

Archiving Performances as a Dissident Practice

A Review of: Corinna Kühn, *Medialisierte Körper. Performances und Aktionen der Neoavantgarden Ostmitteleuropas in den 1970er Jahren*, Cologne: Böhlau, 2020. 324 pp. ISBN 978-3-412-51422-8.

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How could one create progressive art under the difficult conditions of the socialist countries in east central Europe? In short, the artists in their precarious situation worked towards a possible post-socialist future or any other state, where their work would be able to be viewed. They captured their performances in photographs, video recordings and other forms of dissemination such as mail art to preserve them for posterity. Artists focused on mediation and a community of future spectators – as a subversive capsule within socialist societies. In the revised version of her dissertation, with which she extends her previous research on the Polish art scene, Corinna Kühn explores these possibilities of performance art behind the Iron Curtain. Her main argument is that without these forms of recording, no subversive art would have been possible. Focusing on one Czech artist, a Hungarian, a Romanian and two artists / groups from Poland, the publication succeeds in providing a well-composed and multi-layered picture of artistic practices in central Europe during the 1970s. Kühn's book rests on a complex theoretical framework that draws from figures such as Erving Goffmann, Erika Fischer-Lichte or recent ideas on praxeology.¹ For the field of art history, she mostly follows the frequently cited 'horizontal art history' of Piotr Piotrowski, who tried to place a balanced variant alongside the hierarchical art history of the 'West.'² By discussing the neo-avant-garde comparatively in the region, she also inherits many impulses from Klara Kemp-Welch's study of 'Antipolitics' and its halting take on dissidence.³ Citation from literature can be one-sided at times though, and some newer publications are missing noticeably.⁴ Nevertheless, through her broad theoretical framework and the comparative view on performance artists from different countries in Central Europe, Kühn develops a balanced view of the situation. This is particularly evident in her reflective approach to the diverse histories of the countries under socialism, which she later makes fruitful for the artists' individual exchanges, travels and working conditions.

The first chapter deals with the Hungarian performance artist Endre Tót (1937–) and his Czech counterpart Jiří Kovanda (1953–) and the many tentative gestures and acts of

1) Erving Goffmann, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004.

2) Piotr Piotrowski, 'On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History,' *Umění*, 56, 2008, 378–83; 'How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?,' *Third Text*, 23.1, 2009, 5–14.

3) Klara Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics in Central European Art. Reticence as Dissidence under Post-Totalitarian Rule 1956–1989*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014.

4) Missing for instance is Amy Bryzgel, *Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2018.

hesitation in their performances. In line with her overall thesis, Kühn points out that they not only provided commentary on the social conditions under state socialism, but also serve as a reflection of communication with future audiences. Through photographs and other recordings of the performances, the ‘medialised bodies’ of both artists reach bigger audiences, who then could fully benefit from their subversive meaning. However, the audience had to wait (for less repressive times), as did Tót and Kovanda in their performances. Kovanda’s performances in particular demonstrate acts of waiting. In the performance *Untitled: 3rd September 1977* (Bez nazvu: 3. září 1977) he stands the wrong way round on an escalator, facing workers and other commuters as they come out of the underground. There he tries to start a conversation with passers-by – mostly in vain. In this way, he shows how people behave in public, how they come back from work with a complete absence of camaraderie afterwards. The performance symbolises the impossibilities of establishing contacts in the Communist state of Czechoslovakia long after the Prague Spring, where people duck away in the face of repression, show no reaction or behave in an embarrassed or fearful manner.

None of the performances was unplanned. Kovanda always wrote every action down exactly beforehand, using a typewriter, and then stuck photos of the performances on them later. The photos mostly came from his friend Pavel Tuč and his style repeats the gesture of surveillance photos of the secret police. In the 1970 and 1980s, the period of so-called ‘normalization,’ there was a rather high level of surveillance in Prague. Kovanda deconstructed the techniques of state observation and recording. As Kühn elaborates further, the performances target a ‘secondary audience’ through this documentation practice.⁵ The performance is not presented at an exhibition, for example, but only later, second hand, through the texts. Stylistically, these sheets looked like administrative documents or registries. They appeared as neutral as possible and documented the performances for later viewers. They were not aimed at a large number of spectators in the present, but were meant for generations to come.

