

Money No Object: Revolution and Revaluation in the Economics of Place and the Place of Economics in Art

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Within a period of seven years the Hungarian artist Miklós Erdély made, or perhaps more accurately, was involved in the making of two pieces of art which utilized hard currency as an integral part of the work. There are other examples of art made using the depiction of money or its direct presence within the work, such as the American trompe l'oeil painters of the late nineteenth century and Austrian artist Rainer Ganahl's ironic incorporation of currency into textual work. Many of these are included in *Money*, Katy Siegel & Paul Mattick's 'exhibition in a book' as it is described in their cover notes (2004). In Erdély's *Unguarded Money* of 1956 and *Selling Money on the Street* from 1963, neither of which are included in Siegel & Mattick's book, bank-notes are used as part of street actions.¹ Despite the material resemblance, these two works rely on divergent approaches to material and context. What both works do have in common, however, is their distance from the dominant schools of art theory during this period of the Cold War. In the United States, modernist objectivity focused on the qualities specific to each medium, with the artist-author cast as the heroic protagonist. In practice this led to a predominantly abstract style of painting. By contrast, Eastern Bloc Socialist Realism subordinated technique to mimesis, mythologizing its subjects the heroic workers. Nevertheless

¹ The term 'street action' is used here to describe the location of Erdély's work in public space and the fact that the works include acts with a less deliberate theatrical intention than later performance art.

economic policy benefited the working class very little. This paper will compare these street actions, the different environments and circumstances in which they evolved, and Erdély's divergent approaches towards activism and irony within these ostensibly similar works.

Unguarded Money

The first action took place in the unusual context of the streets of Budapest during the revolution of October 1956. The origins, documentation, and authorship of this work indicate its evolution through a combination of groups, individuals, and the flux of events, culminating in a collection of objects in half a dozen different sites. Each installation of the work consists of a printed notice asking for monetary donations to assist the families of those killed or injured in the street fighting, a box to receive that money, and a one hundred forint note inserted in each notice. Tibor Szentpetery's photograph of the action, in the *Photographic Database of the Public Foundation of the Documentary and Research Institute of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution*, reflects the involvement of particular circles in events. Here, it is captioned as 'The Society of Writers collecting money for victims of the revolution' (Szentpetery 1956). However, the 1998 catalogue for the *Global Conceptualism* exhibition cites Erdély as the principal author of this collaborative work (Beke 1999, p.41). Erdély is quoted as saying:

I made six posters, with a total of six hundred forints interlaced in them, a hundred-forint bill in each, that you could pull out. By the time the artists came to see me, Gáyor and others, with the idea that we should start a new magazine, etc... I had already sensed that things were really moving – for example on the radio I heard the news that someone who had fired into a shop

window and damaged a shoe had placed a ten-forint bill under its heel, and it's been there ever since. This was vital information. It was something new. (Peternák 1991, p.76)

This act of paying for damages provides some indication of the strange combination of revolution and an attempt to continue the order of everyday life around these events. The artists' response to these events – to start a magazine – also shows that aside from its utilitarian materials the piece was a further departure from prevailing art theory. Rather than remaining the product of an individual artist-author, it evolved very much into a collaboration.

[...] we organized a group and decided to throw the money into unguarded collection boxes at six different locations in Budapest and from then on my task was driving around in the car of the Writers' Union and chasing away the national guardsmen standing guard next to the collection boxes because they were unable to conceive of the fact that these no longer needed guarding. (Peternák 1991, p.76)

The art work here is in close proximity to the politics of the Cold War as they impacted on everyday life. By being placed in the streets during the events of October 1956, *Unguarded Money* not only commented sympathetically on the revolution but also involved people on the streets caught up in a combination of the momentous and everyday. This live artistic presence contrasts with the highly wrought prescriptions for art propounded by theorists on either side of the geopolitical divide which cast audiences in the role of passive spectator.

