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Creativity, Collaboration and Enlightenment Miklós Erdély's "Art Pedagogy"

Miklós Erdély was a charismatic thinker who instructed, influenced and inspired various groups of people during his life. He was trained as an architect and worked for various state architectural offices. Later he became a filmmaker writing and directing experimental films in a small state-run film company, the Béla Balázs Film Studio. At the same time, he was a poet and theorist of art, joined the Happening and Conceptual art movements and later became one of the leading figures of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde. He devised his first artistic actions in the late sixties and his subsequent cultural activity included organizing events and exhibitions and running semi-official amateur art colonies. In addition to being an alternative form of art education, Erdély's pedagogical activity was a collaborative activist praxis aimed at changing participatory way of thinking in accordance with his revolutionary theory of art. From his experience as an avant-garde poet and amateur filmmaker, Erdély elaborated a specific montage theory which combined and mutually confronted different types of knowledge ranging from the aesthetics of film to the paradoxes of modern science and Zen Buddhism.¹

1 For further interpretations on the significance of science in Erdély's art see Annamária Szóke, "Die Gegenwart der Zukunft: Ein Rätsel: Wissenschaft innerhalb der Kunst im Werk von Miklós Erdély," in *Jenseits von Kunst*, ed. Peter Weibel (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1997), 609–13; Miklós Erdély, ed. Annamária Szóke (Vienna: Geokargi Fine Arts, Budapest: Kisterem, Budapest: tranzit.hu; Miklós Erdély Foundation (EMA), 2008); Annamária Szóke, "Miklós Erdély: Moral Algebra – Solidarity Action (1972): A Case Study," manuscript (2007) http://www.vividradicalmemory.org/html/workshop/stu_essays/szoke.pdf; Sándor Hornyik, "A 'Post-neo-avant-garde' Utopia Realized: On Miklós Erdély's Art Pedagogy," *Exindex* (2007), <http://exindex.hu/index.php?i=en&page=3&id=517>; Dóra Hegyi et al., eds., *Art Always Has Its Consequences – Artists' Texts from Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, 1947–2009* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011).

In the mid-1960s, Erdély hosted the first Hungarian happening² and became aware of the new artistic practices in Eastern Europe through his relationship with artists from the younger generations like Gábor Altorjay and Tamás Szentjóby. A few years later, he turned into an "action artist" whose actions were based on his own semi-poetic, semi-scientific texts. His first actions, in summer 1968, were entitled *Three Quarks to King Marke* and made simultaneous references to the theories of quantum physics, the events in Paris in May 1968, and the communist society of control.³ In the early 1970s he regularly contributed to events organized by Tamás Szentjóby in the spirit of Fluxus. One of their joint events, realized together with László Beke, *The Wolf Is Coming!* directly referred to the consciousness transforming power of modern science as well as new art practices. The subtitle, *Popular Science Lectures – Attitude Shaping Practices* wittily represented the educational intentions of Fluxus and Szentjóby (Parallel Course / Study Track).⁴ Erdély's own action at this event, *CETI (Communication with Extraterrestrial Intelligence)* confronted his epistemologically oriented poem ("Mondolat," a composite of the Hungarian for "sentence" and "thought") on the resemblance of particle physics and religious thinking to the uninformative and administrative resolutions of a Soviet-American conference on the topic.⁵ In 1974, Erdély himself organized a series of popular science lectures under a title "Event Horizon," that reflected on both the new cosmology of black holes and the praxis of Fluxus. Erdély himself held the first lecture, *Possibility Inquiry*, addressing the scientific conditions for time travel. Beyond their avant-garde mentality, *The Wolf Is Coming!* events and the "Event Horizon" series, with popular lectures on politics and science held in local cultural centers, also evoked and appropriated, or mimicked, the spirit of the communist control society in its attempts to educate and enlighten the working class.

