

University of Szeged
Faculty of Arts
Doctoral School of Literary Studies

Péter Kóhalmi

Embodied Thoughts

Miklós Erdély, Conceptual Art, Pop Art

Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation

Supervisor:
Dr. Izabella Füzi

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I. Miklós Erdély

Most assuredly Miklós Erdély is the most significant and most versatile Hungarian creator of the second half of 20th century. Several waves of efforts have been rippling around the understanding of his works during the thirty years that passed since his death – from time to time, various events, exhibitions, thematic issues of periodicals, as well as eager and enduring researches were stirring up the discourse surrounding his oeuvre, setting into motion a keen reception of the important segments and aspects of his life-work. Nevertheless, we are still missing an all-embracing, comprehensive writing up of his oeuvre. Thus, speaking about Erdély we cannot avoid the question: after all, why have things worked out like that? And I have a rather simple answer to this question: supposedly it is Miklós Erdély's own "fault". His especially released interest toward the means of expression, his always reviving and embarrassingly manifold life-work that is almost impossible to hold together, which requires from his interpreter to follow not only his works, but to get close also to his theories. Because Erdély was as much a thinker as he was an artist. Besides the multidirectional medial experimentations his oeuvre is kept together by his interdisciplinary thoughts, his intellect. As a result, it is not enough to be familiar with the period's artistic theories and the classical tradition of Western philosophy, we need to open up to the different methods of knowing the world that are usually separated from each other: we need to move towards the various suggestions of natural sciences, the psychology of creativity, sacrality, Zen Buddhism, Jewish-Christian traditions, as well as the spiritualistic dimensions. Knowing Erdély, there are no boundaries between the different methods of knowledge about the world. Or to be more precise, the barriers are not lining around the diverse ways of knowing, rather, there is one single demarcation line, on the verge of the already known and the still unknown. For the reader, herein lies the real gravity. After breaking down the territorial boundaries of the separate disciplines, instead of a summative closure we have move towards the cracking edge of the yet-to-be-known's horizon, or even farther, towards the unknown. Consequently, speaking about Erdély's oeuvre, our position is far from being as simple as to sum it up in one

single sentence. His life-work is an excellent example showing that while the artworks are suggestions for a renewed usage of different media, these artefacts are at the same time variations for the tangible emanation of thoughts. Because the customary, routinely used forms of expression, and the well-settled intellectual schemas are twisted with one precise move by Erdély's artworks, in order to loosen the old constraints and prepare the ground for the new, the yet-to-be-known.

II. The Aims, Structure and Methodology of the Dissertation

In the first part of my dissertation I am going to approach Erdély's *Marly Theses* [*Marly tézisek*] from three directions, proceeding towards the void, the empty sign. I am writing about the theses in three rather unconventional ways. In the first two shorter chapters I am going to contextualise the theses in a different way that is done by their reception, both with regards to the theoretically possible variants of thinking about the concept of art, as well as the inner strivings of the oeuvre. It is for this reason that my reading of Erdély is not going to step into discourse with the customary Erdély-reception; my reading is speaking to the various forms of thinking about art, drawing attention to the inner connections of the oeuvre. First, I will define the theses as montage, then as a poetic manifesto.

The third chapter is perceptibly longer in extent. It discusses the *Marly Theses* as a non-conceptual work of art. That is, it marks the most stable statement of Erdély's reception with a query, since according the present state of the reception Miklós Erdély is an outstanding figure of conceptual art. This chapter discusses this statement, verifying and traversing it at many points. First, I am placing Joseph Kosuth and Miklós Erdély very close to each other. (Hungarian theoreticians, as well as Erdély himself, considered Kosuth's works and his analytical understanding of concept art to be the benchmark of the discourse concerning conceptualism, concept, concept art and conceptual art.) Thus, I go back to the roots and I carry out a close reading. First I introduce the kinship between Kosuth's and Erdély's strivings, then I point out the differences between their views. On the one hand, with

