

Mapping the Emerging Historiographies of Performance Art in East-Central Europe

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the emerging historiographies of performance art in East-Central Europe, where the genre developed during the communist period outside of the official spheres of art. It looks at the range of ways in which performance was codified, for example, artists' self-archivization, exhibitions and festivals. It also explores the recent publication of national and comparative histories, and the methods used to amass this history, including interviews with the artists. This chapter makes the case that the historiography of performance art in East-Central Europe developed in alternative spaces and media, in the same manner that the genre itself did.

While the *history* of performance art in East-Central Europe¹ is inextricably connected to that of Western Europe, not to mention its global iterations, the *historiography* of performance in the region warrants particular attention. Although performance in Western Europe and North America presented itself, initially, as an extra-institutional development, critical of the institutions of art itself, it became co-opted relatively quickly by that system, becoming commercialized and canonized as it usually happens with the avant-garde, at least according to Peter Bürger, in his 1974 text *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*.² In East-Central Europe, performance art also manifested as an extra-institutional phenomenon, mainly as it was where artists found the space to expand creatively and pursue new forms of expression, outside of the official genres of painting and sculpture, the only ones tolerated by the regime. For this reason, it was not institutionalized or

commodified—other than occasionally by Western institutions and critics—but this process is beginning in the region now.

In the following text, I will explore the manner in which the history of performance art in the region has been ‘written,’ expanding the notion of writing to include other forms of codifying history, such as artists’ self-archivization, exhibitions and festivals—and the discussions that occur as part of events organized around these events, which were often the first opportunity for artists to showcase their work publicly, and with an international audience. I will then explore the manner in which images of performances become icons and the canon of a performance art history is constructed. Lastly, I will examine contemporaneous examples of discourse and debate on performance art, finishing with an analysis of more recent histories of the genre, which rely heavily on the use of oral histories. In this text, I argue that the historiography of performance art in East-Central Europe developed in alternative spaces and media, in the same manner that the genre itself did.

Self-historicization and Self-archivization

As a consequence of these unique socio-historical conditions, artists developed different ways of capturing and preserving their activity, becoming their own archivists and art historians. A good example of this is the artistic duo KwieKulik (Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek). Their archive, amassed and preserved by Zofia Kulik, was a contemporaneous documentation and presentation of the artists’ work. From the 1970s to the 1980s, the two hosted regular events in their flat in Warsaw, presenting their work from the archive in slide shows. What they presented, in effect,

was a contemporaneous art history lesson on the emerging performance activity in the People's Republic of Poland.

In 1974 KwieKulik established PDDiU, the Bureau of Activities, Documentation and Dissemination (Pracownia Działań Dokumentacji i Upowszechniania). Although started as an informal part of their work, the aim was always to make PDDiU a legitimate institution, and the pair sought official recognition for it by the state, which would have given them some funding and space. At its inception, and for its duration, it was located in KwieKulik's Warsaw flat (and later their home in the suburb of Łomianki) because the state never granted them institutional status. Interestingly, it never denied them that status either, it simply refused to respond to their numerous requests.³

PDDiU represents an early example of cognizance of the significance of documentation of performance art on the part of performance artists. KwieKulik very deliberately used the term “działanie” (activities) for their work, which encompassed preparation, presentation *and* dissemination (through documentation). What they termed “performance” was simply the presentation of an action, for example, at a festival—only the live act. The distinction between these two terms on the part of the artists indicates a definition of live art that does *not* place significance on its ephemerality—rather, it focuses on the permanence of the work, in the form of its documentation. Secondly, it includes the acts of self-historicization and self-archivization, which was so crucial to the preservation of experimental art activity under communism, insofar as usually not looked after by art historians at the time.

KwieKulik were well connected to the international performance art scene. They participated in festivals abroad, either in person or by sending their documentation. Local audiences for their work, however, were small—as was the case with performance art across the globe. Nevertheless, many artists in East-Central Europe felt isolated because there were limitations placed on them that artists elsewhere may not have experienced. For example, getting a passport to travel abroad was not an automatic right. Many artists were denied passports to travel internationally, including, at one point, KwieKulik. Information, though it did pass through the porous Iron Curtain, was not as free-flowing as perhaps it could have been. Because of this, documentation, which allowed the artists to present their work abroad, became crucial to forging connections with the art world outside of Poland.

It would be wrong, however, to infer from this that KwieKulik developed this approach to their Activities *because* of their historical circumstances. As early as 1967, when Kwiek was still a student at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, he created a composition that comprised both the making of a sculptural form and the documentation thereof (*Study of the Act of Lying Below the Horizon*). This would form the foundation of KwieKulik's later performative work. Intent on capturing the *process* of creating the sculpture, he photographed it at every step of the way, documenting both the changes that he made as a result of his own progress as well as the changes that were made as a result of discussion with viewers. Without the photographs of the early stages of the work, the process of creating the piece—the performance of creation—would have been lost or forgotten. Thus, the documentation was a way of creating permanence out of ephemerality, and the fact that this happened to suit the conditions of the artists' socio-political circumstances is coincidental.