The semi-official milieu of people's education was also the setting of Erdély's first art course, held in a Budapest cultural center. In the summer of 1975, Tamás Papp, a public education organizer and a fan of neo-avant-garde art, invited him to lead the sculpture course in the Ganz-MÁVAG (Hungarian State Rail Carriage Factory) Cultural Center. Before starting his course, Erdély consulted with artist Dóra Maurer, the leader of the center's drawing

course, to change the traditional approach by which workers and youth were taught art in a way that prepared them for the entrance exam to the College of Fine Arts. Erdély and Maurer led the new sculpture course together and gave it an unusual name: "Motion Planinnig and Execution Actions." According to Maurer, the main inspiration for changing the name of the sculpture course and the general approach to art was a seminar at the 1971 Munich Kunstzone, where the composer Mauricio Kagel experimented with theatrical performances in a way that involved movement exercises. Kagel's *Neue Musik* course was not the only source of inspiration for Erdély and Maurer. In instance, they were familiar with the pedagogical work of Joseph Beuys and both of them took part in Fluxus inspired events and exhibitions in Budapest and Balatonboglár.⁶

Rejecting the sculpture drawing exercises that had made up the first part of the previous sculpture course, Erdély and Maurer transformed the traditional relationship between artist and model. Participants became both artists and models and had to carefully compose, or "plan" the models' pose using various devices, such as strings. They were encouraged to depart from the easily perceptible world and attempt to plan and present unusual scenes and positions (e.g., in the case of the exercise "Reconstructing the Position of a Covered Human Body"). Later, Erdély set various constraints on the participants' "artistic" activity. This involved "passivity exercises," which metaphorically modeled the actual social conditions of art and creativity under the dictatorship of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. In the "Chain-Drawing" exercise, for example, 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. In "Drawing while Disturbed," the participants had to obstruct their neighbors, by whatever means, during the act of drawing. Moreover, Erdély discovered the liberating, creative effects of absurd or paradox assignments. He instructed participants, for instance, to draw the outlines of each other's shadows simultaneously. Erdély and Maurer also used other media (photo, film and video) to demonstrate the paradoxes of depiction and representation. They devised exercises in which participants had to react to the movements of a camera to photographic flashes.

In the spring of 1976, Erdély and Maurer changed the name of the course to "Creativity Exercises." They recommended that participants read Erika Landau's *The Psychology of Creativity*, and the notion of creativity played an eminent role in the first and only public exhibition to come out of the course.

2 On the 1966 happening performed by Gábor Altorjay and Tamás Szentjóby in the cellar of Erdély's relative István Szenes, see *The Lunch (In Memoriam Batu Khan)* (Budapest: tranzit.hu, 2011); and <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/the-lunch-in-memoriam/>.

3 Erdély's actions were part of the event "Do You See What I See" presented at Iparterv, Budapest. For more information see <http://tranzit.org/exhibitionarchive/iparterv/> and *Parallel Chronologies: An exhibition in newspaper format*, ed. Dóra Hegyi, Sándor Hornyik and Zsuzsa László (Budapest: tranzit.hu, 2011), 20.

4 See Emese Kurt's text, pp 249–71.

5 Erdély read out his poem "Mondolat" while a female voice sputtered the directions of the First Soviet American Conference on Communication with Extraterrestrial Intelligence, which were published in the Hungarian periodical *Fizikai Szemle*, no. 2 (1973) back cover.

6 György Galántai's own studio in an abandoned chapel was a significant unofficial exhibition venue in a small town beside Lake Balaton between 1970 and 1973. Galántai regularly invited his friends and avant-garde colleagues to show their works and carry out actions. For further information, see Júlia Klaniczay and Edit Sasvári, eds., *Törvénytelen avantgárd: Galántai György balatonboglári kápolnaműterme* [Outlaw Avant-Garde: György Galántai's Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár] (Budapest: Artpool – Balassi, 2008). English: <http://www.artpool.hu/boglár/short.html>.