all this I intend to justify that along the lines of Kosuth's efforts we must consider the *Marly Theses* to be a work of art. On the other hand, I also intend to prove that Erdély in his theses is looking out of the Kosuthian definition of conceptual art. Although both of them are starting out of an analytic approach, Erdély steps over the boundaries of Kosuth's efforts, and arrives at a continental terrain, to a point from which Kosuth absolutely distances himself. But it is the only possible way to arrive at a ground from which Erdély's oeuvre can be adequately approached. Following his works from the 1980's we can see how does he arrive even at the previously rejected "simple and inane" painting, instead of the intellectual purism of "orthodox" conceptual art – not leaving completely the dense, vibrant intellectual obligations, and not siding with the emerging tendencies of painting. Bearing all this in mind, what can be said about Erdély's works? As closing question of the essay, I ask whether how extensively can we cover Miklós Erdély's medial experimentations with the period's art-historic categories stabilized by today. And my contention is that categorization does not necessarily provide a way for us to get close to Erdély's continuous reversals, no matter how narrow or broad our pigeon-holes are. To epitomize it I would say that Erdély's fluid-like oeuvre is the perfect example of the way he brackets the possibility of interpretation of the art-works and art itself along various artistic styles, schools, attitudes and approaches, as he does it in the *Marly Theses*. The *Theses* break open the categories of art-historical reconstructions, and force the viewer's eyes on art's autonomy, free from all kinds of pressure towards interpretation. And it is exactly this way out of any forms of customary habits and hierarchies that makes the *Marly Theses* and Erdély's oeuvre outstanding and enduring, of timeless value, free from chronological time and volatile stylistic categories.

The next chapter introduces a whole new approach. The direction gets reversed here, and instead of moving towards the void, the empty sign, from here onwards I am going to examine whether what can be said about everything from the void's point of view, and about void itself. As it turns out, the "void" itself is "something". According to the popular understanding of Erdély's theory, the encounter with a work of art proceeds towards emptiness throughout the loosening of hardened intellectual schemas and concepts. Of course,

we can handle this void as a utopia, and with this move we can stall it until eternity. But we can also ask whether what comes after the void, how we can fill in the place of the empty sign. Nevertheless, it is impossible to determine the void from these directions. Looking back on emptiness from a distanced standpoint we can see it as the most stable starting point for all sorts of understanding. In this chapter I am going to bring in two salient, complementary contexts to the process of interpretation. One of them is the context of classic German Idealism, namely the notions of Schelling and Hegel, with the double stakes this carries. Only through the context of German idealism surfaces Erdély's strong and manifold connection to the classic continental thinking, which is important not just as a function of conceptual art, but also for those who regard Erdély to be the Hungarian forerunner of postmodernism. In this respect I contend that Erdély's void and Schelling's absolute can be placed in juxtaposition. And if we juxtapose the void and the absolute, or more precisely their definitions provided by Erdély and Schelling, their kinship reveals itself, which will help us to understand Erdély's empty sign. There are two ways to proceed from here: the historical road of the absolute on the one hand, and the kinship line specifying the oeuvre's efforts on the other hand. I am going to take the second road in order to point out a quintessential difference in Erdély's life-work: it is the new synthesis of arts and sacrality. Hence, the second integral context of this chapter is that of sacrality. Because to touch the void also means the possibility to experience the creation out of nothing and the being created out of nothing. This revives the Christian tradition of the Genesis, and points towards Jewish, more precisely Cabbalistic Hasidic dimensions. Isaac Luria Ashkenazi's kabbalistic teachings of the Creation carried on in Hasidism is of utmost importance in Erdély's works. I am going to reveal the innermost circles of Erdély's theory through his relevant works, photos, actions, installations, and environments included.

As a closing, I am going to open a historical arch, and trace the relationship between pop art, conceptual art, and politics in Miklós Erdély and Tamás Szentjóbí's progressive works from the second half of the 1960's. As Erdély puts in his *Pop Lecture* [*Pop tanulmány*] way before July 1968: "Beauty wants to be free: itself. Still more: freedom wants to be