Festivals and Galleries

While for the most part, performance art was ignored or excluded by galleries and museums across the region, during the communist period, in places such as Poland and Yugoslavia it was possible to present performances and even performance festivals. This occurred somewhat later, after the end of the single-party state, in places that had more restrictive or conservative regimes, such as Romania and Moldova, where such public activity was not possible before 1989. A number of independent-minded and forward-thinking organisations were crucial to the development of performance art in providing a space for the genre to develop, and as such the history of performance art was written in these spaces and at these events. This section will explore two such organisations, the Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin, Poland, functioning as a centre for performance art as early as the 1970s, and the Zona Festival in Romania, which served as a platform for performance art in the post-communist period. This gallery and festival encapsulate the history of the development of the genre in the region. In places where writing about performance art was limited, discussions at festivals and exhibition openings formed an oral art history discourse, in the absence of a considerable body of written literature.

Labyrinth

In 1974, art historian Andrzej Mroczek established the Labirynt Gallery, as part of BWA Lublin. BWA, or, the Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions [Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych], was a network of state-funded contemporary art galleries across Poland. As official galleries, they were therefore subject to the censors and visits to the director by members of the communist party, but nevertheless, Labirynt managed to push through a very progressive programme. The gallery

appeared at a time when artists across the globe were searching for new art forms and new types of art, and Poland was no exception. Mroczek was drawn to performance after his first exposure to it in 1973, at a Festival of Student Theatre organized at BWA in Lublin by Zbigniew Warpechowski. Among the presentations was a manifestation by Jerzy Bereś, “Transfiguration III (The Author’s Altar)” [Transfiguracja III (Ołtarz Autorski)], who was friends with Warpechowski and went on to become a regular guest at Labirynt.

The performances Mroczek witnessed at the youth festival made a strong impression on him; according to Tadeusz Mroczek, his brother and an art historian, it “shaped how he saw contemporary art.”⁴ Mroczek was also influenced by Warpechowski, and eventually made performance a key focus of Labirynt once he became director the year later. In many ways, his programme followed the artists whose work he liked, and with whom he had formed a strong relationship. These connections remained important as he built his performance programme at Labirynt. He later described the gallery as a place of “presentation, confrontation and documentation of art,”⁵ a description that interestingly mimics KwieKulik’s recognition of the preparation, documentation and dissemination integral to performance art. As both KwieKulik and Mroczek realized, performing is not enough, there needs to be mechanisms to both document and distribute the remnants of the performance, especially in a situation such as that experienced by artists in Poland, where audiences for contemporary, experimental and performance art were limited. Thus, the efforts of Mroczek and those like him to provide a space for performance art, to document and preserve it, and to distribute it through publication, were integral to the development and survival of the history of performance art in Poland.

BWA in Lublin hosted its first performative event in 1969, “Phantasma,” described in the program as an “audiovisual event” [zdarzenia audiowizualnego]. Since then, the gallery has served as a meeting point for artists across both Poland and the world who are interested in or are practitioners of performance. Given that the first book on performance art in Eastern Europe was published in Poland in 1984, as a collection of essays edited by Grzegorz Dziamski,⁶ and the first text that attempted to outline a history of the development of the genre of performance had been published by RoseLee Goldberg just five years earlier, in 1979 (in English), public presentations, talks and lectures were among the few ways that artists could gain access to information about performance. And since performance was not taught in art schools, these events functioned as an alternative art history lesson—of the contemporary art happening at that time.

In 1978, Labirynt organized the festival “Performance and Body”—the title in English in the original—which featured artists from across Poland active in performance. “Performance and Body” was the first event in Poland to use the English-language term “performance.” At the time, artists categorized their performative activity in a range of ways, as with KwieKulik above, who preferred the term “activities.” Likewise, Jerzy Bereś used the term “manifestation” rather than performance or action. But performance was an international term and its use in this event connected this small town in the East of Poland with the rest of the world.

In his essay, “Performance – Traditions, Sources, Foreign and Native Manifestations: The Recognition of a Phenomenon” [Performance – tradycje, źródła, obce i rodzime przejawy. Rozpoznanie zjawiska],⁷ Grzegorz Dziamski traces the origin of the term “performance” in Poland to the festival at Labirynt and another event that happened in April of that same year at the Remont

Gallery in Warsaw, “I AM—International Artists’ Meeting.” Organized by Henryk Gajewski, an artist and founder of Remont, “I AM” is considered the de facto first performance festival in Poland, and involved a series of lectures, meetings and presentations.