"Creativity and Visuality."⁷ While the counter-cultural activities of happening and Fluxus were prohibited in the first half of the 1970s, research into creativity was officially legitimate in Hungary and given official support.⁸ The official context of creativity was directly political, deriving from what was referred to in the Eastern Bloc as "the scientific technological revolution" but in fact consisted of Cold War competition in scientific development. It is possible to see Erdély's approach as using the phraseology of the official cultural politics but slightly redirecting it (like a Situationist) from its original ends. He was primarily aiming to shape, instead of "superior socialist man," the ideal survivor (or rebel with a critical consciousness), a person who is able to react creatively in any area of society.

In addition to this ideological *detournement*, Erdély favored the new democratic idea of creativity, in opposition to the traditional cult of the genius. He cited Landau's book in stating that creativity is not an ability but a state of mind.⁹ Erdély also found a significant role for the state of mind or simply the state of an individual in his montage theory. This combines such mutually paradoxical or contradictory theories as particle physics, philosophy of mind, psychoanalysis, general linguistics, utopian Marxism and Zen Buddhism.¹⁰ In the center of his theory stands the overtly paradoxical "principle of extinction of meaning" and "state communication" (the communication of a specific enlightened state of mind). The latter enables the artist to reach the beholder's mind and communicate revolutionary ideas intended to change the beholder's way of thinking. The principle of extinction of meaning is essentially based on the avant-garde theories of collage and montage but includes elements from various scientific and spiritual theories that apply the notion of paradox to represent unresolvable contradictions. From an epistemological perspective, Erdély developed a Zen Buddhist philosophy of art and science in which the confrontation and contradictions of different images, ideologies and

theories could generate a kind of intellectual *satori*¹¹ (a sudden awareness of a higher consciousness), a sort of individual enlightenment.¹²

While the Creativity Exercises were in progress, in spring 1977, Erdély had his first opportunity to make a solo show in another cultural center, this time in Budaörs near Budapest. This provided him with another type of space to visualize his new revolutionary, consciousness-changing philosophy of art and science. *Hidden Green* was an environment-like exhibition and at its spiritual core were subversive scientific paradoxes (Russell's Paradox,¹³ Gödel's Theorem,¹⁴ Duhem-Quine Thesis¹⁵), placed there to urge creative and divergent thoughts in the beholder. In the small room that constituted the exhibition space, Erdély merged several scientific metaphors and everyday symbols according to the principle of extinction of meaning. *Hidden Green* involved a green-lit table on a hay-covered floor, a deer feeder-like structure with a wide green stripe of textile, a surrealistically long broom and a strange "cloud" made of wrapping paper supported by wooden sticks. After the vernissage, Erdély would have liked to write the name of Kurt Gödel on the cloud to make it obvious that the "underpinned" cloud is a scientific metaphor that refers to the Incompleteness Theorem and its epistemological relativization of the "sacred" absolute validity of rationalism and scientific knowledge.¹⁶ These elements of the environment were illuminated by green light, symbolizing the hope and utopian function of art. This evoked the slightly occult (cabbalist) but essentially Marxist philosophy of Ernst Bloch, whose writings were familiar to Erdély at that time.¹⁷ Furthermore, Erdély rethought Bloch's utopian function of art and Herbert Marcuse's notion of the Marxist utopia as he suggested in his commentary to the environment that it embodies hope hidden in art.

7 The exhibition was held in another cultural center, the Józsefváros Exhibition Hall, between May 29 and June 20. There, Erdély and Maurer presented drawings and photographic documentation of their courses (Maurer's drawing course and their joint Creativity Exercises), and they invited the members of the Hungarian Studio for New Music to take part in the exercises organized in the exhibition space at the opening.

8 In the late sixties and the early seventies, several academic researchers focused on the issues of creativity in the field of psychology and social psychology. See, for instance, the work of Ilona Barkóczy, Sándor Klein, Ferenc Mérei and Mária Sági.