American critic Clement Greenberg saw highly formalized abstract art as the most appropriate development of pre-war European avant-garde (Greenberg 2000, p.66). He further saw this

emphasis on formal development, in which each artist would concentrate on properties specific to their own medium, as the answer to the politically prescriptive positions adopted by some groups before the war. Manifestos of the sort adopted by Surrealism, Futurism, Constructivism, and others, which tie aesthetics to the politics of the Left or Right, no longer had any role to play in Greenberg's terms. Somewhat paradoxically in terms of being politically non-prescriptive, though, he also saw liberal American ideology as most appropriate for his preferred form of modernism.

Formal material content notwithstanding, the collaborative nature of Erdély's work and its ad-hoc, interventionist approach to events, totally at odds with Greenberg's take on high modernism, engendered an extended form of collaboration. Beyond the collective conception and installation of the work, its location in the streets soliciting contributions from passers-by gave the work a participatory element. This could be described, with the benefit of hindsight, in the terminology of contemporary theorist Nicholas Bourriaud, as 'post-production' (2002, p.13). Rather than being confined within the formal properties of a single object, the work's meaning is contained within a constellation of objects, participants, environment, and events. These collective properties of the everyday are also the dynamic of the work, even within the context of the extraordinary events surrounding October 1956. Despite the disruption and euphoria of the time, the passers-by making their donations were to a large extent obliged to continue with their everyday lives. This confluence of the revolutionary and the quotidian determines the action.

Unguarded Money is not the only instance of bank-notes being used to intercede in the events of the Hungarian revolution. With its

spontaneous outpouring of protest and apparent lack of sectarian or ideological baggage, the 1956 revolution can sometimes appear to have been the *ideal* revolution (Lomax 1976, p.17). This is one reason why many contemporary activists subsequently appropriated the Hungarian revolution as an exemplary revolution, one which appears to avoid the worst aspects of incipient totalitarianism. However, another use of money during events formed one of the grizzliest episodes of the revolution and one which has come to be regarded as an atrocity. As revolutionaries stormed buildings and forced officials associated with the regime out into the open, the public rounded on some of the security personnel associated. Bank-notes, in this instance carrying the inference of blood money, were stuffed into the mouths and clothing of the badly beaten corpses of state security officers. Although there was much hatred towards these officials for their role in enforcing totalitarianism in Hungary, historians increasingly acknowledge that the violent reaction enacted upon individual members of the security forces was indiscriminate. Despite the reputation given the Soviets for eventually crushing the revolution in a couple of well organised manoeuvres, historians like Johanna Granville now believe that they had far greater difficulty controlling events (Granville 1997, p.75). The treatment meted out to individuals in any way identified with communism took the form of widespread and almost random brutality (Granville 1997, p.75). Images of the security personnel attacked and killed are the best known of such episodes from the revolution. These images consequently diminished some of the sympathy and support for those involved in fighting. Erdély's piece, however, appears to show commitment to the revolution but a commitment expressed in measured terms; his work is something of an antidote to the worst

excesses of the violence. *Unguarded Money* was first of all a means to assist victims of the fighting and their families. While unequivocal in its allegiances, the work gives no direct incitement to violence, certainly not of the kind associated with what was effectively the summary execution of those nominally associated with the regime.

Unguarded Money bears no relation to the Western paradigm of formal artistic freedom, but neither does it bear any resemblance to the prescription for art in the Eastern Bloc. In the Soviet Union and its satellites the ideological stalemate of the Cold War saw Stalinist dogma instil a rigid theory of Socialist Realism across the arts, leading to what Theodor Adorno describes as ‘boy meets tractor’ literature (2007, p.173). Likewise in visual art this meant a romanticized depiction of workers. In stark contrast to the reality of privation endured by the working class, their idealized depiction portrays them as dedicated to digging more coal, smelting more ore, and selflessly devoting themselves to building a future utopia. Erdély’s deployment of a few objects with a text inviting a response from passers-by simply does not pass as art in the terms set out by Socialist Realism. In practical terms however, the piece represents more of an engagement with the economic conditions actually effecting workers, particularly given their participation in the events of October 1956.