According to Tadeusz Mroczek, because “Performance and Body” took place seven months later, it was “more aware of itself”⁸ as a performance festival, as evinced by the title. He noted that it was deliberately in English, in order to connect the event with the activities of performance art going on in the rest of the world at that time.⁹ It involved not only performances and an exhibition of documentation of performance, but it also included discussions and artists’ talks, which were perhaps the most important aspects of the event.

Artists’ talks were also part of other exhibitions organized by Labyrint. For example, at “Oferta 76” (Offering 76), an exhibition of Labyrint’s “offerings” in 1976, Andrzej Partum and Andrzej Lachowicz gave lectures, and at “Oferta 77” (Offering 77), KwieKulik and Andrzej Partum did. While some of the talks have since been published, the discussions that followed were perhaps most representative of ephemeral art, in that they only survive in the memories of the participants, as they were not recorded. Jolanta Męderowicz, a curator at Labyrint, remembers the meetings and discussions she attended, calling the participants “soldiers for freedom without guns ... [trying to] change society through art.”¹⁰ Tadeusz Mroczek also recalled the significance of the lectures, above all:

It should also be remembered that a great role, with the lack of publications devoted to art, was played by the lectures delivered by Wozniakowski, Ludwinski, Morawski, Bialostocki

or the lectures by Zagrodzki with the first shows of avant-garde films from the interwar period.¹¹

Thus, Labyrinth participated in the oral tradition of art history, performing the discourse when it was not yet being written.

Zona

The first Zone Festival, or, “Performance Festival—Zone of Eastern Europe,” took place in Timișoara in 1993, organized by Ileana Pintilie and Sorin Vreme. Its goal was to establish “an open communication network within the bounds of the Zone (Zone is a term with a specific political content in totalitarian societies, defining the places of the maximum concentration of the police, ideological, daily control).”¹² It also aimed to “create an opening for types of experimental art which were banned in the past.”¹³ In Romania, this “ban” was perhaps more strictly enforced when compared to the rest of the Bloc. Artists working in the country in the 1970s—such as Ion Grigorescu and Geta Brătescu—mainly performed for the camera in the private spaces of their homes or studios, fearing the consequences should that work become publicly known. In other places, further from ‘the Zone’ of Bucharest (where the surveillance was greatest), such as Timișoara, public performances did take place, but, in general, in the restrictive atmosphere of Ceaușescu-era Romania, performance art developed in spite of its circumstances.

That changed with the end of communism and the advent of Zona, which offered a platform for Romanian artists to perform and witness performances of artists from abroad, and vice versa. The first Zona was in 1993, when Romania was still in a period of transition after the abrupt end of

Ceaușescu's regime in 1989, with his and his wife's execution. At Zona, both locals and visitors to Romania were able to witness performances by Romanian artists for practically the first time. This was quite significant, as elsewhere at that time, performance art as a genre had waned. Commenting on his experience of Zona 3, in 1999, German curator Robert Fleck expressed surprise at the opportunity to witness live art:

The most interesting aspect for a western art critic, before going to Zona, is the recent revival of performance art in the transition countries. I myself started more than twenty years ago, as a photographer and an assistant at performance festivals. Since about 1980, I have never again been the witness of a performance in the classical sense, or of an artist acting in front of a public.¹⁴

He also mused as to whether “this revival of performance art in the transition states is anachronistic...or a profound and authentic phenomenon.”¹⁵ For artists in the region, it was not outdated at all, rather, it was the first time that they could present their work in such a public fashion.

Zona therefore does not represent a “revival” of performance art in the region, although it might appear that way to a Western critic unfamiliar with the history there. Performance art continued to develop from the 1970s through to the post-communist period. Fleck does conclude that this proliferation of performance art in East-Central Europe is a “profound and authentic phenomenon,” and the critic felt as though he were “really touching a historical moment.”¹⁶ To be sure, the fact that a festival of performance art took place in Romania is historical, but in point of fact, the

significance of this event lay perhaps more in the mapping of performance art history that was taking place during the discussions and round-tables, as well as the catalogue essays for the festival, than simply witnessing live performances long after the genre's heyday.

For example, in the catalogue for Zona 4, Croatian art critic and curator Berislav Valusek discusses the manner in which performance art can be evaluated, or at least the lack of valid criteria with which to assess a performance, other than the aesthetic.¹⁷ In the absence of art school critiques or discussions of art critical essays on performance art, these discussions were instrumental in offering ideas on the evaluation of performance. For Zona 2, several of the artists provided their own definitions of "performance art," which were published in the catalogue. For example, Dan Perjovschi understood it as an "irrepetitive act...If we think of it only in terms of its picture taken in order to turn it into documentary evidence, the performance becomes a vogue, an object for sale,"¹⁸ echoing what Peggy Phelan had to say about performance and its documentation.¹⁹ However, Alexandru Antik and Geta Brătescu did not see a significant distinction between performance and other genres, or their other work in the visual arts, insofar as all artistic expression comes from the artist, and all creation is in some ways performative.

