

BORDER CROSSING

Miklós Erdély

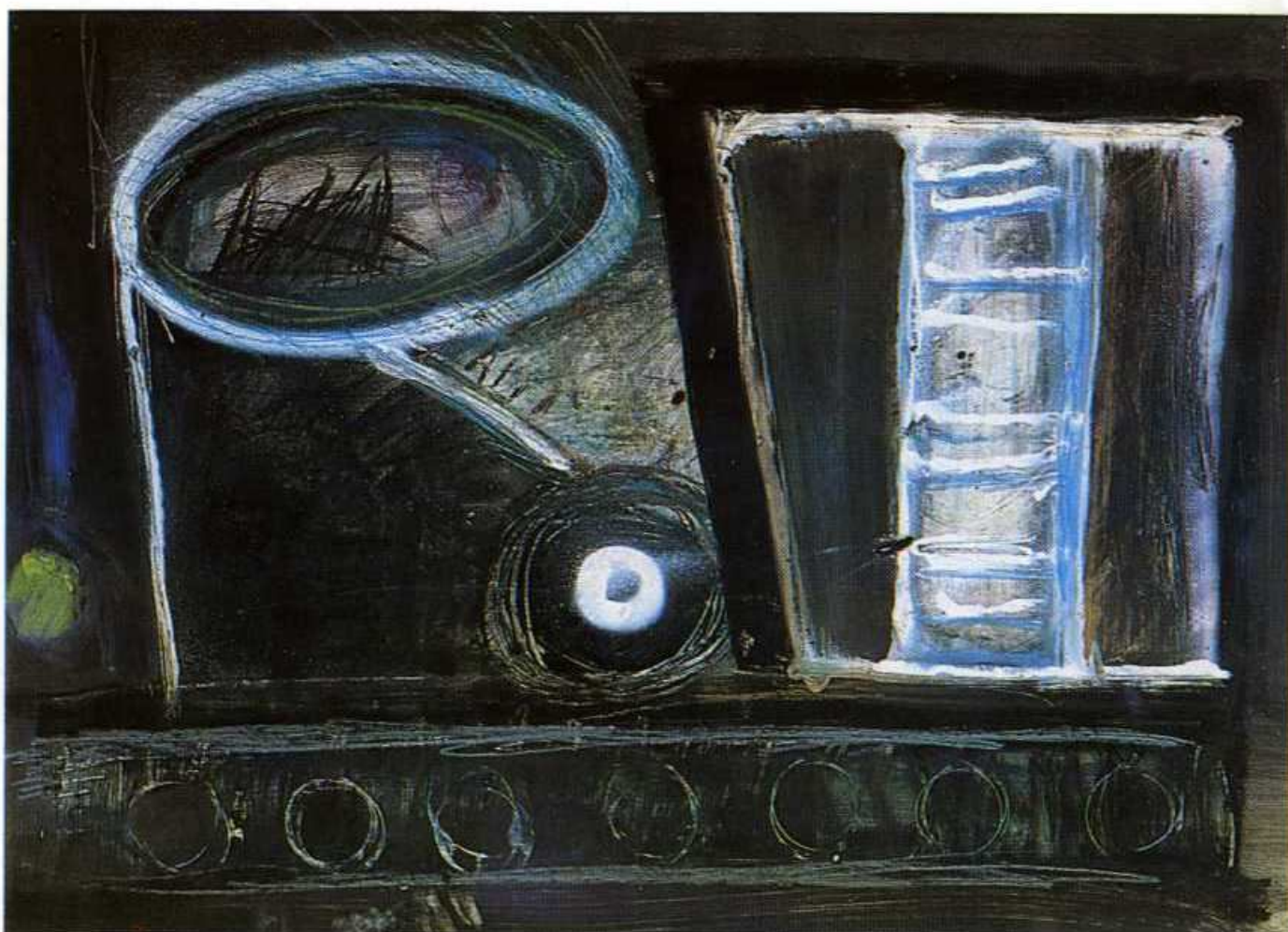
(an attempt at interpretation)

The retrospective exhibition of Miklós Erdély was open in the *István király Museum* of Székesfehérvár until the end of December 1991: the exhibits on the upper floor included works, remains, photos, and documents. Further works, many pictures and a few installations could be seen in the *Csók István Gallery*.