If Abstract Expressionism mythologizes the individual artist-author’s formal autonomy, then Socialist Realism dispenses with any attempt at formal innovation, subordinating all media to the task of a literal depiction of the idealized worker’s toil. Setting aside the consideration of Erdély’s or any other individual’s work, the doctrine of Socialist Realism is not only obviously stifling for artists in general, but it grossly distorts the reality of life for the working class in

Stalinist states. This is borne out by the fact that no group played a more active role October 1956 than the working class people of Budapest. Conditions for working class Hungarians were intolerable socially, politically, and not least of all, materially. Equally, when the revolution collapsed no group suffered greater reprisals than working class youths, particularly in the Ferencváros district of Pest.

Other European theorists like Adorno negotiate the lines of this divide, but few clearly identify with either camp though they nevertheless find much of the debate defined by either side. While Adorno is critical of the abdication of engagement with the formal dynamics of art, he is equally sceptical of the bad faith invested in attempts at apolitical artistic emancipation by purely formal means. For Adorno, culture is never more a product and embodiment of ideology than when it professes political neutrality (1992, p.763). Adorno's essay *Reconciliation under Duress* illustrates the difficulties involved in overcoming the limitations of this dualism. Even though he criticizes both the limitations of Socialist Realism and the kind of formalism advocated by Greenberg, the essay first appeared in a publication funded by United States intelligence (Livingstone *et al* 2007, p.143). While this highlights the drawbacks faced by Adorno in trying to maintain independence within these discussions, his contemporary, the Hungarian György Lukács takes a more committed, though questionable, line lent credibility by the reputation of his earlier work.

Lukács defends Socialist Realism, or *Contemporary Realism* as he dubs it, and is probably the foremost critic in this context of modernism as it has developed in Europe and subsequently the United States (Lukács 1992, pp.683-686). He also elaborates on the concept of reification early in his writing and is one of the first key

analysts of Marx's writings. Furthermore, Lukács took an active part in the 1919 Hungarian revolution and the subsequent Republic of Councils, forming the first, albeit short lived, Marxist state outside the Soviet Union. He arguably retained some credibility as someone capable of translating rigorous theory into revolutionary practice, perhaps later resurrected by his participation in Hungary's brief post-revolutionary cabinet in 1956.

However, in many ways Lukács's weight as a thinker obscures the barrenness of his proposed alternatives to modernism. For example, he is reluctant to engage with specific works of literature in his criticism, instead habitually returning to a few favoured exemplary authors (Livingstone *et al* 2007, p.146). These authors are usually exponents of highly crafted bourgeois literature, such as Thomas Mann; a world away from Lukács's stated objectives for a committed socialist art (Livingstone *et al* 2007, p.144).

Lukács's tract *Contemporary Realism* was published in a period straddling Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and, a few months later, the Hungarian Revolution. Lukács, as mentioned above, became a member of the revolutionary cabinet under Imré Nagy, who enjoyed great public sympathy in contrast to the so-called Muscovites; Soviet oriented Stalinists. Lukács narrowly escaped execution in the ensuing backlash after 1956 and went on to resume a – by then – familiar round of retractions of earlier works and deeds. Although Socialist Realism was official state policy in Hungary until the revolution, it is not clear what Erdély's position on this policy was, beyond non-endorsement.

Selling Money on the Street

Lukács and Erdély are thus poles apart in their philosophies about making art. In this way they are typical of the diverse intentions encapsulated by the revolution itself. However, Lukács's earlier writing, upon which Adorno claims so much of his reputation rested, focuses on that aspect of Marx's work dealing with the commodity (Adorno 2007, p.151). In particular, Lukács highlights the reifying social effects of the commodity in capitalist society, its effects on objectifying relationships between people, which in the process becomes determined by ideology (Lukács 1971, p.62). As Lukács writes in his *History and Class Consciousness*:

Ideologically, we see the same contradiction in the fact that the bourgeoisie endowed the individual with an unprecedented importance, but at the same time that same individuality was alienated by the economic conditions to which it was subjected, by the reification created by commodity production. (Lukács 1971, p.62)

Despite the absence of common ground between Lukács's aesthetic theories and Erdély's work with the Writer's Union in 1956, there are parallels between a later work of Erdély's and Lukács's early theories of reification.