These searches for a definition (or definitions) echo a more public conversation about performance art that took place in 1974 on Grampian TV in Scotland, on a series curated by Richard Demarco entitled *Images*. Following a live performance by Romanian artist Paul Neagu, Cordelia Oliver, art critic for the *Guardian*, Fred Stiven, a Lecturer at Robert Gordon University, Demarco and Neagu engaged in a discussion about what had just occurred. While Demarco saw the performance as a "drawing," Stiven saw it more as theatre, and all aimed to assign meaning to the very complex

performance they had just witnessed, titled *Going Tornado*. These are the types of discussions that would have taken place in art schools in North America around the same time. But in Romania (and Scotland, for that matter), where artistic education, for the most part, remains traditional to this day, such discussions were absent from the academies, nor could they be found in publications. Thus, the art critical and art historical discourse of performance art occurred as performative events at conferences and festivals such as Zona.

Icons of Performance Art

There are numerous works of performance art from Western Europe and North America cemented in one's mind through repeated exposure to iconic photographic images—for example, the women licking jam off of a Volkswagen Beetle in Allan Kaprow's 1964 *Household*; the raked stage of Vito Acconci's 1972 *Seedbed* performance, a lone black-cloaked viewer traversing it; Carolee Schneemann standing atop a table in 1975, pulling a text from her vagina in *Interior Scroll*, to name a few. One can perhaps point to fewer "iconic" works of performance art in Central and Eastern Europe that were indeed "iconic" prior to their mass circulation following the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc. Several works that were presented at Zona and Labirynt can now be classed as "icons" of East-Central European performance art.

In 1993, at Zona, Dan Perjovschi had the word "Romania" tattooed on his arm, in an eponymous performance. The piece literally marked Perjovschi as a Romanian artist, with the word emblazoned on his upper arm, suggesting that the artist cannot be separated from his national identity. Ten years later, at Zona 4, he had the tattoo removed, commenting that although the ink was no longer visible on his shoulder, it had simply dispersed through his body, just as one can

never shake off their identity—at least not the ones that others impose on them. The 1993 performance was included in Zdenka Badovinac’s “Body and the East” exhibition and catalogue,²⁰ the first exhibition of performance art in Eastern Europe, which helped to establish the canon of performance art in the region, thus contributing to the iconicity of the performances contained therein—at least among artists and scholars of East-Central European art.

In 1978, KwieKulik presented *Activity for the Head: Three Acts*, at Labirynt. The piece involved a series of actions in which, at various points, both artists had garbage bins on their heads, with the audience throwing garbage in them—filling their heads with rubbish, as the authorities in the People’s Republic of Poland often did. At one point, Zofia sat with her head inserted through a hole in the bottom of a washbasin, with Przemysław yelling obscenities at her and then washing his face in the bowl, splashing water on her face and nearly waterboarding her. This piece was also included in “Body and the East.”

The significance of the creation of these “icons” is two-fold. Firstly, that they even exist is significant, given the familiarity in performance spheres with the icons of “Western” performance art. In order to gain equivalent recognition and representation on a global scale, East-Central European performance art needs such iconic images for inclusion in textbooks and art history lectures.

Secondly, the space in which these iconic performances were created is important and should not be overlooked. In Western Europe and North America, while it may not have been possible to present performance and action art at *every* gallery or museum, it was considerably easier. The

strongest objection a venue could have had would be to the radical content, and the concern that the venue's regular audience would not be amenable to such experimental art. In East-Central Europe, it was not simply the artistic content that could be objectionable—often that was the least of concerns. Rather, because every exhibition and festival had to be approved by the censors, and organizers had to procure official permissions, it often occurred that censors either did not understand the work, and thus dismissed it immediately, or they feared that something so radical would attract attention and thus cause problems. In East-Central Europe, where presenting the work of contemporary experimental artists required a lot of finagling on the part of those organizing events, the place where these events occurred matters, and should be considered as part of the context and interpretation of the artwork.

Contemporaneous Writing of the Histories

While much of art history and art criticism in East-Central Europe was subject to control by the state, there were art historians and critics who were writing about performance art both locally and regionally during the communist period. Some examples of this are Grzegorz Dziamski in Poland, Jindřich Chalupecký in Czechoslovakia, and Branka Stipančić in Croatia. Others, however, self-colonized and reinforced narratives that performance art was something that only developed in the West.