9 See Miklós Erdély's text, pp 97–107 (which was also published as the introduction in the catalog of "Creativity and Visuality" exhibition, Józsefváros Exhibition Hall, Budapest, 1976). The Hungarian translation of Erika Landau's book *Psychologie der Kreativität* (Basel: Ernst Reinhardt Verlag, 1969) was published in 1974.

10 For a more detailed analysis of Erdély's montage theory see Sándor Hornyik, "A 'Post-neo-avant-garde' Utopia Realized: On Miklós Erdély's Art Pedagogy," *Exindex* (2007), <http://exindex.hu/index.php?l=en&page=3&id=517>.

11 Japanese Buddhist term for awakening and comprehension, usually translated as enlightenment.

12 See Miklós Erdély, "Theses for the Marly Conference of 1980," trans. John Burt Foster, in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 99–101; and Miklós Erdély, "Optimistic Lecture," trans. Katalin Orbán, in *Art on the Construction of a Spaceship Module*, ed. Vít Havránek, Dóra Hegyi and János Schölhammer (New York: New Museum, 2014), 5–6.

13 A logical paradox of set theory discovered by Bertrand Russell in 1901.

14 The theorem published by Kurt Gödel in 1931 demonstrates that it is possible to construct axioms that are unprovable within their own system.

15 That states that it is impossible to test a scientific hypothesis in isolation, because an empirical test of the hypothesis requires one or more background assumptions.

16 See Kurt Gödel, "Über formal unentscheidbare Sätze der Principia Mathematica und verwandter Systeme I," *Monatshefte für Mathematik und Physik*, no. 38 (1931): 173–98. For the epistemological significance of Gödel's Theorem see David Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York: Basic Books, 1979). One of the lecturers in the "Event Horizon" series, Árpád Szabó, was a Hungarian Gödel expert, who may have been a significant source of inspiration for Erdély in discerning Gödel's theorem.

17 See Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1959). In English: *Principle of Hope* (MIT Press, 1986). In the early 1970s, Marcuse and Bloch's utopian thinking was a topic of discussion in Hungarian philosophical circles.

ing the beholder to the table where a green pencil and sheets of paper were waiting for his or her contemplation on the function of art and science. This gesture could be regarded a sort of call for a more direct participation in the environment and the community, or in the collective world of socialism.

In summer 1977, Erdély and Maurer were fired from the Ganz-MÁVAG Cultural Center because of their unusual methods and growing fame but Erdély continued to work with his course, which he renamed FAFEJ – Fantasy Developing Exercises, which means wooden-head or blockhead in Hungarian. In the FAFEJ course, Erdély left the traditional field of visual representation and focused solely on the processes of thinking. Its main aim was to question the evidence underlying art and science. The participants had to collect and discuss the artistic and scientific systems of thought they knew. After the discussions, they had to answer mostly paradoxical or absurd questions concerning the future of the world. Erdély imposed strict constraints on their answers, such as using only 3 words, or drawing a diagram. By the end of the course, Erdély was increasingly absorbed in Zen thinking and required the participants to answer him in koans.

In the autumn of 1978, FAFEJ changed its name to InDiGo Course. InDiGo is a Hungarian acronym derived from “interdisciplinary thinking” and also means carbon copy paper. Erdély often used carbon paper as an artistic material in his drawings and in some of his environments. Some of the participants who attended the Academy of Fine Arts urged Erdély to let them do something to show their developed creativity and fantasy. This led to the organizing of thematic study exhibitions planned and intended to visualize the students’ new way of thinking about art and science. Although these exhibitions still took place in the world of semi-official art, in cultural centers, far from the official exhibition venues, this activity and artistic approach was still tolerated, “interdisciplinarity” being another legitimate scientific buzzword of the era. The topic for each exhibition was decided through a process of “scientific” collectivism, a kind of common thinking process or brainstorming at gatherings where everyone wrote down or drew their own ideas on pieces of paper. After the brainstorming, they discussed the individual ideas and planned the exhibition together. Usually, the participants chose a single visual medium or notion to contemplate and reflect on, like “Coal and Charcoal Drawing,” “Sand and Its Forms of Movement,” “Weight,” “Painting” and “Faith.” The only exception was their last study exhibition of the school year, the “Artists’ Exit” which was devoted to semiotics and the social role of art.

