

Performance Art in East-Central Europe 1960s to the Post-Communist Era

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In order to evaluate the significance of performance art in the former communist countries of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe, it is important to consider the development of the genre in the context of the socio-political conditions governing artistic and creative practice under state-sponsored socialism. During this time, most, if not all official artistic practice was subject to some form of government control if not monitoring. While the implementation of socialist realism in the Soviet Union and its satellites was the most extreme example of this, in practice, the policy was adhered to haphazardly, perhaps most strictly in Albania, and to some extent, Russia. Nevertheless, with the arts under governmental control, only painting and sculpture were considered appropriate genres in which to work. Thus performance art—a genre within the *visual arts*, as opposed to theatre or musical performance—not being recognized as a valid art form, offered visual artists a “free zone” for experimentation and development of their individual forms of expression, which could not have been realized in the official sphere.

The narrative, with regard to the development of performance art in Western Europe and North America, is that the genre emerged at a time of institutional critique, when artists were questioning the institutions of art and their respective mechanisms for judging and evaluating works of art; questioning canons and their exclusive and restrictive nature (for example, the exclusion, in the Western art canon, of women, LGBT, and artists from other marginalized groups); and attempting to combat the commodification of art. As such, performance art was one form of ephemeral art, along with conceptual art, that came into being with the aim of denying the art market and its institutions saleable objects of art.¹ As we are also well aware, however, under communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe, there were no art markets to speak of, at least none similar to those

present in Western Europe and North America. Art was not sold in commercial galleries; it was commissioned and purchased by the state. To be an artist, in many countries one had to belong to the official Union of Artists, which provided a salary, studio, and access to supplies. To exist as an independent commercial artist was almost unheard of, although occasionally artists were able to sell their artworks to foreign collectors.

It should also be noted that while artists from East-Central Europe were well-connected with and familiar with many of the artists, performances, and events taking place outside their borders, the same cannot be said for those in the West, who to this day remain relatively unfamiliar with the performance art that developed in the Eastern bloc at the same time as in Western Europe and North America. This is in part because, until very recently, this history remained largely unwritten. While RoseLee Goldberg published her seminal text in 1979, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, it was only in the 1990s that art historians in the region were finally able to construct their own local histories of the development of performance. Among the first of these histories were Pavlína Morganová's *Akční umění* (Action Art), published in 1999 in Czech and in English in 2014 as *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*; and Ileana Pintilie's *Actionism in Romania During the Communist Era*, published in 2002.² It is thanks to these national histories that international scholars can begin to get a better grasp of the significant performative activity taking place behind the Iron Curtain, contemporaneous with similar activity elsewhere.

While artists such as Allan Kaprow and John Cage in North America were developing more authentic forms of "art into life," such as transient, experiential, and time-based—as opposed to object-based—works of art, in order to avoid commodification and provide a direct experience of expression, artists in East-Central Europe did not arrive at their performative acts as a reaction to or *rejection* of the market or the object (although they were well aware of the strategies used by artists in Western Europe and North America, and equally critical of capitalism as they were of communism). Rather, this form of creation was an *affirmation* of freedom and creative spirit. Using performance, they could create freely, outside of any guidelines dictating what art should or should not be. Of course, in most cases, this creation had to take place in private and remain undetected by the authorities, who would have—and often did—sanction this type of activity outright, given that it was not officially approved as artistic activity. For example, Czechoslovak artist Milan Knížák's action, *Walk Through Prague*, planned for December 5, 1965, was interrupted by police at the very beginning of the event, when police spotted participants drawing chalk circles of about three yards in

diameter on the sidewalk and walking in the circumferences, all in front of the National Theater. Despite the innocuous nature of this activity, it was deemed too unconventional and nonconformist for a city sidewalk, and the rest of the action, which involved a visit to a movie theatre and trip to the zoo, did not take place because of the interference of the authorities.

It was for this reason that most actions, happenings, and performances took place in private or in the countryside, in places that were not heavily policed or surveilled. And despite interruptions such as with Knížák's work, the lack of an official stamp of approval often gave artists considerable freedom to develop their art in the direction they desired. The result was an interesting hybrid of different art forms that were unlike anything seen elsewhere. For example, during the period of "normalization" in the 1970s, when any artistic activity that veered from the norm posed a great risk for artists, much of the action art in Czechoslovakia took place in the countryside, which resulted in an interested amalgam of performance art and land art. Intermediality, in fact, offered artists in East-Central Europe fresh possibilities. With artistic production under communism being so rigidly defined according to genres, the possibility of including elements of movement, dance, poetry, music, and photography freed the artist from having to remain true to disciplinary boundaries, giving him or her more freedom to create than those boundaries usually allowed.

