



**Amy Bryzgel.** *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960.* Rethinking Art's Histories Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017. Illustrations. 384 pp \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78499-421-1.

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Amy Bryzgel's *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* is devoted to a highly important yet to date still insufficiently explored area of art history: the art of Eastern and Central Europe. While her artistic focus is commendably narrow—performance—the geographic and sociopolitical regions she tackles are wide: Bryzgel negotiates artists from twenty-one countries, ranging from the member states of the former Soviet Union to its satellite nations Poland, Hungary, the former Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria, but also the former Yugoslav republics, Albania, and lastly the former German Democratic Republic. Bryzgel aims at analyzing the diverse forms of performative practice in relationship to each country's sociopolitical climate, which differs not only from country to country even while under Communist rule but also with regard to the Communist and post-Communist landscapes. *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* is thus an extensive and ambitious study, which opens many paths into Eastern Europe's art history by introducing a variety of artists, performative practices, topics, and motivations embedded in a multitude of cultural and political contexts.

In her introduction, Bryzgel rightfully comments on the lack of discussion of Eastern European artists in Rosalee Goldberg's seminal *Perfor-*

*mance Art: Live Art, from 1909 to the Present* (1979)—an observation that has to be applied to many more publications. Bryzgel's study also builds on Goldberg's slightly reductive description of performance in Eastern Europe as having evolved mostly out of the genre's immateriality as its central allure for artists working under Communism. These observations guide Bryzgel in her examination, but she does not stop there. In addition to unearthing an entire overlooked geographical area of artistic production and providing a more nuanced reading of performance art in Eastern Europe, its motivations and intentions, Bryzgel also aims to outline the "paths of reciprocal exchange between East and West as well as across the East." Her selection of countries was therefore guided by performance art practices that "emerged from, and are connected to, European traditions, especially those of the avant-garde" (p. 2). The artists represented in the book, on the other hand, were selected by Bryzgel on account of her field research, which she conducted over the course of two years, from 2013 to 2015. During those years, Bryzgel interviewed 250 artists, curators, and scholars, and included ultimately a broad range of artists that she was able to meet in person and research secondary source material on.

With these parameters, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* is a study devoted to several key issues of contemporary art history: its domination by Western scholars and artists; the prevalence of Western readings and interpretations of such phenomena as performance art; and the strong divide between Western art history and the art histories of the rest of the world, which go beyond Bryzgel's area of study—Eastern and Central Europe—as well. These ambitions certainly at times leave contextual questions about artists and their work in Bryzgel's text unanswered, but she succeeds in demonstrating the large variety of experimental artistic creation that characterizes the Eastern and Central European regions both in response to and independent of state-sanctioned political and artistic doctrines. In addition, Bryzgel's elaborations on the reciprocity between Western and Eastern performance art is instructive and will hopefully be deepened in her future projects.

Bryzgel is well positioned to conduct her study: having lived in both Poland and Latvia and having learned the respective languages, Bryzgel gained her insights not purely by analyzing available scholarship but mostly by doing her own field research, traveling to every country discussed in the book (except for Ukraine, which remained inaccessible due to political circumstances) to research the material and conduct interviews. This devotion cannot be stressed enough given that there still exists an enormous gap between scholarship conducted on Eastern Europe by Western scholars and from a Western perspective, and resources and scholarship available in Eastern Europe, which remain difficult to access, especially for those with linguistic barriers. Bryzgel illustrates her research richly with little or even unknown archival material and contextualizes it with foundational scholarship on Eastern European art, such as work by Piotr Piotrowski, Angela Dimitrakai, Bojana Pejić, and Klara Kemp-Welch. With regard to the theoretical foundation for performance art, she remains,

however, very much focused on Goldberg, who is but one important figure in the field.

Following Bryzgel's introduction, a chapter titled "Sources and Origins" outlines the various chronological developments of performative practice in the different countries of study, spanning the 1960s to the present. Subsequently, she explores the range of performative practices around four themes, which, as she stresses, "emerged from the research, as opposed to preceding or being applied to it": the body, gender, politics and identity, and institutional critique (p. 4). Even though these are all concepts that are deeply embedded in Western performance studies, Bryzgel proves that, while similarities or connections between East and West can be discerned, it remains important to acknowledge their specificity in Eastern European forms of expression.