Although their first exhibition, “Coal and Charcoal Drawing,” was evidently concerned with a single medium of art, Erdély and the participants extended the field of reflection to the scientific and social context of coal and carbon. They referred to chemistry, biology, literature (Franz Kafka’s “Bucket Rider”) and everyday life in the Academy of Fine Arts. The latter involved re-appropriating nude studies found adorning the walls of the Academy boiler room, housing its coal-fired furnaces. In contrast with this culturally diverse interpretation of coal, the “Painting” exhibition confined itself to analyzing the medium itself, but, in a way, deconstructing it both conceptually and literally. It featured

three heaps of pulverized paint (red, white, black) on the floor enclosed by empty frames that could be moved on pulleys, embodying the boundaries of art. Also, hanging from the ceiling was a large pane of glass decked with three plunger cups, an allegorical and ironic representation of the gaze of the beholder and the power of art. The group mostly made jointly planned thematic exhibitions, although most of the members also decided to show individual works. The last art course organized by Erdély and the InDiGo Group was the InDiGo Drawing Course held in the prestigious Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, in 1982/83. Course participants were given exercises reflecting on the prevailing post-conceptual and postmodern status of art and painting and then had to comment on them. The exercises were: “beautiful but bad drawing,” “ugly but powerful drawing,” “a good theme poorly rendered,” “mirage,” “sticky techniques,” “overdone drawing” and “drawing for galleries.”

When this course was still in progress, however, Erdély intensively engaged in individual philosophically oriented action and gesture painting, a change in direction that could be interpreted as a failure of collaborative creative practice. However, four years after his death in 1986, following the political changes of 1989/90, it was Erdély’s theories of art and education that inspired his former InDiGo collaborators, Miklós Peternák and János Sugár, to launch the Intermedia Department in the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest.

Erdély’s pedagogical activity gave him the chance to test the montage theory he had elaborated in the 1970 and to apply his thoughts on “state of communication” and refine them with the collaborative ideas of Fluxus and Happening.¹⁸ In Creativity Exercises and his later courses, the position of the beholder – the audience before which he had presented his previous actions – was replaced by that of a collaborative participant. Consequently, Erdély’s alternative art pedagogy could be seen as a significant part of the history of participatory art, which starts with Dada and Constructivism and includes ideologically diverse practices as Situationism, Happening, Fluxus and the new genre public art.¹⁹ While making a comparative analysis of artistic practices in Prague, Bratislava and Moscow, Claire Bishop emphasized the significance of how Western participatory art was adapted in the East (Fluxus and Happening) against the political and cultural background of Soviet collectivism. Like Milan Knížák in Prague, Alex Mlynářčík and Stano Filko as well as Július Koller in Bratislava, Erdély critically reinterpreted and re-situated Western Actionism in his epistemologically oriented utopian actions. At the same time his ironic *detournement* of “official” creativity research evoked the attitude of Przemysław Kwiek and Zofia Kulik in Warsaw as they reinterpreted from the perspective of Actionism Oskar Hansen’s art pedagogy based on Open Fo-

18 Miklós Erdély, “Mozgó jelentés: Zenei szervezés lehetősége a filmben” [Moving Meaning: Opportunities for Musical Organization in Film], *Valóság*, no. 11 (1973): 78; Miklós Erdély, “Montázs-gesztus és effektus” [Montage Gesture and Effect] (1975), *A filmről* [On Film], ed. Miklós Peternák (Budapest: Tartóshullám, 1995), 150.