Despite the restrictions that artists in the region faced, they were not entirely disconnected, nor unaware of the developments taking place around the rest of the world. Information circulated in a range of ways, artists from East-Central Europe traveled to Western Europe and North America (for example, Milan Knížák, Natalia LL, Tadeusz Kantor, not to mention a number of artists from Yugoslavia), and artists such as John Cage, Tom Marioni, Gina Pane, Chris Burden, and Joseph Beuys traveled across East-Central Europe. Furthermore, the mail art network enabled artists to remain part of the international art world even if they were unable to travel.³ Romanian artist Lia Perjovschi, for example, participated in a mail art exhibition in Mexico, exhibiting the documentation of her performance piece *The Test of Sleep* (1988), in which she covered her body with drawings and then photographed them, making her body the surface of the canvas or screen onto which images are projected.

Finally, artists kept up with the developments in the art world through several well-circulated texts, such as Michael Kirby's *Happenings* (1965), Allan Kaprow's *Assemblages, Environments, Happenings* (1966), Adrian Henri's *Total Art: Environments, Happenings and Performance* (1974), and eventually RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (1979). Kaprow's text was brought

to Estonia by art historian Eda Sepp, and Romanian artist Iosif Király also mentioned being aware of it. Czech artist Tomáš Ruller had purchased Henri's book while traveling abroad in 1977, and Bulgarian curator and art historian Diana Popova translated Goldberg's text into Bulgarian and circulated it among friends and colleagues. Lithuanian artist Gediminas Urbonas also recalls a book about the Viennese Actionists being brought into Lithuania by art historian Raminta Jurėnaitė, whose father was a prominent member of the Communist Party. Journals on contemporary art, such as *Art Forum*, could often be read in university libraries, although in some cases these publications were heavily guarded, and one needed the status of an art student to access them. In East Germany, for example, these texts could be found on the *Giftshrank*, or "poisonous bookshelf." Performance artist Via Lewandowsky recalls it contained such "subversive" tomes as the catalogues from Manifesta.

Artists working in performance art, conceptual art, mail art, etc., were, consequently, very familiar with contemporary trends in art around the world. Despite the isolation of working in a region where travel both into and out of the country was often restricted, artists were able to participate in international developments using the easily portable art form of performance art. And although their work has largely been excluded from Western art publications, at least until now, it did not entirely escape the radar of prominent curators and critics from the region. For example, the work of Czech artist Petr Štembera and the Slovenian group OHO was included in Lucy Lippard's 1973 publication, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*; a Soviet-oriented issue of *Flash Art* was published in 1978; Polish artist Natalia LL reports corresponding with and meeting American feminist performance artist Carolee Schneemann; after Fluxus founder George Maciunas saw the action-based work of Czech artist Milan Knížák, he asked the latter to be the representative of "Fluxus East."

That is not to say that examples of performance art from East-Central Europe should be considered in any way derivative of counter examples elsewhere. Quite the contrary: performance art in the region developed *concurrently* with its correlates elsewhere. A good example of this symbiosis is the Squat Theatre, an experimental theatre group originally from Budapest, where they gave secret performances before being exiled. The group toured Western Europe and eventually settled in New York during its years of major activity, 1977–1981, no doubt leaving an impact on experimental art scenes in each locale along the way. It was often the case that artists in the region only discovered examples of performance art by artists outside of their local environment after they had already begun experimenting with action and body art themselves. This discovery often served to *embolden* them to continue their experiments and affirmed that they