A case in point is two books published in Poland in the 1980s: Piotr Krakowski's *On New and the Newest Art*²¹ and Grzegorz Dziamski's *Notes on New Art*.²² The former reads like any standard text on performance art that you could find anywhere else, and basically rehearses the chronology and trajectory of performance art advanced by RoseLee Goldberg in her 1979 text *Performance:*

Live Art from Futurism to the Present, which traces the lineage from Dada and Surrealism through to Jackson Pollock, Allan Kaprow and beyond. Krakowski's text also offers a self-colonizing history of performance art, as something that happened "elsewhere," not in Poland, despite the fact that it was happening in Poland at the very time of the writing of that book.

Dziamski's text, however, is much more nuanced and considers contemporary art not only of "the West" but also the local context, referencing both artists and art historians from East-Central Europe and the West, for example, Czech art critic Jindřich Chalupický and American performance theorist Michael Kirby. He discusses the work of Gilbert & George and Marcel Duchamp, as well as that of Polish artists Ewa Partum and KwieKulik, placing Polish contemporary art in its wider context rather than ghettoizing it as Krakowski does. While Krakowski looks only to the centre, Dziamski looks both at the periphery and to the centre from the periphery—perhaps one of the earliest practitioners of Piotr Piotrowski's "Horizontal Art History".²³

As noted above, Dziamski also edited the first book on performance art published in Polish,²⁴ a collection of essays by a number of authors, including Dziamski's "Performance—tradycje, źródła, obce i rodzime przejawy" (Performance - traditions, sources, foreign and native manifestations); Klaus Groh's "Theoretical Ideas on Performance Art;" a translation of an excerpt from Goldberg's *Performance: Live Art from Futurism to the Present*, and original texts by artists, such as Czech artist Jan Mlčoch, Polish artists Zbigniew Warpechowski and Jerzy Beres, and Hungarian artists Miklós Erdélyi, Tibor Hajas, to name a few. *Performance* was published by the same publisher as Dziamski's single-authored book, *Notes on New Art*—Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, or

Youth Publishing Agency.²⁵ As with exhibitions, clubs, and artists unions across the Eastern Bloc, the authorities had a much greater tolerance for youth activity, which therefore explains why Dziamski's two books were published as paperbacks by a youth publishing agency, whereas Krakowski, an established art historian touting the "official" line of history, would be published in hardcover by the State Scientific Publisher [Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe].

According to Tadeusz Mroczek, there was very little published about contemporary art in Poland at the time, as there was nowhere to publish, and most art historians were not interested in writing about contemporary art—probably because they knew that if they did, they had little chance of their work being published. While authors such as Kwiatkowski avoided the local scene, there were others—aside from Dziamski—paying attention to this work. Jolanta Brach-Czajna was interested in environmental art, and included the work of Teresa Murak in her 1984 book, *Etos Nowej Sztuki* (The Spirit of New Art).²⁶ Current director of Labirynt and performance artist Waldemar Tatarczuk also recalls Jacek Wozniakowski, an important art historian from Lublin who taught at the Catholic University, was among those teachers who pushed people to think about art.²⁷ He is the author of a text titled *Co sie dzieje ze sztuka?* (What is Happening with Contemporary Art?)²⁸ Tatarczuk also recalls that his teacher, Mikołaj Smoczynski, created "secret performances," using a long exposure on the camera so that only trace elements of the gestures of the action would be captured on film.²⁹

Labirynt also participated in the publication of significant texts by Polish artists in their exhibition catalogues—for example, the writings of Jan Świdziński, a conceptual and performance artist, known for his theory of "Contextual Art," on which he lectured often at Labirynt; Andrzej

Partum's manifesto "Insolent Art"; as well as texts by Jerzy Bereś on performance and by Andrzej Lachowicz on contemporary art.

In Świdziński's text, "The Necessity for a New Avant-Garde," he writes, "I am interested in art as far as the meaning is concerned, but not in the art looked upon from the aesthetic point of view. Hence, I am against formalism as a methodological position (it goes beyond the sphere of art), because it makes constructions (artistic and scientific) independent of the meaning."³⁰ Świdziński's theory of Contextual Art argued for the consideration of the context from which the art emerged, the opposite approach to the purported cold, impersonal conceptual art of North Americans such as Sol LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth. As Świdziński stated, "Art does not exclude any meanings. It only imposes on their structure new ones."³¹

Andrzej Partum's 1977 "Manifesto of Insolent Art" calls for "the elimination of inspiration in art...the elimination of full-time critics...toward the understanding of art which encourages new statements from the artist...the art of the lack of art provides hope for an answer..."³² While comparable texts and manifestos by artists in North America were published widely in art journals and are now anthologized in critical texts of contemporary art, these artist statements from Poland and elsewhere in the Bloc had fewer opportunities for publication, smaller and narrower circulations, and very narrow audiences. Consequently, publishing and circulating these texts meant that those outside of those closed circles, as well as those abroad, could have access and exposure to the new ideas about contemporary art being formulated in Poland at the time.

