

## MIKLÓS ERDÉLY, ERNST BLOCH, KURT GÖDEL, AND HIDDEN GREEN

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Hidden Green was Miklós Erdély's first solo show, a mysterious environment<sup>1</sup> he created in a cultural center<sup>2</sup> on the outskirts of Budapest in 1977. Thanks to Eszter Bartholy, we have access to Erdély's own interpretation of the work. Any interpretation of *his* interpretation must take into account Erdély's preoccupation with problems of art theory at the time. One of the key documents of this engagement is his grand two-part lecture<sup>3</sup> on montage at the College of Fine Arts in Budapest in 1975, in which he interprets montage theory and practice within the frameworks of art history and film theory as well as psychology (creativity) and philosophy (epistemology). At the time, Erdély was also planning an exhibition on montage and a lecture series on the history and theory of utopias, as well as being actively involved in art pedagogy within the limits placed on him by the existing institutional infrastructure. The art-

1 Hidden Green [Bújtatott zöld], Budaörs Cultural Center, February 11–25, 1977.

2 Hungarian neo-avant-garde artists—marginalized and, in some cases, explicitly banned from the official art scene, their work rejected by the Lectorate of Fine and Applied Arts—often presented their works and actions in cultural centers on the outskirts of the official art scene with the help of cultural workers there, bypassing the official jury selection system. The Mór Jókai Cultural Center in Budaörs, where Erdély built his environment in a community hall, was such a venue.

3 Erdély presented two lectures on montage theories, which lasted three hours each. Cf. Miklós Peternák, "Beszélgetés Erdély Miklóssal 1983 tavaszán" ["A Conversation with Miklós Erdély in Spring 1983"], *Árgus* (1991/5): 81.



Green, probably made in 1980.<sup>8</sup> Some portions reproduce Erdély's ideas literally, while other sections appear to reflect the artist's thought and intentions more liberally.

In 1974, *Magyar Műhely* had awarded Erdély the Lajos Kassák Prize for *Collapsus med.*,<sup>9</sup> a collection of poems that distinctively combined poetic, everyday, and scientific discourses. Such poetic combinations of different styles also shaped Erdély's artistic actions, environments, and theoretical texts. In fact, Bartholy's analysis of Hidden Green, too, sheds light on the way that Erdély combines *ars poetica* and art theory, while directly reflecting on utopia and on the social function and significance of art. Representing Erdély's thought, Bartholy's article follows avant-garde traditions by linking social and artistic issues, even though Erdély attributes meanings to utopia that are far more radical (and ironic) than did the historical avant-garde, contending that artists must consider not only socially improbable, idealized phenomena but also scientifically improbable and seemingly irrational ones, such as time travel or parallel universes, in order to revolutionize society's pragmatic mindset.

While the text about Hidden Green has every appearance of being the interpretation of an artwork, Bartholy and Erdély, in a virtual dialogue with thinkers including Ernst Bloch, Kurt Gödel, and Allan Kaprow, also make categorical claims about art theory and social theory. These unusual pairings instantly reveal how boldly and provocatively Erdély uses the theories of montage and creativity. The first half of the article is a description of the environment of Hidden Green, where Erdély's use of the term *environment* is similar to Allan Kaprow's.<sup>10</sup> For Hidden Green is not an exhibition in the classical sense, but an artwork that intends to function as an environment, or a miniature cosmos, rather than as an object. The objective of this environment is to affect visitors and to change their thinking by exposing them to an alternative

8 Bartholy participated in several of Erdély's projects, starred in his film *Dream Reconstructions*, and once conducted an in-depth interview with the artist. Eszter Bartholy, "Mélyinterjú Erdély Miklóssal" ["In-Depth Interview with Miklós Erdély"], in *Hasbeszélő a gondolatában*, ed. László Beke, Dániel Csanády, and Annamária Szőke (Budapest: Tartóshullám, 1987), 203–12.

9 Miklós Erdély, *Kollapszus orv.* [*Collapsus med.*] (Paris: *Magyar Műhely*, 1974). The abbreviation *med.* stands for *medical*, ironically specifying the meaning of collapse. Erdély's texts mobilize several contexts and semantic layers of collapse, destruction, and deconstruction. From the vantage point of Erdély's own montage theory, collapse is primarily a collapse (or demolition) of coherent meaning and a coherent—naive realist—worldview.