In a certain sense this is the answer to the seemingly easily answerable question: what, in fact, one can see here? — better said, this is the short version of the answer given by the catalogue which lists the exhibits and — with surprising classification — puts them into categories, once according to genre, then according to style or technique. So there are early sculptures, early drawings, photographic works, objects, conceptual works, indigo works, bitumen works, graphic works, paintings, photo-documentations. There is also another

answer in the catalogue to the question „what one can see here”: the beautiful comment of *Géza Perneczky* that what one can see here is a prevalent idea, „a play with negation”, „deconstructive tautology as the Doctrine of Essence”.

Maybe there exists a third answer which does not contradict the first two, and this is that what one can see in this exhibition are in fact the art-like, sensuous remains of another man's producing freedom. Miklós Erdély was not the artist of any artistic problem or medium. One could call him an amateur professional, has this term not lost every meaning owing to the disintegration or discredit of the training and institutional forms of modern art. So maybe one should say simply that he was his own artist, a private artist, an omnivore who liked to resort to all media, i.e. he considered none of them as a standard



Erdély Miklós: Rádió / Radio, 1985, vegyes technika, 55 x 75 cm



Erdély Miklós: *Amerikai rádió / American radio*, 1985, vegyes technika, 54 x 75 cm

frame for himself. He saw art as a border situation and the work of art as the incarnation of a symbolically represented, materialized, ritually performed flash of freedom.

Art is an empty word gaining a new definition with every gesture considered artistic, and the task of the artist of today is to experiment with new and newer gestures, i.e. new and newer arts. A work of art has no message: it is full of invalidated meanings, its message is its own emptiness. A work of art speaks of something by not saying anything about the affairs of the world: it makes place in the receiver by generating freedom. Erdély, in the *Marly-theses*, indicated the empty place of art as a task; at other times he spoke of self-provokation. In his action Democratic painting he asked the spectators to vote against every element of the painting to force himself (and those present) to be creative. And his method of painting, „messing up” a canvas and trying to „correct” the mistake, is also self-provokation.

This means that art is not about freedom, it produces freedom as art. One can interpret this as an extreme, fluxus-like affair, the suicidal radicalism of avantgardism, the last kick which helps the anyway desintegrating conceptual scaffolding of avantgardism to collapse definite-

ly. Yet I am inclined to think that this arrogance is not the hubris of the newcomer but the revival and connection of a very old despair and a very old desire. The despair is the inconceivability of creating and being created from nothing, and the desire was already a banality for the manierist artists, i.e. that we transcend this creation with the help of a new creation.

This is probably how we must understand Erdély's declaration that avantgardism did not start with the movement labelled the *avantgarde* in the 20th century because every great artist belongs to the tradition of avantgardism taken in this sense.

So how will the freedom of another person, the artist, turn to art? How can one create freedom as beauty, not as recognized necessity but as recognized freedom in an age (if one may say so) in which artistic convention does not offer material even for rebellion any more? For there is no doubt that Erdély's works are beautiful in the broadest and narrowest sense of the word, and, despite the *Marly-theses*, not in the sense of emptiness.

Let us begin with the extinction of meaning.

Journey in time (photographic work). Five photos; old family pictures of, or with, Erdély into which he mon-

taged back his own self of 1975. Beside the pictures is an explanation listed in thesis-like points: the *Time-Moebius*. "1.) What will be, and is, able to react, exists. 2.) What reacts upon itself determines itself as cause." and "11.) Beware of yourself. 12.) What is in preparation is ready." A multitude of more or less identifiable meanings combined into an enigmatic problem to which we also get the key: it is not necessary and maybe even not advisable to seek metaphorical-symbolical profundities. Nothing is more simple than to imagine time, the time of our coming into existence as a Moebius-strip in which "what is in preparation is ready" where — in the mind of Leibniz's God — the seed of coming into existence is also the definition of what comes to be. We can simply conceive a time in which a sort of totality produces always itself. It is simple to imagine it although impossible. On the photos we see the impossible that can be only imagined.