As an example of how difficult it was to publish texts on contemporary art at the time, in a video interview presented at the exhibition “My Gallery Is an Idea—Galeria Adres Archive” (curated by Karolina Majewska-Gude, Studio Gallery, 2019), Ewa Partum described a situation where she was trying to publish Andrzej Kostołowski’s *Theses on Art* because, in her words, it was “important to let people around the world know about art in Poland.”³³ She found a publishing house that was willing to help her print the book, in the office of the Artists’ Union. The publishers told Partum that when the Director of the Association of Polish Artists, which is where her Adres was located, found out, he was upset, but they were nearly done with the book. As was customary at the time, Partum offered some alcohol as incentive to the printers. They finished the book and Partum took it from the publishing house, so that when the director came, there were no copies of the book left for him to criticize or censor. But the scandal was not over. Later, according to Partum, the daily paper in Łódź, *Dziennik Łódzki*, published an article that Galeria Adres had published a “black book,”³⁴ referring to the design and layout of the book, which contained solid black pages. Therefore, it cannot be taken for granted that publishing of texts on contemporary art was a given in the People’s Republic of Poland. It often required close contacts, good will, ingenuity and bartering.

Current Performance Art Histories and Oral History

Aside from the various repositories discussed above, much of the history of the development of performance art in the region exists in the minds of those who were involved, resulting in dependence, nowadays, of historians on oral history. For example, the first history of Czech Action Art, written as a PhD dissertation in the 1990s by Pavlína Morganová, was constructed with the help of the artists, whom Morganová interviewed and spoke with personally. The reliance on oral

history places the burden on those who know and speak the language, usually local scholars. While many scholars in the region have been writing this history since the 1990s, it is only more recently available in English, enabling foreign scholars to take up comparative studies.

Among the first national studies of performance art are the aforementioned book by Pavlína Morganová, *Akční umění* (Action Art), which emerged from her dissertation and was published in Czech by Votobia in 1999; and Ileana Pintilie's text, *Actionism in Romania during the Communist Era*.³⁵ The latter is a 134-page well-illustrated book published in Romanian and English in 2000, but it remains out of print. However, Pintilie has published widely on Romanian performance art since the 1990s and was the organizer of the Zona Festival. Morganová's book was recently updated and published in English in 2014 by Karolinum Press and distributed by the University of Chicago Press,³⁶ and remains the key source on Czech performance art. Her more recent project re-examined and revisited the spaces in which Czech actions took place, as Morganová visited those sites with the artists, with whom she has had a working relationship since the 1990s, and interviewed them about the choice of space and the experience *in situ*. This book was published in Czech in 2014 and in 2017 in English, titled *A Walk through Prague: Actions, Performance, Happenings, 1949-1989*.³⁷ It makes a unique contribution to the history of performance art in that it functions as a "performance art guide book," with maps and photos, enabling the performance art tourist to revisit the sites of iconic Czech performances.

Andrea Bátorová is the leading authority on Slovak performance art, and her book, *Action Art in Slovakia in the 1960s: The Actions of Alex Mlynárčik*³⁸ focuses on one of the most significant Slovak performance artists. Mlynárčik was responsible for some of the most vivid actions of the

1970s, and was a key figure in the art scene there due to a relationship he cultivated and maintained with French art critic Pierre Restany. While this book is currently only available in German, she has recently published *The Art of Contestation: Performative Practices in the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia*,³⁹ introducing Slovak performance art to the English-speaking world.

Suzana Marjanić has published a vast and comprehensive history of Croatian performance art, *Chronotope of Croatian Performance Art: From the Travellers to the Present Day*.⁴⁰ Although criticized for being too sweeping and all-encompassing, Croatian artists have made such significant contributions to performance that a history of the genre in that country warrants such a compendium. Marjanić's survey goes back to the early twentieth century, examining the pre-history of performance in the Dada and Constructivist activity in Croatia at the time, and then takes her study through to the present day, covering theatre, dance, actions, happenings, body art, performance, and photographic and video performance. The three-volume book is only available in Croatian, but for the avid performance historian, it is perhaps worth the purchase for the images alone.

What all of these publications rely on, not only for their completion but also their reliability and authority, are long-standing solid working relationships with the artists, cultivated over time. These oral histories are not just professional but personal, in that they are inextricably tied up with the socio-political circumstances of the time, that it is not sufficient for a historian to swoop in, do one interview, and expect to have an understanding of the artists or their art. Indeed, the strength of the work by Morganová, Pintilie, Bátorová and Marjanić is grounded in the enduring relationships these historians have cultivated with their artists.

