

ÁGNES BEREZCZ

## Open Assembly – Unguarded Money

### Abstract

On the eleventh day of the soon to be subjugated 1956 Revolution, the Hungarian Writers' Association placed several wooden crates on the streets of Budapest with the inscription: "The pureness of our revolution allows us to collect for the families of our martyrs this way." An informally organized solidarity action, the event was administered by Miklós Erdély and many others who deposited the crates at different parts of the city and then collected and distributed the cash donations to the families in need.

After the oppression of the Revolution when the newly installed Kádár administration represented the anti-Soviet uprising as a right-wing counter-revolution characterized by looting, violence and a lack of socially conscious action, the event subsisted in collective historical memory as a treasured instance and a counter-proof of the official narrative. By the mid-1960s when Erdély emerged as the leader of the Hungarian neo-avant-garde, the event – named *Unguarded Money* and solely attributed to him – became considered by the participants of the unofficial art scene as the first public happening and the mythic point of origin of politically risqué performance art. Since the end of the Cold War, and especially the 1999 New York exhibition, *Global Conceptualism* that featured its documentation, *Unguarded Money* has been framed as the emblem of sociopolitical conceptualism in the former Eastern Bloc.

Exploring *Unguarded Money's* transformation from a participation-based, collective political action to an authored artistic event, I will analyze the contexts of its subsequent reinterpretations and investigate its role in the construction of the so-called secondary publicity. Exploring if, and to what extent *Unguarded Money* provided a model of public participation for both civic activism and underground art practices in Kádárist Hungary will be the main focus of my inquiry.

## Zur Person

Ágnes Berecz (PhD, Université Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2006) teaches modern and contemporary art history at the Department of Graduate Studies of The Fashion Institute of Technology and at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. The New York correspondent of the Budapest-based art monthly, *Műértő*, she is currently writing a book about the cultural politics of painting in postwar France. Her writings have been published in *Art in America*, *ArtMargins*, *Praesens*, *Treca* as well as in European and US exhibitions catalogues. Her most recent work includes “Grand Slam: Histories of and by Georges Mathieu” in the 2008 issue of the *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* and “Painting Lessons: Hantaï and His Critics” in the Winter 2008 issue of *Art Journal*.