10 Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1965).

reality. This is what Erdély wanted to achieve in Hidden Green by combining hay and a “feeding station,” both reminiscent of the outdoors, with a desk and chair, confronting an external environment with an interior space. In the installation, these contrasting objects were linked by green light and green color, both evoking rich symbolic meanings. For Erdély, green was not only a symbol of nature and renewal but also an allegory of hope. Bartholy points to the fact that in the thought of Ernst Bloch, hope is linked to the theory of art and utopia.<sup>11</sup> Bloch argues that the main objectives of art are to create alternatives to the given social and cultural order by imagining civilizations that work better or differently, where people live more happily under a different set of laws. In other words, Bloch argues that art must create forms for the desires and social and techno-scientific utopias of humanity. In this context, Bartholy notes that “even though he [Erdély] did not know Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of hope at the time, he would happily recognize later that Hidden Green was a simple symbol of what Ernst Bloch stated in his philosophy of hope.” However, it can be argued, to the contrary, that Erdély was indeed familiar with Bloch’s ideas at the time of Hidden Green.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the lecture series he organized in 1977 (entitled “Utopia”) included a lecture (“Hope and Possibility”) about philosophical utopias and touched on Bloch’s ideas, among others.

The phrase “hidden green” implies that the visitor needs to find something hidden in the space of the environment, namely the green that is both there—illuminating and permeating the entire space—and hidden at the same time. Erdély concealed a green strip of felt behind the feeding station in such a way that it could be found by the visitors. Erdély notes, in this context, that the green strip could also have a disillusioning effect, as it represented an ordinary “objectified green” in a dreamlike space, failing to offer any kind of redemption or earth-shattering profundity.

The most prominent component of the environment that both highlighted and concealed green was a paradoxical object, an odd construction that Erdély and Bartholy in the article call the “cloud.” This cloud, paradoxically supported by about fifty wooden slats, consisted of sheets of paper, a wood pulp board, and a cover made of tracing paper. In

11 Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung I–III* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1959).

12 An excerpt from Bloch’s *Prinzip Hoffnung* on the utopian function of art was published in Hungary in 1975 in the journal *Világosság*, which was a well-known intellectual source for Erdély.

Erdély's interpretation, the cloud symbolizes art and its irrationality, which seems to lend credibility to a positivist world view that relegates everything to the realm of "art" that does not fit the scientific worldview.<sup>13</sup>

It may have been due to this richly paradoxical perspective that Erdély would come to regret—as Bartholy reports in the text—not having written on his cloud the name of Kurt Gödel, the famous Austrian mathematician. Of course, Gödel's name was only familiar to mathematicians and historians of science at that point, and visual artists did not reflect on his work at all. Erdély claims that it follows from Gödel's famous theorem that all hypotheses rely on an infinite number of presuppositions and are ultimately unprovable. Bartholy writes that, according to Erdély, "it follows from Gödel's Theorem—and the object with its support also alludes to this—that any statement rests upon an infinite number of presuppositions and is, as such, unprovable. It is these presuppositions and prejudices that need to be uncovered."

In fact, it was Pierre Duhem who, before Gödel, came to the conclusion that any scientific theorem rested on an infinite number of presuppositions and that, consequently, the refutation of a theorem would not indicate precisely which presuppositions were false.<sup>14</sup> Several phrasings of Gödel's incompleteness theorem (actually, two related theorems) are known.<sup>15</sup> The loosest and most general version states that it is possible to construct logically true statements in any system of axioms or arithmetic system that are unprovable and irrefutable within the system and that, consequently, mathematics and similar systems will never be formally free of contradiction, so they can never be complete and provide a perfect description of reality. Gödel takes a classical logical paradox (the Epimenides paradox) as the starting point for his theorem, which also implies that not even modern mathematics is immune to paradoxes, which in turn undermines the validity of a completely consistent rationalist and positivist worldview.