The extinction of meaning is not the absence of meanings but the rift which arises when the impossible penetrates into the world gently, without warning, in the form of a family photo. When the impossible becomes visible it removes the world from its familiarity which is the guarantee of the phenomena accessible to us. If we are displaced gently, without violence from familiarity, the medium which blends with us unnoticed, then, standing in the rift, we delicately touch the border of the world from outside but then, from this directionless freedom we ultimately step back to imagination, to the free play of the imagination of somebody else here, in the exhibition hall.

Vase with flower (object, reconstruction). According to the chronology of László Beke Erdély exhibited this (?) porcelain vase with flower in 1970 at the Polytechnical University, together with a shirt stiffener made of matzos, a thermos containing "last year's snow", and the *Basin of gentleness*. Could it be the reversal of the favourite deconstructivist trick of "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*"? (R. Magritte). Maybe this is *that* deconstructive tautology? The picture of a pipe is not a pipe but a vase with flower is certainly a vase with flower. But maybe the work's relatedness to the old, famous artistic gesture is also only an extinguishing meaning, an extinguished historical allusion. Because the rift of between the sign and the signed is not present here, the signed stands for the sign, and it does not stand only, it is exhibited. And what is exhibited for us, is separated from us; it faces us. Something we used to exhibit, a beautiful vase with a flower, faces us here. Something belonging to everybody is separated here, detached as something holy. The holy makes a rift in the world on the sly, on the most unexpected spot, more unexpected than any provokation in the form

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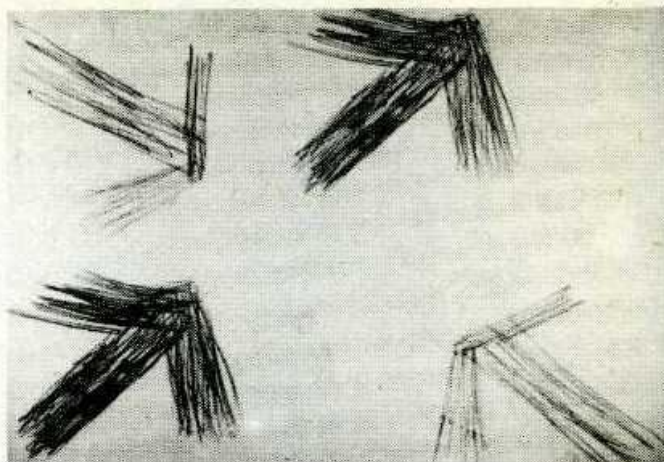
of a *pissoir*, and this simple, frightful freedom of imagination simulates irresistible laughter.

This is not the problem-complex of the representation of reality/illusion. Of course one can specify what happens: presentation takes the place of representation, and we may be shocked at the absence of any difference between the "found object" and the "artifact", difficult to determine with the help of immanent marks; the problem itself is becoming gradually scholastic. However, Erdély wipes out this traditional stumbling block, since if there is no representation at all, neither in the sense of a faithful representation of a piece of reality, nor in the sense of radically perverting this reality, and we cannot speak of unrelatedness to reality or any specific scandalousness either, then what remains is the mere object standing there, and the gesture which has put it there. So the difference, or "differance", turning an object into an artifact is not present and leaves no trace on the object. If we do not think of Erdély, of his gesture, we must become silent. In this sense there is *nothing* to be speak about, we are confronted with sensuality which is not contradictory at all, in fact it does not tolerate contradiction. This extinction of meaning does not lead to the inconceivable state of being outside the world but to nameless and undeniable sensuality.

With the extinction of meaning Miklós Erdély has invented the means of experiencing freedom: he does what he wants to do, namely turn the idea into a state. In this state and in this borderland there are not simply "interesting" or "new" questions; there is a compulsion to ask questions, a merry variant of anguish from which everybody must find the issue for himself.

Copied-away drawing (indigo work, 1978). The idea appears as a state, the state as material. Indigo is a very special artistic means: a material concealing conceptuality in itself. Copying, repetition and identity are the materials of "deconstructive tautology". The copied-away drawing, partly its own copy, is unrepeatably, just as the picture of the "line meeting itself" photographed and drawn on photo-paper cannot be copied without losing the uniqueness of the work's sensuality and the minimal shifts along the dimensions of space and time. This shift is minimal but produces that elementary rift, the freedom arising from paradoxical difference which is the essence of Erdély's works.