It is Erdély's experience of Paris and western European consumerism that again prompts him to adopt the use of money as a material in an action:

When I first arrived in Paris, I was instantly seized by a new and different, crazy spirit, and immediately discovered the curse that went with it. Because I found the freedom that was proclaimed there totally incomprehensible. I sensed a tremendous contrast between the proclaimed conditions of freedom and people's actual behaviour. That is, everyone acted as if their behaviour was controlled by invisible strings. I

could not at first identify the organizing principle behind this phenomenon. Then I realized that money had saturated their nervous systems to a far greater extent than what we had gotten used to – in Hungary. And it seemed to me that the power of money had somehow organized all this behaviour. It was an invisible power. (Peternák 1991, p.76)

This time, however, there is a total shift in emphasis; money no longer signifies a token of solidarity but one of power that determines social relations in the context of the everyday. This is an internalized application of power practically at the level of a reflex. As an object money no longer has any positive function here but is like a chimera.

Comparing the situation in which *Unguarded Money* was placed around Budapest during October 1956 with the context in which *Selling Money on the Street* was made in Paris in 1963 is analogous to the operation of hard and soft muscle tissues in the body. The former deals with conscious effort, like operating the hard muscles of the arms or legs: the harsh realities of totalitarianism met with further force. In the latter, the focus is on the soft effect, the passive assimilation of consumerism. Soft muscle tissues, like the internal organs, function without conscious intention; the heart pumps blood without our conscious decision to make the muscles move. Erdély found that the operation of the value system of money was both internalized and all pervasive. Thus he has the sense that ‘money had saturated their nervous systems’ (Peternák 1991, p.76).

Though definitely taking his cue from the earlier work in Budapest in order to highlight the strangeness of this value system, Erdély adopts a more ironic approach to this action than he did in *Unguarded Money*:

It consisted of – since by then I had some money – selling money on the street at a price somewhat under its nominal value. Opening a boutique, and offering the 100-franc note for 98.50 – at a slight discount. (Peternák 1991, p.76).

Again, the work takes the form of an action. Erdély is recorded referring to it as such: ‘I started to organize an action. Using the experience gained in that ’56 thing’ (Peternák 1991, p.76). However, when he applies for a boutique site on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, Erdély is surprised that the authorities are wholly opposed to the project on the grounds that it is ‘tantamount to devaluing their money’ (Peternák 1991, p.76). Although little is known about precisely how this work finally came to fruition, the reaction to the piece was generally mixed. The idea of tampering with the value attributed to money, as demonstrated by the difficulty involved in securing premises, seemed to hit a nerve. Erdély was surprised to hear that a Swedish artist later attempted a similar piece, selling the Swedish krona for less than its nominal value. He registered less surprise, though, at the response of the Swedish authorities in imposing a jail sentence (Peternák 1991, p.76).

These are rare instances of this type of engagement with economic issues. If money has taken the place of so many other iconic themes in contemporary art and society, as critic Paul Ardenne claims, its visible use or depiction remains relatively scarce (2001, cited in Seigel & Mattick 2004, p.11). Nevertheless the influence and power of money determines so much of what is seen and elevated to the status of the canonical in the art world. While art-world institutions are apparently rarefied, professing distaste for the economics of it all, they are hardly autonomous in the way that art sometimes aspires to be. Criticism of the reluctance within art

institutions to acknowledge the role of economics in art or society still has to be qualified by refuting any kind of vulgar Marxism. In one such example, the art historian Gen Doy repeatedly and defensively eschews any potential accusations of economic determinism in the course of her *Materializing Art History* (Doy 1998, p.20).