Something similar can be said about Endre Tót and his performances *TÓTaJOYS*, which he often put under the motto *I am glad if...* (Örülök, ha..., 1971 –), which point out the restrictions in everyday life in Hungary with a good pinch of humour. This recalls the dark humour surrounding supposed dissidents, who seem to say something critical merely by chance, as in Milan Kundera’s first novel *The Joke* (1967). The novel is about Ludvík, a student who sends his girlfriend Markéta a postcard with a scathing commentary on Communism because she has gone to a party training course rather than spend time with him. Kühn succeeds well in describing this humour in Tót’s performances such as, for example, simply celebrating the freedom to walk a few steps or to look in a certain direction. He mostly documented these performances in photos. The simplicity of the actions refers humorously to the great loss of freedom under socialism. However, whether this adapts the subversive strategy of over-identification (as with the Neue Slowenische Kunst group in Slovenia, who famously adopted authoritarian imagery), as Kühn suggests, may at least be doubted.⁶ It is not that the comparison is not illuminating in some examples, such as when Tót had himself photographed next to Lenin. Nevertheless, Tót didn’t use references to Communism frequently, and there were no

5) A term introduced by Claire Bishop, see Kühn, *Medialisierte Körper*, 105.

6) *Ibid.*, 63.

disguises, uniforms or other mimicry, and a closer look at the individual examples would have been useful.

Overall, the reader finds a well-balanced chapter that addresses the relationship between private and public space under socialism and its dissolution. Where everything can potentially be the target of spying, performances can examine public space playfully, humorously and sensitively. They thematise formerly private matters like walking and waiting in the public sphere, which was only possible through careful documentation and preservation in various media for future audiences (of a free society). An important detail of Kühn's research is the observation that artists from Hungary and Czechoslovakia often moved to Poland because the art scene there was more open. Free artistic platforms existed in Warsaw, Łódź, Wrocław and Poznań, which were used by many artists from central Europe, including Tót and Kovanda, partly via connections provided by friends in Prague such as the Czech performance artist Petr Štembera (1945–). These different degrees of freedom in central Europe also made the medial preservation of the performances seem sensible. There was always a way of distributing them somewhere, and Kühn highlights the importance of that artistic exchange and the possibility of a broader audience in the neighbouring countries.

The second chapter deals with the Polish artist Natalia LL (1937–) and the Romanian Ion Grigorescu (1945–). Again, these were performances in front of the camera to an unknown future audience. Natalia LL's *Consumer Art* (*Sztuka konsumpcyjna*, 1972) shows a woman slowly eating various foods, some of them sexually charged, including, prominently, a banana. The clip is striking for its subversive use of an actor who bears a strong resemblance to Natalia LL, thus pointing not only to the commodity character of these goods, but also to the interchangeable identity of the performer. She does not need to perform herself. Following the artist's own interpretation, however, the iconic section with the banana cannot be interpreted as a reference to Pop Art (as in the case of Andy Warhol, for example), since people in central Europe in the 1970s would have had a different relationship to consumer culture.⁷ There were hardly any bananas available, despite the slowly improving consumer options in the socialist systems. Natalia LL's performance thus makes the viewers think of the longing for the rare commodities. Yet she also voices her doubts about Pop Art in the West. As Kühn carefully dissects: art exploring consumer culture took on a meaning of its own in central Europe. She also makes evident in this chapter how haunting performances are that work haptically with the body. Natalia LL's demonstrations open up important perspectives on works by the Polish artists' group KwieKulik, which are discussed in the last chapter. Their performance *Play on an Actress's Face* (*Gra na twarzy aktorki*, 1971) is not just about eating food, but about being at the mercy of somebody else. Random things are attached to Ewa Lemańska, the hired performer; her face becomes a medium on which unidentifiable hands paint with different colours or place lumps of clay, glue, tape, string, paper, tomato juice or rice. Even a cigarette stub is brought close to her mouth on a sharp-edged piece of glass. Since Lemańska was very popular at the time, the viewer felt directly involved in a 'public face.' Yet the artists raise the question of enforcing power and control on the most vital part of an individual.

The same applies when Ion Grigorescu shows himself washing his body in the performances *Pyjama* (*Pijama*, 1978) and *Washing* (*Lăutul*, 1976), where his own self is often the

7) Ibid. 197.

