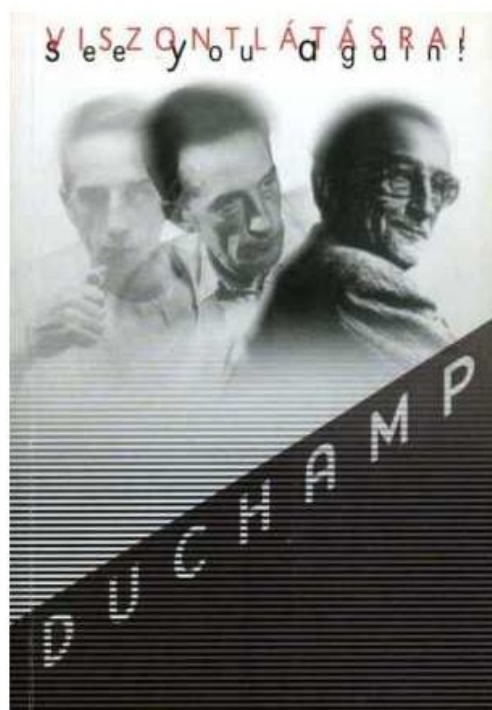


VISZONTLÁTÁSRA! DUCHAMP



Budapest Galéria, 1996-2000



ERDÉLY Miklós:
Tavalyi hó / The snows of yesteryear, 1970. Termosz / Thermos flask. 5,5 x 7,5 cm ø

MIKLÓS ERDÉLY: SNOWS OF YESTERYEAR, 1970

In the 1950s Miklós Erdély, who had studied sculpture in the previous decade, came to a kind of "informal" approach to sculpture with an "Unfinished Work". This sculpture, which in its original state was perhaps formed in the style of Dezső Bokros Birman, was a head. Later on he subjected it to unusual treatments (for example, washing it in a washing-machine), and around 1970 he quasi-rediscovered it, incorporating it into a conceptual work. In 1974 Erdély specified Bokros Birman and Duchamp as his mentors. Here I do not wish to give a protracted analysis of the path which in Erdély's case led from Bokros to Duchamp, or to point to the nature of the influence of "Duchamp the master". In Erdély's oeuvre there are numerous works which can be brought into connection with the readymade genre, which is closely linked in art history to Duchamp's name. Many such works are displayed in the present exhibition. Here I shall attempt an analysis of one of them, the thermos flask bearing the title "Snows of Yesteryear".

Erdély displayed his "thermos flask" at the "R" exhibition, which opened in December 1970 and which featured two other objects: "Vase with Flowers" and "Stiffener for a Boy's Shirt". Of the last two objects the first actually is what its title indicates: a (red) vase with flowers—that is, a typical motif of a traditional painting genre, a still-life, lifesize, erected directly on a stand: instead of depiction, the thing itself. "Stiffener for a Boy's Shirt" refers to a personal story to do with Erdély: in the chequered shirt which he wore at the end of 1930s as a member of the Vörösmarty Scout Troupe he placed a sheet of matzo instead of the cardboard stiffener.

Similarly to the previous two, "Snows of Yesteryear" is not a readymade either, in the sense that the message of readymades is the gesture of the artist's choice itself, regardless of the possible meanings of the object and its circle of associations, but neither is it an *objet trouvé*, characteristic of Surrealist object use. Having emphasized the importance of choice, Duchamp wrote the following in connection with "Fountain": Mr. Mutt took an ordinary article of life and placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—creating a new thought for that object.

At the time of making "Snows of Yesteryear" Erdély was primarily preoccupied with conceptual art, the notion that the object of art is the preoccupation with it. The thermos flask is a tautological object. The original commodity character, however, has no importance in the meaning of this art object—that is, it was not the elimination of the original use that was important. In fact, it was the original storing-preserving-carrying function of this shabby thermos flask which Erdély emphasized in these

surroundings, and used it in a transference meaning. Without supposing these functions, the "content" of the work of art would disappear.

The title gives the new function: first of all it suggests that the thermos flask contains snow. While in the case of the vase with flowers the title describes what is actually seen, in the case of the thermos flask the title refers to the unseen. Connecting the title with the object, the inference of the viewer, i.e. that the thermos flask contains snow, is a matter of seconds. According to recollections, at the time of the exhibition it did actually contain snow from the previous year, snow which Erdély had been storing in a refrigerator for twelve months. It is still not the function of the title, however, to denote the real "content". The reference to the question by Villon, and to the everyday turn of phrase by now, given in the title is a reference to something irretrievable. "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" does not pose a real question to which the answer would be "Here in the thermos flask." The rhetorical question has no answer, and the original idea inspired by the title that the thermos flask contains snow becomes unimportant. In the mind of the viewer, productive confusion occurs, the triggering off of which is—according to Erdély—the task of works of art. The art of object existence is not affected by whether the implicit statement—that is, that the thermos flask does contain yesteryear's snow—is true or false. It could contain this year's snow or indeed nothing. The title adds to the object the upsetting thought that time is impossible to grasp, and the thermos flask as an art object functions as a unit for storing time.

"The message of a work of art is its inherent emptiness," says Erdély (1980) in the Marly Thesis.

The title of an art object is that medium in which the thermos flask appears as a work of art, as a poetical creation. The title itself is really a readymade, in that the poetical question is a line of poetry, a quotation, found ready; it is quasi the viewer's own readymade. The title is a readymade in that case as well if we take its denoting function literally. In this case it would be the snow which would be made in advance, although not man-made, and our line of thought would extend to the problem of the difference between objects created by Nature and those created by Man, or to the various concepts of the correspondence between the two creation procedures. In the 1960s, "process art" and "fluxus" did actually include natural processes in art, thereby raising questions to do with the duration and time of the work of art. Creations functioning and surviving for a limited time demonstrated the changes and metamorphoses and the passing of things. In the case of Erdély's thermos flask, which is merely a storage vessel, all this remains concealed. In this sense, it belongs to concealed "hidden" works of art, in which it is the idea itself that matters. The idea and the thought get emphasized in that sense too, which corresponds to the argument of minimal art, although here, instead of "stereometrical" forms that can be easily envisaged in everyone's imagination, it is "stereotypical" content which is present: yesteryear's snow is just the same as this year's. This changing constant is preserved by Erdély's thermos flask, sustaining its eternal nature and state, and sealing it off from an outer environment that is unsuitable for it.

The thermos flask is estranged from its original function in that it cannot be opened and does not store material food. It does not store energy essential to the human body, but the snow is not the symbol of manna from heaven either. Since in the final analysis it mediates passing in a closed or open state: the opening of the thermos containing snow would lead to entropy—that is, the upsetting of tension existing between outer and inner; sealed, however, its content and lifespan are invisible and inaccessible, merely a thought on what will never return, and in case the thermos flask has nevertheless

been made into what it is by the choice of the artist—a creation preserving something of eternal truth —, it is genuinely a readymade: it takes over all the possible commonplaces concerning earlier works of art, which make up the concept of art that these works of art preserve something from past times. In Erdély's words: "The complexity of art is demonstrated by the fact that if we succeed in creating a new concept of art, then suddenly we discover that this new concept was present in the old masterpieces, and in fact as their essential aspect."

References

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Tomkins, Calvin: *The Bride and the Bachelors*. The Viking Press, New York, 1969, p. 41



ERDÉLY Miklós:

Váza virággal / Vase with flowers. 1970. Mázas kerámia váza, víz, vágott virág / Glazed ceramic vase, water, cut flowers. 32 × 18 cm ø