Her chapter on the body is where Bryzgel's balancing between negotiating Eastern European art within its specific sociopolitical background and its dialogue with the West is probably the most successful. She complicates Western art history's interpretation of the use of the body in performance—the artist's or someone else's—and expands it by bringing to attention its unique resonance in the heavily monitored and controlled public environment that characterized parts of the socialist countries. The use of the body by Eastern European artists illustrates, so Bryzgel states, "the manner in which the body is always already located within a system—be it political, artistic or otherwise" (p. 102). It becomes a "site that enabled artists to act or express themselves in a manner not possible in the public space nor through traditional art forms ... which were regulated by the state" (p. 105). Through analysis of a variety of concepts of body-art practice ranging from the use of the nude body (Tomislav Gotovac, Vlasta Delimar) to the disguised body (Miervaldis Polis, Enisa Cenaliaj), to radical rituals (Petr Štembera, Marina Abramović, Micha Brendel) throughout the Communist and post-Communist periods,

Bryzgel demonstrates the ongoing suitability of the body in a negotiation of its presence, agency, and surrounding structures.

Bryzgel's chapter on gender points to the complex position of feminism in Eastern Europe, which has been largely ignored by Western scholarship or regarded as nonexistent, a view that most certainly needs to be reevaluated in greater depth. While it is true that the Communist agenda claimed equality for women in the workplace, pay, and education, the reality was often different, especially in the domestic realm. To acknowledge the existence of feminism in Eastern Europe one must leave behind the Western definition and look instead at the subjective experiences that found their way into the works of such artists as Natalia LL, Jana Žeblišká, and Sanja Iveković, who negotiate such issues as the representation of women and female sexuality in society. They do so, as Bryzgel calls it, from "within their particular 'islands,'" alluding to the absence of a larger feminist art movement with most female artists consciously rejecting the label "feminist" as an import from the West (p. 170). Using performance art as a bridge, Bryzgel sets out to connect these individual islands not only with each other but also across both the Communist and post-Communist periods. She introduces several themes—beauty, representation of women, female sexuality, and gender roles, among others—to present her selection of compelling artists, most of whom deserve a much deeper scholarly examination in the future.

Situating her chapter on politics and identity consciously after elaborations on the use of the body and the issue of gender by Eastern European artists helps the author to demonstrate that not all performance art production from the Communist period was or should be interpreted as political. Through a variety of examples, Bryzgel elaborates artists' use of performative practices in articulating personal forms of self-representations, which can be, but—as often assumed—were not always,

statements against political oppression. Instead, she concludes, the politicization of art intensified especially in the post-Communist period with its challenges for artists to adapt to the new political and cultural landscapes that were accompanied by an increase in nationalistic ideals in some cases (as shown by Igor Grubić or Marko Marković), the fear of a loss of the past versus an uncertain future (Flo Kasearu), or the negotiation of the binaries of East and West (Veda Popovic).

In her final chapter on institutional critique, Bryzgel ultimately challenges the idea that, due to the absence of an art market and the state functioning as sole patron, institutional critique did not exist in the Eastern European art world. She establishes here another point of concurrence between the East and the West: according to the author, institutional critique in Eastern Europe developed mainly as the result of the interaction and exchange of Eastern European artists with the West and the fact that they eventually "considered themselves European artists" (p. 299). Nevertheless, institutional critique in Eastern Europe responded to its respective situation, characterized mostly by a lack of institutional support for experimental art, but according to Bryzgel also the "Westernisation and commercialization of culture," and a lack of infrastructure for artists in the post-Communist culture, respectively (p. 300). The chapter outlines some important venues and initiatives, mostly focusing on Yugoslavia, which had, however, a slightly different premise than the Soviet Union as artists did not suffer from the same state-sanctioned art doctrines and had remained in fairly open exchange with artists from the rest of Europe and the US. This exchange foremost played out in the government-installed Student Cultural Centers in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana, where artists could explore new practices and media. Equally crucial were the region's artists' groups, such as Podroom or Gorgona, which evolved from a desire for self-organization outside of the more traditional academic infrastructure. In addition, the chapter lists important

performative works that critically question ideas about art during socialist rule, among them Raša Todosijević's famous 1975 "Was ist Kunst?" The post-Communist period, represented by such works as Tanja Ostojić's 2001 "I'll Be Your Angel," exposed artists to a globalized, strongly hierarchized art market that they seek to navigate while still being embedded in the local, often still fragile structures.

*Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* is an important contribution to the study of Eastern European art and will be instructive to those interested in Eastern European studies, art history, and performance art. It introduces the reader to a variety of artists, both established and fairly unknown, and paints a rich picture of the complex history of performance art and experimental culture in Eastern and Central Europe. As an introduction to performance in Eastern Europe, the text broadens art historical scholarship and opens a myriad of possible paths for further research that hopefully will be tackled by scholars in the future.

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