In the case of Erdély's work, it is notable that the issues addressed in both *Unguarded Money* and *Selling Money on the Street*, deal with matters directly relating to working class people. This is the group that formed the bulk of those on the streets in October 1956. It is also the group perennially ensnared in the contradictions of money and exchange value in which currency, whilst merely a cipher of exchange value, has also become *the* value. As Marx explicates in his preparatory notebooks for *Capital*:

[...] as the product increasingly becomes an exchange value in reality, and exchange value becomes the immediate object of production – to the same degree must money *relations* develop, together with the contradictions immanent in the *money relations*, [...] The need for exchange and for the transformation of the product into a pure exchange value progresses in step with the [...] increasingly social character of production. But as the latter grows, so grows the power of *money*, i.e. the exchange relation establishes itself as a power external to and independent of the producers. [...] Money does not create these antitheses and contradictions; it is, rather, the development of these contradictions and antitheses which creates the seemingly transcendental power of money. (Marx 1973, p.146)

In exchanging labour as a means of subsistence it is never possible to accumulate sufficient money to transcend these relations since the fluctuations in its value are beyond the control of labour. Among many reasons for participants' involvement, such as the culture of

surveillance, intimidation, and the creeping Stalinization of every aspect of life, the impact of economic shortage had become intolerable to those already living with the least means (Gough 2006, p.114).

Eastern Bloc societies never managed, and it could be argued they never even attempted, to transcend the money relations of capital. István Mészáros, a Hungarian philosopher and one of Lukács's former students from the so-called Budapest School, points to the reluctance or inability of Lukács and the system of the Eastern Bloc to envisage overcoming these relations. He writes:

The most important corollary of Lukács' departure from the Marxian conception of the division of labour concerns the 'law of value' and its manifestations under different socio-economic systems. (Mészáros 1991, p.33)

For Mészáros, Lukács focuses on one limited parallel of Marx, made in order to demonstrate:

'[...] that the share of each individual producer in the means of subsistence is determined by his labour-time' transforming this into a 'universally valid and permanent law, characteristic of 'all modes of production', including the highest stage of communist society. (Marx cited in Mészáros 1991, p.33).

Mészáros goes on to propose a system of communitarian value in which, rather than money as the principle means of exchange of labour and time, 'production is organized as directly social from the outset' (Mészáros 1991, p.54).

While Erdély's attitudes towards economics seem at odds with the dominant ideological blocs of the period, his concern with money and the everyday environment seem, as argued above, equally out of step with some of the then prevailing theories in

contemporary art. However, his location of the actions *Unguarded Money* and *Selling Money on the Street* in the context of urban and commercial life foreshadows an increasing acceptance of art's relationship to the everyday. This is based on an understanding of the everyday as, rather than a neutral category for the simply prosaic, a series of spaces between those of the institutionally established (Papastergiadis 2006, p.6). Here the reciprocal effect of the amassed, random detail of everyday life resonates with the workings of the institutional. These interstices, if not completely subverting their institutional counterparts, offer potential for means of experiencing alternatives, however fleetingly, to the normative channels of work, study, holidays, leisure or even art. Attempts to utilize these alternatives have become integral to the practice of many contemporary artists and are written about extensively by theorists including Nicolas Bourriaud and Nikos Papastergiadis.

Bourriaud locates these practices in a quite specific period within recent art. He places them in the mid to late 1990s among a group of artists including Rirkrit Tiravanija, Douglas Gordon and Vanessa Beecroft (Bourriaud 2000, p.46). Papastergiadis traces a gradual acceptance of the category of the everyday, from Marx on through his twentieth century interpreters including Lefebvre and Agnes Heller (Papastergiadis 2006, p.26-41). For Bourriaud and what he terms Relational Aesthetics, the lexicon of terminology and practices associated with Fluxus, Minimalism, and Conceptual art which these 1990s artists have drawn upon has nonetheless ceased to be the defining quality of their activities. Both of these writers insist that the vocabularies of video, installation, or documentation are employed purely on the basis of their suitability 'to the formalisation of certain activities and projects' (Bourriaud 2002, p.46). Bourriaud

goes further than this. He all but eliminates the importance of production itself:

I try to show that artist's intuitive relationship with art history is now going beyond what we call 'the art of appropriation,' which naturally infers an ideology of ownership, and moving toward a culture of the use of forms. (Bourriaud 2002, p.9)

While both authors locate the roots of these contemporary practices in the art and theory of the Cold War, they still perceive the decisive acceptance of the everyday as a valid category to be a recent shift.