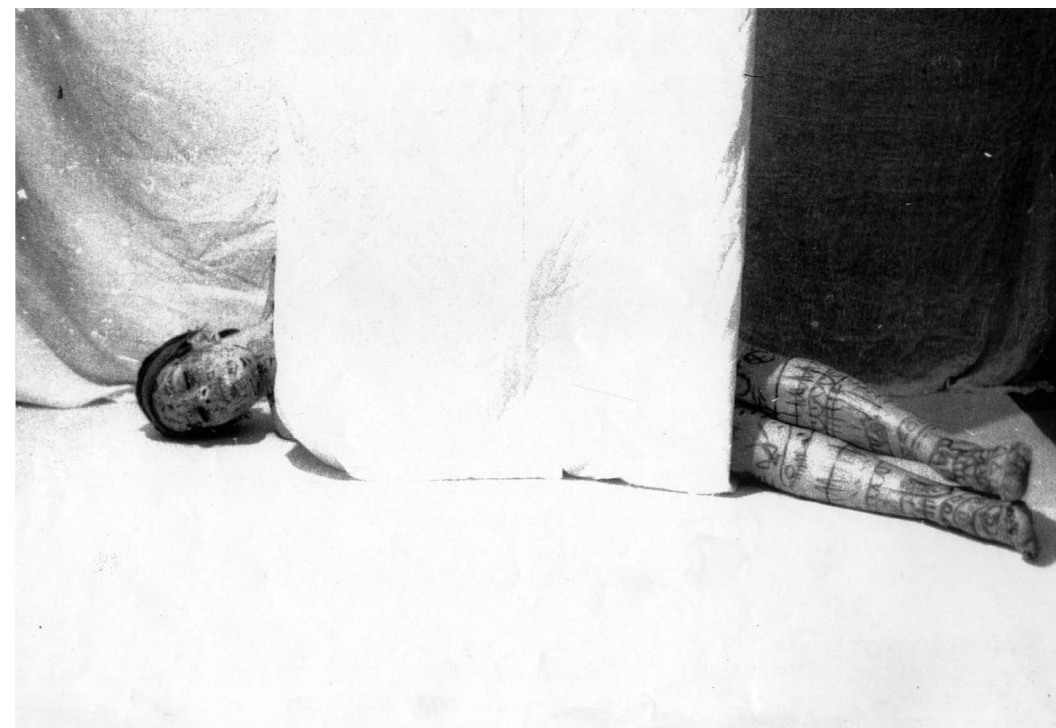
remained connected with, not isolated from, the developments of experimental and avant-garde art elsewhere. Hungarian artist Tamás Szentjóbby noted parallels between the objects he was developing in Budapest in the 1960s and the North American and Western European happenings that were featured in the May 1966 issue of the journal *Film, Theatre and Music*. Seeing this, he felt energized to stage his first happening, *The Lunch: In Memoriam Bhatu Kahn*, in 1966. A few weeks later, he received a copy of Jürgen Becker and Wolf Vostell's book *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme* (1965), which affirmed that his work was not, in fact, created in isolation, but part of an international creative trend. Performance art, then, functioned as a lifeline that connected artists with other like-minded individuals across the very strict and often insurmountable national and political borders.

While artists in Western Europe and North America may have been prompted to develop ephemeral art forms as a way of eschewing the art market, avoiding commodification and objectification, artists involved in performance art in East-Central Europe did *not* want their work to remain immaterial. In fact, most artists documented their work quite deliberately. This was not with the aim of it being shown immediately in a local gallery or being sold to a major institution or collector. Rather, the documentation of performance art in East-Central Europe served one very particular and important function, that of providing permanence—evidence that it had occurred. This evidence was oriented in two directions: Firstly, it was gathered to share with friends and colleagues, both locally and across the region, as well as abroad. As demonstrated, performance art proved quite portable through mail art channels. Secondly, this “evidence” was preserved for a wider audience, which artists hoped would be available in the future. Ivana Bago and Antonia Majaca have characterized this audience as a “delayed” one, which might be able to appreciate the wider implications of these artists’ activities at a future date.

Indeed, this echoes the comments made by many performance artists in the region about the documentation of their work. For example, Romanian artist Iosif Király stated that he photographed his actions for a “future audience,”⁴ unsure of whether it would ever be seen. Slovak artist Peter Meluzin talked about the need to document his performances because this made it possible to show the work to future generations. In his words, “without the photographs, these works would be unverified.”⁵ Similarly, Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi commented that he documented his work and the work of his colleagues in order to have a “witness” to it, stating that in many instances, he “never thought it would be seen.”⁶ In many ways, the hopes of these artists have been realized, and today we are able to reconstruct the history and development of performance art across



Lia Perjovschi, *The Test of Sleep* (1988). Photo: Dan Perjovschi. Courtesy the artist.