19 See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

theory. Nevertheless, Erdély's epistemological orientation did not embrace the radical political connotations of KwieKulik's appropriation of family life, and was more comparable with Andrei Monastyrsky's outlandish and covert "collectivism."

However, if we adapt Grant Kester's criticism of the esoteric language and spirit of the avant-garde, Erdély's utopian ideas of a revolutionary new metaphysics based on the paradoxical epistemology of Zen and modern science could be considered as a formative but still misconceived endeavor to create real social communication and new communities.²⁰ In this regard, Erdély's holistic approach to art and social communication could be connected to Joseph Beuys's Steinerian ideas. Erdély's notions and theories were more inspired by scientific knowledge, however, and unlike Beuys, he did not regard his pedagogical activity as an artistic practice *per se*. Nevertheless, his educational activity on the FAFEJ course and his later collaboration with the InDiGo Group could be interpreted as a sort of "social sculpture" in a Beuysian sense, since he regarded the exhibitions of InDiGo as an "illustration" or visualization of his revolutionary pedagogical work.



Mauricio Kagel, *Probe: Versuch für ein improvisiertes Kollektiv* [Rehearsal: Experiment for an Improvised Collective], 1971 (images of the Hamburg Performance in 1972). Similar to the Kagel workshop that Miklós Erdély and Dóra Maurer participated in at the 1971 "Kunstzone" Festival in Munich, *Probe* built on exercises determined by the participants, using the methods of imitation and invention.

20 See Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communications in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