beautiful – itself – and | concern all once.”¹ And he prophesies the following: “It is not impossible that near future’s most widespread art will be demonstration.”² This bigger unit is trying to find the relation between Erdély’s theory of freedom and the political system of that historical period. That is, if freedom’s one and only repository is art, then how does this art relate to the surrounding politics, the actual possibilities for freedom? The answer to this question comes from the context again: for the sake of a better understanding we have to insert his works of art to the context of contemporary arts. This unit shows that compared to the second half of the 1960s’ avant-garde arts, Erdély’s works are far from being weightless, but they reflect a “gentle state”. This gentleness is relative, however. To demonstrate the degree of gentleness, I am going to touch upon the collective appearance of neo-avant-garde’s beginning phase, with special attention to Tamás Szentjóby’s works. I am going to stick to a chronological grouping of Erdély’s and his contemporaries’ works in order to show both the presence and absences of relations among them. Besides answering the main question – how political can we consider Erdély’s work of art – several other aspects of the oeuvre also come to the surface, broadening our understanding of Erdély. Following my train of thought, proceeding from theory to life, I am going to deal with national and international events, from the Czechoslovak happenings to the new economic mechanism, or the Kádár-era’s simultaneously existent and non-existent Jewish question. My interpretation also builds upon the propositions of natural sciences, and the oeuvre’s spiritual bearings.

III. Summary

Miklós Erdély associates the category of void, beauty, and freedom with the work of art. My doctoral dissertation follows these three categories. In the meanwhile I intend to demonstrate how the central figure’s peculiar efforts are related to the period’s characteristic

¹ Erdély Miklós: Pop tanulmány. In: Erdély Miklós: *Művészeti írások. (Válogatott művészetelméleti tanulmányok I.)*. Szerk. Peternák Miklós. Képzőművészeti Kiadó, Budapest, 1991. 36.

² Ibid. 34.

artistic tendency, that of conceptual art, as well as to pop art as neo-avant-garde's defining source.

My doctoral dissertation focuses on two chronologically well-defined period of Miklós Erdély's oeuvre. One focal point is the second half of the 1960's, the beginnings of neo-avant-garde strivings, when Erdély brought a strong, mature, authentic, and unusual artistic approach to Hungarian arts with the first momentums of his appearance. The second focal point of my thesis concerns the thoughts and works of Erdély from the 1980's, which is an extremely fruitful period during his life-work, bringing along the perfection of his theory that started to form in the 1960's. My dissertation does not follow these two periods in a chronological order. First, it introduces Erdély's theories on the basis of the *Marly Theses*, from where it opens up to his materialized thoughts, and then, focusing on the actual works of art, it integrates Erdély's theory into the multi-coloured avant-garde movement. My dissertation aims to bring to the surface the never-seen accents and relations of Erdély oeuvre, to stir up the reception at many points, with the final ambition to extend and expand Erdély's interpretation.

IV. Publications related to the dissertation

Erdély Miklós filmesztétikája montázsának tört tükrében – avagy dialektikus zárójelek mint

Erdély mosolyai. In: *Apertúra*. 2007. ősz, III. évf. 1. sz. Interneten:
<http://apertura.hu/2007/osz/kohalmi>; 2016. 05. 02.

Szelíd, de nem súlytalan. Pop art, konceptuális művészet, politikum: Erdély Miklós és Szentjóbby Tamás progresszív munkái a '60-as évek második felében. In: *Különbség*. 2012. május, XII. évf. 1. sz. 151–191. o. Interneten:
<http://www.kulonbsegfolyoirat.hu/index.php/kulonbseg/article/view/35/23>; 2016. 05. 02.

A semmi felől. In: *Tiszatáj*. 2014. április, LXVIII. évf. 4. sz. 37–50. o. Interneten:
http://epa.oszk.hu/00700/00713/00271/pdf/EPA00713_tiszataj_2014_04_037-050.pdf; 2016. 05. 02.

A preszókratikától a kvantummechanikáig. In: *C3 Gyűjtemény*. 2016. április. Interneten:
<http://www.c3.hu/collection/kohalmi/preszokratika.html>; 2016. 05. 02.

A zen út fokozatai. In: *C3 Gyűjtemény*. 2016. április. Interneten:
<http://www.c3.hu/collection/kohalmi/zen.html>; 2016. 05. 02.

A kreativitás. In: *C3 Gyűjtemény*. 2016. április. Interneten:
<http://www.c3.hu/collection/kohalmi/kreativitas.html>; 2016. 05. 02.

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