These national histories are crucial for foreign scholars to get to grips with the artists and different manifestations of performance in each country. Because secondary source material, and print material in general, is either scarce or scattershot, all of these authors have relied heavily on interviews with the artists to complete their research. In this sense, these publications fill the gap of both the missing primary source materials for the foreign scholar, in offering translations of artists' statements in interviews, as well as translations of any locally published texts, and offering an interpretation of the work.

Also crucial to the understanding of the genre in the region are the comparative studies being conducted by both local and foreign scholars.⁴¹ For example, although not focused exclusively on performance art, Klara Kemp-Welch's books *Antipolitics in Central European Art* and *Networking the Bloc*⁴² both cover a range of material from across the region. *Antipolitics* discusses five male artists from the region who were active in performance and conceptual art: Tadeusz Kantor, Endre Tót, Jerzy Bereś, Július Koller and Tamás Szentjóby. Each chapter is a dedicated study of the work of the artist, focusing on the manner in which they played politics without playing politics.⁴³ *Networking the Bloc* covers performance art, mail art and conceptual art in the region—although in reality the lines between those three is often blurred—focusing on the networks and exchanges of information that occurred, both across the bloc and beyond, which were crucial to the development and dissemination of experimental art in the region.

One could also mention Izabel Galliera's *Socially Engaged Art after Socialism: Art and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe*,⁴⁴ a comparative study of participatory and socially

engaged art in Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. The inclusion of Bulgaria is one of the book's many strengths, as the country is one of the most underrepresented in studies of East-Central European art. While most comparative studies will include Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, East Germany and Yugoslavia, Bulgaria is rarely included. Although the Baltic countries are currently part of the European Union, they are also usually omitted from performance histories, despite Estonia, in particular, having a rich performance history. Studies of performance in the former Soviet Union usually focus on Russia, with Ukraine getting little attention and Moldova getting almost none. While performance art appeared relatively late in Moldova compared to other places (the late 1980s), it has a very rich post-Soviet performance scene that also warrants attention.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Oral History

As an art historian working with living artists, I am often told by art historians of the Renaissance or Middle Ages that they wish they could just speak to their artists and ask them what they intended. I would strongly caution anyone against romanticizing the use of oral history in art history. While of course it has its advantages—in precisely the fact that a historian can ask the artist what they meant—the disadvantages are numerous as well.

Firstly, oral history interviews in the humanities are markedly different than those in the social sciences, often leading to misunderstandings among researchers, as well as within funding bodies. While in the former, anonymization of data is crucial to protecting the living subjects in the study, in art history, anonymizing the artist makes no sense, because their work is in the public domain and created for an audience, therefore to remove their authorship from the work would be wrong. Secondly, memory is of course flawed and encompasses more than just historicization. Memory

includes place, smell, feel, sight and sound. For this reason, Morganová's latest publication represents an interesting development in the use of oral histories and narration, in interviewing the artists *in the precise location where the event took place*, and also guiding others to that place with a map of where it occurred. This enables a more holistic approach to memory than an interview in a studio or café.

Oral history is also often criticized for being flawed—insofar as memory is. I would counter that criticism with the observation that *any* text or publication is flawed, subject to the biases of the author. To pretend that we as historians or critics do not have biases and can be truly objective in our analysis of work is unreasonable. Anyone who has ever published a book knows that books are invariably published with mistakes, and anyone who has ever written a book knows that by the time the physical object reaches the shelf, the author will have already revised some of their ideas and be wishing they could update the text. Just as no legitimate historian would rely solely on one text for his or her research, no legitimate historian using oral history would rely solely on the testimony of the artist, nor treat it uncritically. Thus, the key to using oral history is balance—to treat the statement of the artist as any other, and combine it with a consideration of secondary sources, as well as contextual interpretation.

The historiography of performance art in East-Central Europe is an emerging one, and one in which artists and art historians alike are participating in. During the communist period, it was primarily artists and artistic organizations that preserved and contextualized the discourse on performance art. Currently, local and national histories are underway, while, at the same time, those local

histories are gradually being incorporated into more global studies and understandings of the history of performance art.