The question of means is the question of sensitivity. Self-challenge or its lack appears in the selection of the means. Erdély interrupts flowing procedures or turns



Erdély Miklós: Szétmázolt rajz/Copied-away drawing, 1978.
grafit, indigó, papír, 41,5 x 58 cm

them in to Moebius-strips, and the materials — as means — do not adjust as instruments to his intentions but adapt the work to themselves. Artist and spectator must become specifically sensitive through a material. Yet, I wouldn't call Erdély's works conceptual: the conceptual paradox appears only with the help of, and in, sensuous empathy. And sensuality, with its infinite number of often nameless paths, this side and beyond the extinction of meaning, is a medium in which the just "beautiful" is irreducible and inevitable and creates an emblematic world of its own.

Bitumen-picture (Bitumen work, 1979—80). Sensuality does not end with the paradox it generates.

The materials are not allegories but their own emblems, they have no meaning, only a sphere of association, potentialities, repulsion and attraction. The play of materials brought into relation — ship does not serve simply the modelling of intellectual relations. Sensuality knocks a hole in conceptually articulated intentionality.

The bitumen-pictures manifest a special type of order. These strange materials with their rich sensuality and strong associative sphere such as bitumen, gauze, matzos, plaster, arrange themselves in elementary relationships adequate to their nature, the relationships of embeddedness, juxtaposition, interpenetration. These relationships produce elementary geometrical forms without violating the nature of the materials. This order, emblematically simple yet created without reduction, produces that kind of beauty present on all pictures or Erdély made in the 80s, on the bitumen- and Armageddon-pictures, on his graphic works and paintings. This elementary order is a kind of visual essence-doctrine and is close to meditative pictures, old and new suprematism and constructivism. However, these suprematism and constructivism produce the elementary forms from which meditative pictures are built by analysing the language of the visible, by reduction, or as ideal

forms. It seems that Erdély's pictures should not be read with the help of a visual language considered the most genuine, beauty does not come about through the harmonious-symbolic use of a language like that. I think visual language is replaced by visual emblematicism which becomes language-like only in a holistic frame broader than specifically artistic questions — and even then it is not fully decipherable.

We began with the extinction of meaning, we must conclude with emblematicism.