Installation view of *The Place Where Gullivers Sleep* (1998), National Art Gallery, Tirana, Albania.
Photo: Courtesy the artists.



Siniša Labrović, *Perpetuum Mobile*, 2009. Photo: Courtesy the artist.

the region thanks to the painstaking efforts of these artists who did not allow their work to disappear, but rather made it permanent and concrete through the object of performance—its photographic documentation.⁷

In addition to maintaining control over the field of artistic production and everyday life, under communism, the body was also co-opted by state structures and subject to control, in the form of mass spectacles, where the uniform bodies in motion came to represent the uniformity of the people in support of the government, not to mention their social and economic parity. Branislav Jakovljević has written about the contrast between the struggling and contorted bodies of performance artists active at the Student Culture Centre in Belgrade, among them Marina Abramović and Raša Todosijević, and the obedient, harmonious bodies witnessed in mass spectacles. In his words, these were “emaciated, unregimented bodies that don’t march and don’t exercise in union.”⁸ I would extend Jakovljević’s argument to include all of the performing bodies of artists active in performance art in the region. These bodies, whether of the artist or of others involved in the performances or actions, were undisciplined bodies voicing their opposition to the norms, rules, and restrictions of the state, as well as the art academies that only supported more traditional approaches in painting and sculpture, as opposed to experimental practices in ephemeral art, however minute or unwitting this dissent might have been. Performance art offered one opportunity for *antipolitics* in the region, wherein individuals could dissent from the norm, without overtly being political.⁹

PERFORMANCE ART IN THE POST-COMMUNIST PERIOD

Perhaps it goes without saying that performance art did not develop uniformly across the region, given that the region itself was not uniform. While artists in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Latvia, and Yugoslavia, among other places, worked in performance art in the 1960s and 1970s, alongside artists across the globe, the genre arrived much later in other places. For example, in Moldova and Albania it only appeared after the end of communism, in the 1990s. The reasons for this were different in each place. In Moldova, the art world was rather conservative, and experimentation was usually confined to take place within painting; for example, an artist utilizing expressionist techniques or colors was considered innovative. In Albania, however, under the strict rule of communist leader Enver Hoxha, experimenting with an expressionist technique could, and did, land an artist in jail in the 1970s.¹⁰

When artists in these countries did begin to experiment with performance, it offered them a similar freedom as it did their predecessors in the 1970s. It enabled, for example, Moldovan artist Pavel Braila to pursue a career in art,

which he hadn't previously thought possible. Braila had been working in public relations in Chişinău when he began attending the workshops and summer camp, CarbonART, offered by the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art (now K:SAK, the Chişinău Centre for Contemporary Art). These workshops offered instruction in new media and mixed-media genres, including performance art, and the artist commented that this opened up a new world of possibility for him, as he hadn't previously thought it possible to make a living as an artist without any formal training from the art academy.

Likewise, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Albania started to open up, artists Flutura and Besnik Haxhillari, who now work together under the artistic name of The Two Gullivers, realized that they had missed a lot in terms of new developments in art, that had been excluded from their training at the art academy and certainly wasn't available to them in publications, under the strict conditions of life in communist Albania. Rather than posing a problem, this gap in their knowledge opened up a space for them to create something completely new. The Two Gullivers made a conscious decision to work in performance, a genre that they knew nothing about, in order to insure that their work was unique and not derivative.¹¹ Their first performance in Albania took place in 1998, when they installed their bed on the wall of the National Gallery of Art in Tirana, and "slept" in it during the opening of an exhibition.

Performance art remained important to artists working across the region in the post-communist period. Many of the artists who utilized the genre after the system change did so without knowledge of the pre-existing traditions in their own countries. Such was the case with Romanian artist Veda Popovici, who noted in an interview that she found out about the performative work of Ion Grigorescu and Geta Brătescu—both painters who created some of the earliest examples of performance art in Romania in the 1970s, in the privacy of their studios—only after starting to create actions. Rather than discourage her, by giving the impression that this had already been done, it bolstered her to continue her practice, given these exemplary precursors. Much like the artists in Moldova and Albania, many became attracted to work in performance because it seemed a "new" genre, something fresh and different from what they were taught in art school. Others were attracted to performance for its direct and visceral expression.