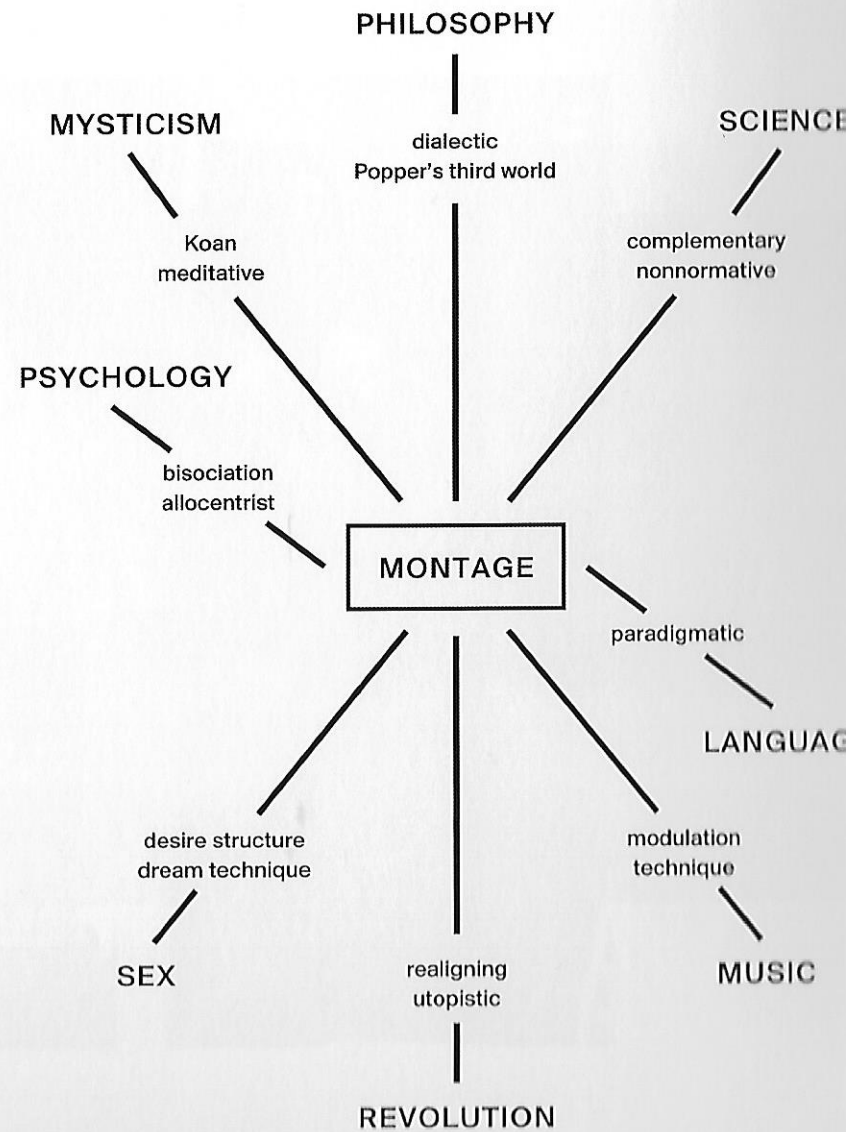
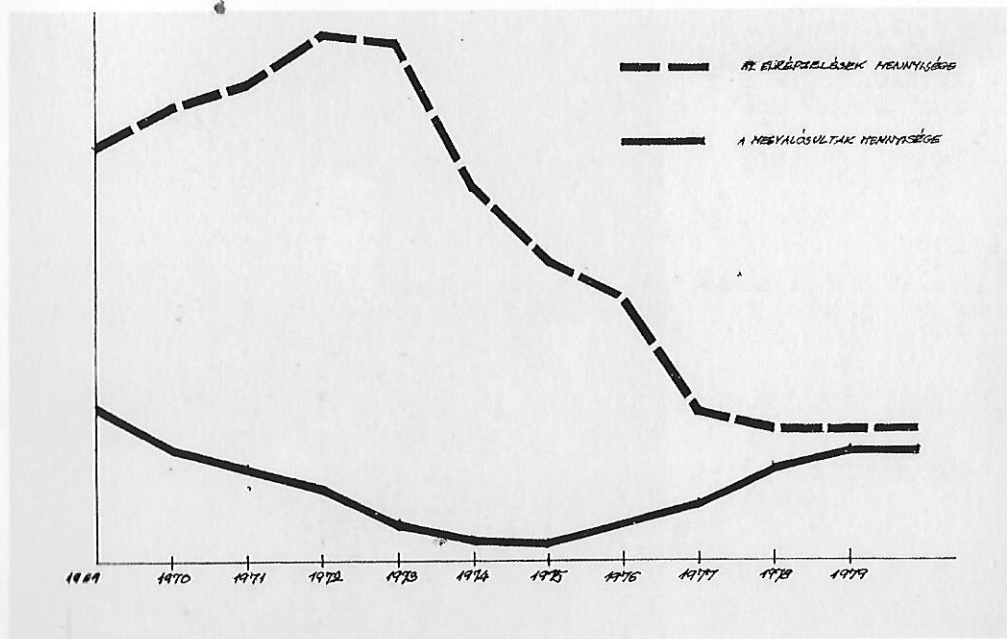
Miklós Erdély, *Dirac in Front of the Box Office*, reading action, part of the event "Three Quarks to King Marke," at the Iparterv State Architecture Office, Budapest, 1968. The caption reads: "Truth is in this direction."



Miklós Erdély, *CETI* (Communication with Extraterrestrial Intelligence), action reading, part of the event "The wolf is coming!," Ganz-MAVAG Cultural Center, Budapest, 1973



Dóra Maurer, *Once We Went*, photo action with the participation of Miklós Erdély, Tibor Gáyor, György Jovánovics, Dóra Maurer and Tamás Szentjóby, Balatonboglár, Chapel Studio, 1972





"Drawing while Disturbed"
exercise, 1976



Opening of the exhibition "Creativity and Visuality," Józsefváros
Exhibition Hall, 1976. "Tactile exercise" led by Miklós Erdély,
György Galántai and Dóra Maurer, based on the idea of Lujza
McCagg



Miklós Erdély's environment
Hidden Green under construction in the Mór Jókai Cultural House, Budaörs, 1977

Miklós Erdély, *Hidden Green*,
Mór Jókai Cultural House,
Budaörs, 1977



"Coal and Charcoal Drawing," the exhibition of the InDiGo Group, Marczibányi Youth Community Center, Club of the Communist Youth League, Budapest, 1978

Detail showing charcoal nude study covered with chicken net and charcoal nude drawing lighted by stovepipe.