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- ¹ In this text I use the term East-Central Europe deliberately, in reference to the late art historian Piotr Piotrowski's adoption of the term to refer to the former communist countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, including the Eastern countries in the Soviet Union, as well as Yugoslavia, East Germany and Albania, many of which are excluded when the bracket of 'Central Europe' is used.
- ² See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avantgarde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- ³ See Klara Kemp Welch, "Art Documentation and Bureaucratic Life: The 'Case' of the Studio of Activities, Documentation and Propagation," in Jacek Dobrowolski, Maciej Gdula, Klara Kemp-Welch and Georg Schollhammer, eds., *Zofia Kulik/Przemysław Kwiek: KwieKulik* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2012), 518-520.
- ⁴ Tadeusz Mroczek, in an interview with the author (interpreted by Aniolka Mroczek) in Lublin, April 12, 2019.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Grzegorz Działowski, ed. *Performance* (Warsaw: Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1984)
- ⁷ Grzegorz Działowski, "Performance – tradycje, źródła, obce i rodzime przejawy. Rozpoznanie zjawiska" (Performance – Traditions, Sources, Foreign and Native Manifestations: The Recognition of a Phenomenon) in Działowski, ed. *Performance*, 1984.
- ⁸ Mroczek, 2019.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Jolanta Męderowicz, in an interview with the author in Lublin, April 11, 2019.

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- 11 Tadeusz Mroczek, “The Time Bygone” in *Labirynt-Czas Przeszły, Czas Obecny, 1956-2006*, n.p.
- 12 Alexandra Titu, “East Europe,” in Ileana Pintilie and Sorin Vreme, *Festival de Performance Zona Europe de Est* (Timișoara, Romania: 1993), 8.
- 13 Ibid., 64.
- 14 Robert Fleck, “The Revival of Body Art and the Art of the 90s,” in Ileana Pintilie, ed. *Zona 3—Festival de Performance* (Timisoara: 1999), n.p.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Berislav Valusek, “Performance! Zone! Museum?” in Ileana Pintilie, ed. *Zone 4: Festival de Performance* (Timisoara, 2002): 5.
- 18 Dan Perjovschi, in Ileana Pintilie, ed. *Zona Europa de Est* (Bucharest: Soros Center for Contemporary Art, 1996), 29.
- 19 See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).
- 20 Zdenka Badovinac, ed., *Body and the East* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
- 21 Piotr Krakowski *O Sztuce Nowej i Najnowszej* (On New and the Newest Art) (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1981)
- 22 Grzegorz Działowski *Szkice o nowej sztuce* (Notes on New Art) (Warsaw: Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1984)
- 23 See Piotr Piotrowski, “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde,” in Sascha Bru and Peter Nicholls, eds., *European Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 49-58.
- 24 Działowski, ed. *Performance*, 1984.

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- 25 Grzegorz Dziamski *Szkice o nowej sztuce* (Notes on New Art) (Warsaw: Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1984)
- 26 Jolanta Brach-Czajna, *Etos Nowej Sztuki* (The Spirit of New Art), (Warsaw, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984).
- 27 Waldemar Tatarczuk, in conversation with the author in Lublin, April 2019.
- 28 Jacek Wozniakowski, *Co sie dzieje ze sztuka?* (What is Happening with Contemporary Art) (Warsaw: Państwowe Instytut Wydawniczy, 1974).
- 29 Tatarczuk, 2019.
- 30 Jan Świdziński, “The Necessity for a New Avant-Garde,” in Andrzej Mroczek and Jolanta Męderowicz, eds. *Galeria Labirynt 1974-1994* (Lublin: Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych w Lublinie, 1994), 141.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Andrzej Lachowicz “Manifesto of Insolent Art” (1977), republished in Andrzej Mroczek and Jolanta Męderowicz, eds. *Galeria Labirynt 1974-1994* (Lublin: Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych w Lublinie, 1994), 146.
- 33 Ewa Partum, in an interview with Karolina Majewska-Gude. “My Gallery Is an Idea—Galeria Adres Archive” (curated by Karolina Majewska-Gude, Studio Gallery, 2019).
- 34 Ibid.
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- 36 Pavlína Morganová, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain* (Czech Republic: Karolinum Press, 2014).

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- 37 Pavlína Morganová, *A Walk through Prague: Actions, Performance, Happenings, 1949-1989* (Czech Republic: Academy of Fine Arts Prague, 2017).
- 38 Andrea Bátorová, *Aktionskunst in der Slowakei in den 1960er Jahren. Aktionen von Alex Mlynárčik* (Action Art in Slovakia in the 1960s: The Actions of Alex Mlynárčik) (Berlin: LIT, 2009)
- 39 Andrea Bátorová, *The Art of Contestation: Performative Practices in the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia* (Bratislava: Comenius University, 2019)
- 40 Suzana Marjanić, *Chronotope of Croatian Performance Art: From the Travellers to the Present Day* (Croatia: Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, 2014)
- 41 I could also mention my own books, *Performing the East: Performance Art in Russia, Latvia and Poland since 1980* (London: IB Tauris, 2013), and *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).
- 42 Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art* (London: IB Tauris, 2014) and Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019)
- 43 See Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art: Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule, 1956-1989* (London: IB Tauris, 2014).
- 44 Izabel Galliera *Socially Engaged Art after Socialism: Art and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: IB Tauris, 2017)