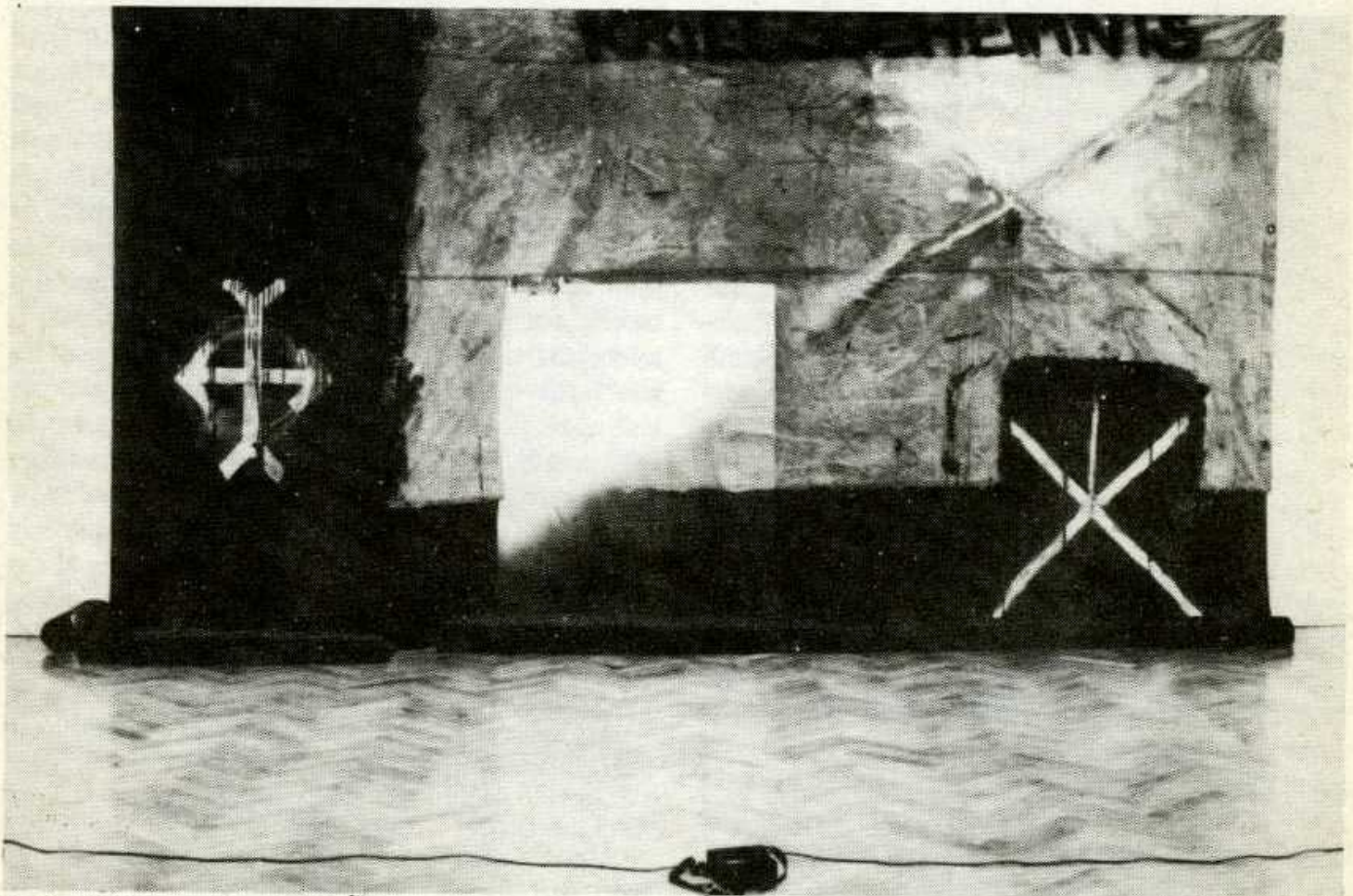
Nature I—II (graphic works, 1985), *Radix minus I* (painting, 1985). So far we have not spoken of what Géza Pernecky called Erdély's "pseudo-naive scientific positivism", how he brings together Dirac and the cinema box office, law and accident, the imaginary number and painting. Since the sixties Erdély has been using the newest results of science as references, and the starting point of his intellectual experiments. In these actions science is the metaphor of human knowledge, resp. ignorance. Holistic thinking, i.e. "extending our competence to everything", requires a unified concept of knowledge, something with which the limits of knowability can be measured. Erdély does not refer to esoterics, logic or ontology, he refers to science. And this means of course that in his eyes science is *the* doctrine of essence and not the summation of more or less incommensurable or merely instrumental descriptions. But in art

the scientific symbol, as the symbol of achieved knowledge, becomes willy-nilly a cultural symbol. The imaginary number takes the place of God's eye which Baroque iconography liked to put on the top of altar-ensembles. Like the extinction of meaning, playing with the limits of the rationality of the rational world, the cultural symbol also creates a borderline situation because it represents the basis of the world, God, the imaginary number or the law of nature, sensuously as reminding signs, in a form which cannot be treated by discursive rationality.

Maybe Erdély took his own doctrine of essence based on the contingency of natural laws "seriously": ultimately it is the doctrine of our competence extending to everything, our almost inutilizable freedom. But this "taking it seriously" is sometimes turned upside down in representation: the mathematical or geometrical sign reinterpreted as a pictorial sign becomes a compositional accent, a part of the emblematic order. The meanings and references cannot be separated from their visual vehicles because not the *fact* but the *mode* of their appearance is what decides. The pictures are contemplative entities in a culture flowing narrow-minded radios, digital markers, and UFOs.

Erdély, in a certain sense, has re-invented painting.

ESZTER BABARCZY
Translated by Éva Polgár



Erdély Miklós: *Hadititok/Military secret*, 1984, ponyva, üveg, olaj, bitumen, kátránypapír, 300 × 500 × 150 cm