While there is still the misguided notion that performance art is somehow "cheap" or "free," because it "only" involves the artist using their body, contemporary performance artists are conscious of this misconception and address it in their performative work. For example, Croatian artist Siniša Labrović created the performance *Perpetuum Mobile* in 2009, as a response to several invitations he had had to perform for free. The performance involves the artist attempting to urinate

into his mouth and, when he ultimately fails, he cups his hand and drinks his own urine. The message is that contemporary performance (and other) artists have to be self-sustaining in the current neoliberal environment, where resources for art are scarce, and especially when they not paid for their work.

As I have attempted to demonstrate, the development and significance of performance art in Central and Eastern Europe varied from country to country, region to region, even city to city both during and after communist rule. In Romania, Albania, and Russia, for example, artists particularly felt the pressure of state surveillance. However, in places such as Yugoslavia and Poland, the level of tolerance for artistic experiment was somewhat greater. That said, across the region performance art was not accepted as a legitimate genre, unlike in Western Europe and North America where, although it may have taken a few years, it was comparatively quickly institutionalized. Nevertheless, artists in Central and Eastern Europe utilized these challenging conditions to create unique manifestations and permutations of performance art, actions and happenings that are both comparable to experiments in Western Europe and North America, yet unique and distinct in their own right. Performance art played such an important role in the development of experimental and avant-garde art practices in the region, enabling art to continue to develop in the face of stagnation promoted by the government and art institutions, and also had a greater social role in enabling an anti-political form of dissent, that it is surprising it is only recently that it is beginning to receive its due in terms of acknowledgment by institutions and art historians the world over.

NOTES

1. It rapidly became clear that the market (or even the artists themselves) would not allow such subversion, and performance art often produced saleable and reproducible objects in the form of photographs and videos of the performance, not to mention exhibitible objects used in performance.

2. Since then, the following national histories have been published: Zane Matule, *Performance Art in Latvia 1963–2009* (Riga, Latvia: Neputns, 2009); Suzana Marjanić, *Chronotope of Croatian Performance Art: From Traveleri until Today* (Croatia: Institute of Ethnology and Folklore, 2014); Andrea Bátorová, *The Art of Contestation: Performative Practices in the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia* (Bratislava: Comenius University, 2019); and Katalin Cseh-Varga's long-awaited publication on Hungarian performance art is set to be published this year: *The Hungarian Avant-Garde in Late Socialism: Art of the Second Public Sphere* (I.B. Tauris, 2020). In 1998, a groundbreaking exhibition took place in Ljubljana, Slovenia, "Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present," curated by Zdenka Badovinac, and resulting in a publication of the same name in 1999 in the form of an exhibition catalogue. The short texts and black-and-white illustrations provide an early glimpse into the performance activity in the region. More recently, an edited volume was published by Katalin

Cseh-Varga and Adam Czirak, entitled *Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere: Event-Based Art in Late Socialist Europe* (Routledge, 2018), presenting the first interdisciplinary analysis of performance art from East-Central Europe.

3. It was also through his work in mail art that Romanian artist Iosif Király was able to invite and host Japanese Gutai artist Shozo Shimamoto in Romania. According to Király, because his work came from Japan, and the censors couldn't read or understand Japanese, the mail usually got through.

4. Iosif Király, in an interview with the author in Bucharest, March 26, 2014.

5. Peter Meluzin, in an interview with the author in Bratislava, October 17, 2012.

6. Dan Perjovschi, in an interview with the author in Bucharest, March 24, 2014.

7. It should be noted that video documentation of performance art in East-Central Europe from the 1970s and 1980s, though it does exist, is extremely rare.

8. Branislav Jakovljević, in Claire Bishop and Marta Dzierawska, eds., *1968–1989 Political Upheaval and Artistic Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 42.

9. The reference is to György Konrád's 1982 text of that title. Klara Kemp-Welch's *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule, 1956–1989* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014) addresses the manner in which artists from the region engaged in dissident or subversive activity by *not* playing politics.

10. For example, artist Edison Gjergo was imprisoned for his Chagall-like painting *The Epic of Morning Stars* (1972), and the painting was confined to storage.

11. The Two Gullivers, in a Skype interview with the author, October 20, 2014.

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