last possibility of retreat. The fisheye lens used here creates the impression of constant surveillance, right down to the most private corner. Throughout the chapter, the reception of such performances is repeatedly at issue, the fact that the body gestures could never be seen live by spectators but only appeared later via the recordings. Despite the very revealing ideas, Kühn sometimes ignores important aspects, for example the divergence of sexuality and aesthetics in Grigorescu's performances *Body* (Corp, 1974) or *Masculine / Feminine* (masculin / feminin, 1976). Especially in the latter one, he recognisably plays with his corporeality, his façade, so to speak. He highlights similarities between the bodily appearance of the two sexes by employing unusual camera angles. These physiological observations appear in two rows of photographs in which the observer can follow the ambiguous play of gender through the artist's body. Surprisingly, in the second row of photos, he also compares his body with views of façades of buildings, possibly to point out that we are used to thinking in certain types or typologies. The theory-driven reading favoured by Kühn sometimes does not offer an interpretation of these nuances and therefore can sometimes fall a little short. For instance, Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, the idea that a child can recognize itself in the mirror from the age of about six months and therefore see itself as an object, is cited briefly and certainly has its purpose, especially for Grigorescu's use of projections, ghostly images and doubles in many other performances, as in *Superpositions* (original title in English, 1977–79) or *Boxing* (Box, 1977).⁸ The reference to Rosalind Krauss's essay 'Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism' also is meaningful, as it is a key contribution to the self-referentiality of video art, but the way it is implemented by Kühn often doesn't yield any additional interpretational value.⁹ The artist does not just make subjective statements about himself, as the references to Lacan and Krauss suggest. The question why Grigorescu wanted to escape the standardised perception of his body during a certain era in Romania would deserve further attention, especially with a closer visual analysis of the works that alludes to art history and formal qualities. Potentially his aesthetic ideas address gender boundaries, or serve as a critical statement on traditional gender roles in socialist societies. Here, too, Kühn's look at Poland is important when she cites Vaclav Havel's essay *The Power of the Powerless* (Moc Bezmocných, 1978), which makes it clear that the Polish state under Edward Gierek no longer saw the need to propagate socialist realism.¹⁰ Artists in Poland such as Natalia LL were able to adapt modern forms, for the international stage, while remaining politically neutral. The same openness did not apply, but Romanian artists like Grigorescu were also able to receive new trends in art through exhibitions and art magazines from outside the Iron Curtain.

The third and final chapter deals with the Polish artist couple KwieKulik, who address the concept of the artwork and collective modes of production, but also touch on archiving as an essential artistic process. One of the key concepts of the duo, consisting of Zofia Kulik (1947–) and Przemysław Kwiek (1945–), is the so-called 'Całostka,' the idea of a separated wholeness. They had received their inclination towards open forms of art (Forma Otwarta) from their teacher in Warsaw, the Polish architect and city planner Oskar Hansen (1922–2005). As Kühn

8) Élisabeth Roudinesco: 'The Mirror Stage: an Obliterated Archive,' in Jean-Michel Rabaté, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, 25–34.

9) Rosalind Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,' in *October*, Spring, 1976, 50–64.

10) Kühn, *Medialisierte Körper*, 195.

conclusively shows, everything can remain a fragment in open art practices determined by 'Całostka.' Additions by other participants were possible or the complete reworking into other forms of media. This way, both artists understood it as a notation system for the manifold social circumstances of performance art. Under the auspices of the socialist state, documentation appeared as an interventionist form of communication, a performative statement, a collecting activity for a possible new canon. The artist duo KwieKulik also dealt with the praxeology of the Polish philosopher Tadeusz Kotarbińskis (1886–1981). Based on this, they founded informal networks and ran a private artist archive in their flat in Warsaw. This offered many artists in central Europe the opportunity to secure their ephemeral or merely banned art. Generally, in Poland in the 1970s, author's galleries outside the mainstream provided platforms for artists and intellectuals that were not in line with the Ministry of Arts and Culture or the already established art scene. By exhibiting and archiving together, new collectivist art forms emerged.

Apart from these collectivist initiatives, KwieKulik also worked as performance artists themselves. *Monument without Passport* (Pomnik bez paszportu, 1978), a work that fittingly graces the cover of the publication, shows a subversive commentary on state repression – that the artists apparently had triggered through their critical statements. When KwieKulik wanted to participate at the 'International Festival of the Arts' in Arnheim, Netherlands, the state refused them permission to leave the country. The artists then proposed a 'correspondence performance' with the participants on site via postcards, on which they promptly replied during an artistic demonstration. This triggered the actual performance by KwieKulik, which Kühn aptly analyses as a transformation of the typical sculptures of socialist realism. Both artists appear standing (and sitting) still like a sculptural group, calling for a protest against the measures. Zofia Kulik repeats the iconic revolutionary gesture of the raised fist, while her feet are stuck in cement. The quick exchange with other artists distinguished their practice and allowed for a continuous form of critic, so that their voices could not be silenced.

In her publication, Corinna Kühn vividly illustrates how central the recording and media processing of performance art was in central Europe. The interpretations of the selected artists from five different countries provide rich material and a balanced overview. Above all, it makes clear how precisely the artists planned their output and preserved it for later audiences. While this is true of all performance art, it seems to be strongly amplified under socialism. This was the only way to address a 'second audience.' Sometimes Kühn's interpretations switch too quickly to the dense theoretical framework and the analysis of the individual art pieces falls a little short. Future research could touch on the conjunctures of the later reception in exhibitions and archives. As she herself describes in her outlook, the field could also be extended to neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe or to other fields such as literature or music. Overall, this meritorious study provides many new insights into the history of performance art in central Europe and creates many new research perspectives between the individual regions.



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