Paradox, the montage of contradictory statements, was a tool Erdély used to unhinge everyday thinking and naive realism from the routines

13 Bartholy wrote that, according to Erdély, "brick by brick, the latest scientific world view had slowly erected a buttress under the balloon meant to express the irrational nature of art floating above things" ("Hidden Green").

14 Pierre Duhem, *La théorie physique: son objet, sa structure* (Paris: Chevalier et Rivière, 1914), 281.

15 Kurt Gödel, "Über formal unentscheidbare Sätze der *Principia Mathematica* und verwandter Systeme," *Monatshefte für Mathematik und Physik* 38, no. 1 (1931): 173–98.



about the theories of relativity and quantum physics was their proponents' ability to articulate, in everyday language, scientific theories that contradicted everyday assumptions regarding the operations of macrocosmic and microcosmic relations.

Erdély dated the revolutions of modern mathematics and physics to the early 20th century—in art, the age of the heroic avant-garde—and connected them to the philosophy of science, specifically to Paul Feyerabend's Dadaist epistemology<sup>20</sup> and to Arthur Koestler's theory of creativity. Feyerabend proposed that his epistemology, which incorporated explanatory elements from nonscientific sources such as alchemy, voodoo, and politics, was not unlike Dada and anarchist practices. Koestler, in his turn, invented the concept of bisociation to refer to the scientists' creative technique of intuitively connecting previously unrelated theories.<sup>21</sup> It was in this spirit that Erdély's Hidden Green—both the text and the environment—connected romantic folk culture (the feeding station), the modern culture of socialist education (the cultural center), the romantic theory of utopia in Marxist aesthetics (Bloch), and the paradoxes of modern logic (Russell, Duhem, and Gödel).

True to the spirit of actionism and happenings, Erdély showed up in person at his installation every day, took the oddly extended “surreal” broom and swept the hay out of the perfect white circle (about 1.5 m in diameter, roughly the same size as the “cloud”) that was surrounded by it. To him, the white circle symbolized the pure, reflective rationality of science that could also admit contradictions. Bartholy interprets this action as a metaphor for the way we can rid ourselves of social roles, cleansing ourselves of deeply ingrained mental schemas:<sup>22</sup> “Whoever has any openness toward the transcendent will not accept the status of

20 Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (New York: New Left Books, 1975).

21 One of Koestler's examples is the discovery of electromagnetism, in the course of which Ampère and later Maxwell unified descriptions of chemical magnetism and physical electricity into a single theory. Cf. Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Laurel, 1964).

22 This was also basically the goal the artist set for himself and for his participants during the “Creativity Exercises” workshop and its successor, the “Imagination Developing Exercises,” which were launched in the fall of 1977. The latter workshop was devoted to the linguistic and cultural roots of common stereotypes of art and reality, and it confronted participants with the absurdity and paradoxes of Zen koans. Erdély's own theory of art, the theory of the cancelation of meaning, certainly shows the impact of Zen. For the influence of Zen on Erdély's art theory, see Miklós Erdély, “Theses for the Marly Conference of 1980,” trans. John Batki, in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 99–101.

being attached to a role, this attire easily accepted by others. One cannot wear a costume to the last judgment; an area directed upward needs to be kept clean, as if naked, just in case, whether the transcendent aspects of the human being exist or not. The sedimented roles need to be brushed off it.” On a related note, in his lecture on montage, Erdély suggests that the goal of montage-based artistic practice is to have different statements and perspectives cancel each other out semantically, thereby helping the viewer realize that there is no single reality and no representation or description of reality that can, as such, be trusted. He compares the ensuing void and purity to the Zen Buddhist experience of satori.<sup>23</sup>

To complete the installation *Hidden Green* in terms of pedagogy and activism, Erdély urged visitors to write down, with a green pencil on white paper placed on a small desk illuminated by green light, whatever thoughts the exhibition evoked in them. It is a testament to Erdély’s holistic thinking and humor that he took a donkey to the exhibition space during its closing, fed it the hay that was part of the installation, and didn’t fail to note that the donkey carefully avoided the bright white circle symbolizing scientific rationality, sensing its transcendent quality.

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23 Erdély, “Montázsgeztus és effektus,” 150.