

Miklós Erdély: *Fragile Balance (Danger)*, 1981

Installation, set up within the framework of the 9th Cracow Meetings: Pawilon Wystawowy, Kraków, 13 November 1981.

(Installed by Miklós Erdély, together with Ildikó Enyedi and an unidentified person.)

Destroyed. Miklós Erdély oeuvre catalogue registration number: Evm_23.

Photographs: Ryszard Bobek, Jacek Szmuc, Stefan Zbadynski

Original prints: property of Ildikó Enyedi, property of László Beke, Miklós Erdély Estate

First reconstruction: *Miklós Erdély (1928–1986) Retrospective Exhibition + INDIGO*, Kunsthalle (Műcsarnok), Budapest, 16 October–18 November 1998.

(Reconstructed by: András Kapitány, Annamária Szőke; installed by: András Kapitány and Attila S. Tordai)

Second reconstruction at Trafó Gallery:

19 glass panels (200 × 90 × 0.5 cm), 1 bottle of vodka, indigo paper, 1 artificial head of cabbage.

Reconstructed by: Zsolt Haraszti, Zsuzsi Nagy, Bori Szalai, Judit Szalipszki

Professional leader of the reconstruction: Annamária Szőke, art historian

Fragile Balance is the most monumental work among Miklós Erdély's installations created between 1979 and 1985 of structures built from glass sheets. Both logically and partly chronologically, it brings forward a sequence of works that begins with glass sheets laid flat on the floor, continued with sheets leaned against walls, then placed on edge and leaning against one another, culminating in a large-scale, upright construction made of mutually supporting glass sheets - completely transparent, evoking the impression of a glass labyrinth through reflections and refractions of light. Chronologically, these works are: *Painting* (a joint work with the INDIGO Group), Budapest, 1979; *Artist's Exit* (a joint work with the INDIGO Group), Budapest, 1979; *Boris Godunov (Custom Is the Soul of the State)*, Budapest, 1980; *In Memory of the Council of Chalcedon*, Budapest, 1980; *Südstrand (Without Horizon)*, Wilhelmshaven, 1980; *Stabilization*, Zagreb, 1980; *Slander Crystals. One Must Think about Fertilizer*, Budapest, 1981; *Master Singers*, Szigliget, 1981; *My Most Beautiful Summer Experience*, Budapest, 1981; *Fragile Balance (Danger)*, Kraków, 1981; *Like Reinforced Concrete*, Budapest, 1983; *[Untitled] (Bitumen Cake?)*, Genoa, 1983; *Military Secret*, Vienna, 1984; *Joint Exhibition of Miklós Erdély and Magdolna Csutak*, Vienna, 1985.

Throughout this series of works, glass appears in countless forms and applications. “Why do I use glass?” Erdély asked in 1980. “Because it turned out that in exhibition spaces there is usually nothing else - only glass, or not even that. Since glass itself is highly expressive, it can be used or placed in such a way that one or several kinds of meaning emanate from it.” The meaning of several of his installations was connected to the political or global situation at the place or moment of their installation.

An early example is the installation *Message de la Révolution*, set up at the 1971 Biennale de Paris: “A porcelain dinner service covered by a glass sheet, above it a slanted sheet of corrugated metal [at its upper edge] with an iron ball that appears ready to roll down at any moment. From time to time, unexpectedly, a tremendous crashing sound is heard (from a tape recorder)”—as described by László Beke.

Fragile Balance (Danger) likewise responded to a turbulent and uncertain situation in Poland, one month before the introduction of martial law and the banning of Solidarność.

In Kraków, Erdély intended to work with glass and tar paper, but the latter could not be sourced by the organizers. The basic concept of the work is extremely simple and could be clarified through photographs and through the assistance of Ildikó Enyedi, who helped with the installation. The massive series of glass sheets leaning against one another like a house of cards or dominoes begins with four glass sheets propped together, forming a square from whose center a red cabbage hangs down from the ceiling. Erdély required the help of two people only to create this square; from that point onward, he built the regular sequence of glass sheets by himself. Around the middle of the row of panels, he broke its direction and created another square from four panes, inside which he placed a bottle of wine or vodka wrapped in carbon paper on a low pedestal. These two items - the alcoholic drink and the cabbage - were among the few things that could still be purchased in Kraków before the declaration of the state of emergency, at a time when queues formed everywhere in front of stores. During the construction of the work, the audience was gradually pushed out of the exhibition space.

Numerous photographs were taken during the installation process; however, it was extremely difficult to orient oneself in the images of the glass “labyrinth.” The distortions of low-angle shots complicated the calculation of dimensions, and the sense of monumentality conveyed by the photographs amplified the impression of the work’s actual dangerousness. Only later, after the completion of the 1998 reconstruction, and

with knowledge of the stability of the structure built from heavy glass sheets leaning against one another by their edges and surfaces, can we say that the work's danger was merely apparent: its "fragile" balance can be upset only by strong or deliberate external intervention.

This is a regular structure which, in terms of its method of support, resembles Erdély's earlier installations, but in terms of size and logic represents their further development. Since the artist is no longer alive, the question may arise as to whether the work is being presented in an authentic manner. It is precisely the regularity of the structure that makes it possible for the installation to be carried out according to a "recipe" or a set of instructions. The most we can strive for is to understand the construction's internal system and statics, and in the case of reconstructions this process of understanding must be more intensive and complex than for other works. Without this, the work no longer exists, because it cannot be recreated. Reconstruction - or construction itself - is interpretation.

The long-term "preservation" of a work of this kind lies in clarifying and describing, in every detail, the method of its installation at any given time and by anyone. Ideally, one could imagine that the carefully packed and stored elements of the installation would simply need to be taken out and assembled according to a precise plan - like a structure whose mode of operation we understand. The appropriate person to install the work will always be someone willing to undertake concentrated and deeply engaged labor, to which the experiential aspect is enhanced by physical involvement and exertion, as well as by the direct experience of the "behavior" of the materials.

The completion of this second "reconstruction" also provided an opportunity for a new generation to take up the baton and to experience the possibilities of a "friendly handling" of the work.

Annamária Szőke