Detail showing balloons filled with different materials containing coal.

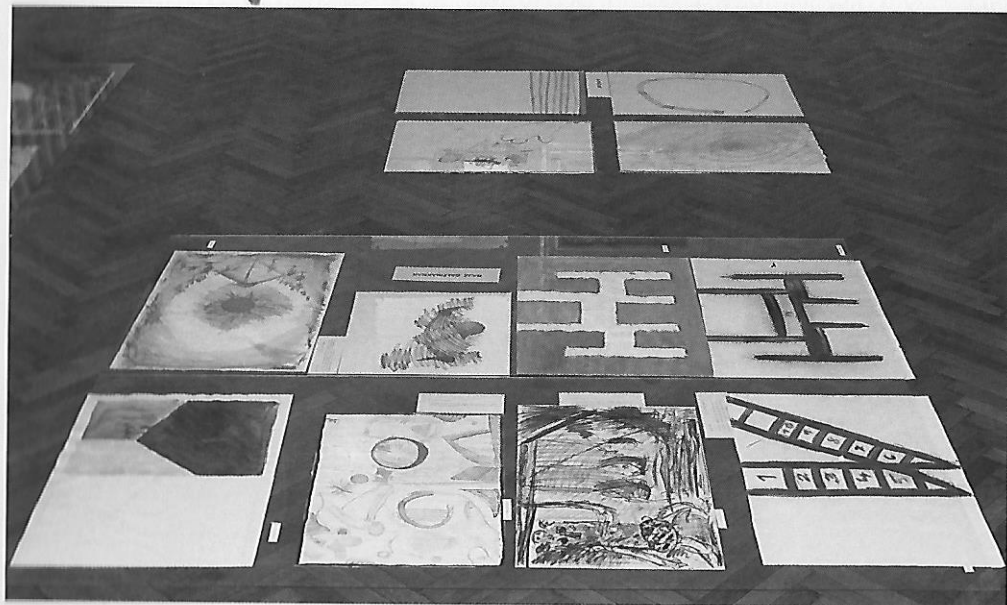
Detail showing knee pipes



o Group building the exhibition "Painting," MOM, Árpád
sits Cultural Center, Budapest, 1979

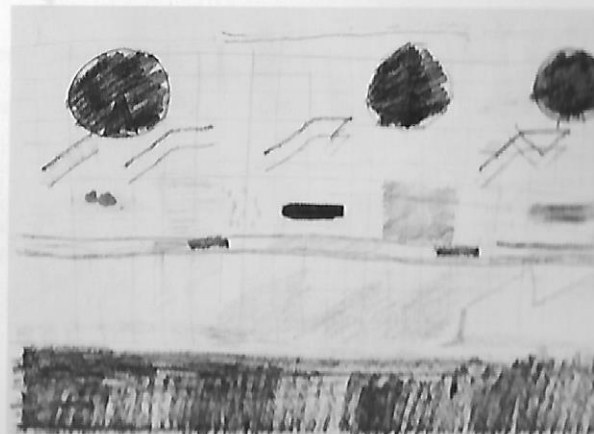


inDiGo Group, *Temporary Sculpture Made of Cotton* at the
exhibition "Hard and Soft: Post-Conceptual Tendencies" curated
by László Beke, Óbuda Gallery, 1981



IndiGo Group, the exhibition of the Drawing Course in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 1983

Works made for the assignments "Mirage" and "Drawing for Galleries"



Collective work of the "girls" for the assignment "Beautiful, but bad drawing"

János Szirtes's work, *Map*, for the assignment "Good theme poorly rendered"

János Sugár's work, *Confectionary Industry*, for the assignment "Good theme poorly rendered"