Reconsidering the early part of the Cold War, a relatively small difference of time nevertheless coincides with a sea change in historical circumstances, accompanying a shift from the geopolitics of that period that contrast with the early twenty-first century. This is also true of the art historical canon of the two periods. While Papastergiadis argues that art history is virtually not up to the task of theorizing contemporary art, the post war era, the period of the neo-avant-garde, was rich in historical perspectives, criticism, and theory. Most familiarly, the debates around Modernism as exemplified by American Abstract Expressionism, and the critical alternatives which grew up in response to its dominance, were able to theorize difficult new art in terms nevertheless familiar within the lexicon of art history. The critical responses of pop, minimalism and conceptual art also used these terms as the basis of their own shift from the formalism inherent in Greenberg's ideas, retaining these theories as essential points of reference.

Due to, rather than in spite of, the fact that *Unguarded Money* was an action which intervened directly in the political turmoil of the everyday while eschewing the ideological formulations on either side of the Cold War, the work succeeds in being an effective

intervention and, necessarily, a formal departure from the standard prescriptions of the 1950s. Its comparative reverence for the power, or at any rate usefulness, of money seems incongruous in the context of a consumer society. Of course, revolution itself as a means to achieve political change also seems a far-fetched possibility in this context, although few could have predicted the events of October 1956 either. *Selling Money on the Street*, as a development of Erdély's earlier work in Budapest, nonetheless indicated a need to adopt a more detached, ironic approach to dealing with the rather strange but everyday function of money in a consumer society.

Erdély is usually characterised as a conceptual artist because of his formal departure from traditional art forms and perhaps in part because of this type of critical approach to his work (Beke 1999, p. 41). If his involvement in collaborative actions in the mid-1950s to some extent upsets the chronology of *happenings* and *performance* more typically traced through western developments, then Erdély's later description as a conceptual artist is no more satisfactory. Elements of conceptual art's tendency to dematerialize the art object can be seen in *Selling Money on the Street*, where the objective value of money is questioned. His work does not move away from objects altogether, though. Erdély and his collaborators appear to have no problem utilizing whatever means appropriate to explore their themes. In this respect the parallels with contemporary art and the art of the 1990s are apparent. Nicolas Bourriaud writing about the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija indicates the artist's lack of conceptual baggage about the use of many objects in his work whilst acknowledging that these are only adjuncts, useful means of pursuing other objectives:

[...] by creating and staging devices of existence including working methods and ways of being, instead of

concrete objects which hitherto bounded the realm of art, they use time as a material. The form holds sway over the thing, and movements over categories. The production of gestures wins out over the production of material things. (Bourriaud 2000, p.17).

This is not to claim that Erdély's work was somehow ahead of its time, or that Hungarian art in general was overlooked as an innovative field paralleling or predating Western equivalents. It is however one example of how so much of the accepted history and chronology, so much of the theory taught and absorbed in the western European and North American environment has taken little account of recent art produced elsewhere. In the case of the art made in the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War, there is a large body of extremely diverse work that often reflects specific local conditions. The category of Eastern Bloc art itself is too general, and, with its inherent inclination towards a kind of Soviet bias, it is too likely to replicate the neglect of work within the so-called satellite states.

Exhibitions such as *Global Conceptualism* in 1999, which featured Erdély's work among that of many other artists from places previously considered peripheral in contemporary art terms, have gone some way to redress the balance. This exhibition tried to include those artists and works within an established canon of conceptual art, which seems now too broad a category for the array of work, the means employed, and the initial intentions of those involved. The gradual expansion of this canon nonetheless has to happen through existing institutions, their terminology, and history, which are currently doing only slight justice to the possibility of a fuller account.

The role of economics in all this remains not only an obstacle but one which, if surpassed, will inevitably recoup whatever progress

is achieved in its own terms. Formal, artistic progress can only be tokenistic unless ultimately accompanied by political change. Erdély's two works discussed above, however committed in their attempts to support revolution and subvert the economic order, could of course only be exemplary as art. Nevertheless, their example was able to supersede the daunting artistic and political ideologies of that period in the Cold War. Compared to the well-crafted and marketable paintings of Abstract Expressionism or the state-sponsored dogma of Socialist Realism, Erdély's use of currency is comparatively a case of money being no object.

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