

## ON EASTERN EUROPEAN PERFORMANCE ART

## AND WHY IT DID NOT MAKE IT INTO ART HISTORY (SO FAR)

(Review on Bryzgel, A., 2017, *Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.)

Eugenia Sydorenko

## Про східноєвропейський перформанс

## і те, чому він (поки що) не потрапив до історії мистецтва

(Bryzgel, A., 2017, *Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.)

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Зазвичай, читуючи книжку з історії мистецтва, що мала би географічно охоплювати весь світ, ми стикаємося із серйозною повторюваною проблемою: з якоїсь причини 'світ' представлений тільки Західною Європою та Північною Америкою. Звичайно, мистецтво Азії чи Африки може періодично з'являтися на сторінках, проте його завжди вважають за 'інше' й оцінюють його історичну, естетичну чи яку би то не було цінність, спираючись лише на Західні стандарти, або ж на вплив, що мав витвір мистецтва, коли його презентували західній публіці. Тим часом Східна Європа здебільшого повністю ігнорується. Для західних дослідників цей регіон занадто європейський, аби бути 'Іншим', але недостатньо європейський, аби бути включеним до канону.

У цій статті я знайомлю читача з книжкою професорки Північно-Західного університету Емі Бризгель «Мистецтво перформансу в Східній Європі з 1960 року», написаною із усвідомленням вищеписаної проблеми, де авторка намагається дослідити перформанс у регіоні із незалежної від Західу, але не ізольованої від нього перспективи, імовірно виступаючи першопроходицю в даному прагненні. Окрім того я аналізую деякі, імовірно, найважливіші із висновків Бризгель стосовно розвитку та форм перформансу у Східній Європі, а також методологію авторки та деякі думки про природу мистецтва перформансу.

Дана праця, проте, не спромоглася уникнути нерівноцінного ставлення до країн, які вона географічно охоплює. Безумовно, Бризгель надзвичайно цікавить динамічність югославського перформансу, що частково стала результатом інституалізації частково – відносно послабленого авторитарного режиму у 1970-х роках на батьківщині Марини Абрамович. Але український перформанс і культура загалом вкрай піденою невизначеності в даній книжці. Саме тому я намагаюся зрозуміти причини цього нерівноправ'я репрезентації, а також віддати належне українському перформанс-арту, дослідивши те, від чого книжка Емі Бризгель тільки виграла би – контекст країни, де зустрічаються Схід і Захід.

**Ключові слова:** Східна Європа, горизонтальна історія мистецтв, перформанс, інституалізація, Емі Бризгель.

*Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960* by Amy Bryzgel, as the author rightfully claims in the book's introduction, represents the first attempt of in-depth examination of performance art in Central, Eastern and South-eastern Europe. Bryzgel's main aim is to fill the gap in the global history of performance art, from which Eastern European artists were omitted. Her other purposes include exploring various artistic practices and their emergence from factors such as social and political circumstances in each country. Moreover, as the book's chronological scope captures the modernity, in presenting the artists working after the collapse of communist regimes, the author aims to trace the continuities and ruptures with the past (Bryzgel 2017, p. 1-5).

The book's division into five sections – 'Sources and origins', 'The body', 'Gender', 'Politics and identity' and 'Institutional critique' – was determined by the outcomes of the research and not pre-established by the author. In 'Sources and origins', the author explores some of the first accounts of performative activity in the region, as well as the emergence of Performance art in the region from Dadaist art and necessities of local character. Although Bryzgel begins with this, she proceeds to establish the structure of the work based on the above categories, instead of writing a chronological overview. In 'The body', the expressiveness and convenience of using artists' own bodies as material is explored. Successively, in 'Gender' the author focuses on how the norms of masculinity and femininity are challenged and how feminist values and the notions of sexuality are addressed by performance artists. In 'Politics and identity', Bryzgel examines the ways in which artists chose to make political statements through their performances both in response to the communist regimes and to the new life after the collapses of those establishments. And finally, in 'Institutional critique' the author not only investigates artists' objection to the official art institutions, she also evaluates the region-specific role of those institutions.

*Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960* is a significant work, since it is a rare example of a 'Western' academic fully acknowledging their point of view as being such, not universalizing the Western perspective. As Piotr Piotrowski (whose writing Bryzgel frequently references throughout her book) points out, art historians writing in Western Europe or North America tend to universalize their standpoint, forgetting that London or New York are specific places located on the map, just as Bratislava or Odesa (Piotrowski 2009, p. 56). This ignorance manifests itself in assessing the cultural and historical significance of the artists' work based on the impact they made in Western Europe or North America and is, in fact, an art historical problem, considering that artists themselves would give equal importance to a happening in Bucharest and one in Berlin (Piotrowski 2009, p. 51). This type of approach Piotrowski calls 'vertical art history' and Bryzgel strives towards the 'horizontal' one in her book.

Speaking about the communication between the artists from the East and the West, Bryzgel concludes that, while the Iron Curtain both complicated the exchange of ideas between the artists, sometimes even disabling it, and helped Eastern European art avoid complete commercialization and therefore, according to some artists, degradation, the presence of the Curtain also did not mean that the artists described in the book worked in vacuum (Bryzgel 2017, p. 52). In fact, they felt validated, finding out through publications or informal conversations that their art was a part of a global trend or when they would travel abroad to participate in art festivals, given that the regime in their country would allow it. Surprisingly, sometimes it was through their Western colleagues that Eastern European artists found out about their countrymen's work, because of the lack of artistic networks within some countries (Bryzgel 2017, p. 116).

While the existing networks of artists enabled the informal creative alliances in Eastern and Central Europe, state-sponsored institutions, such as Student Culture Centres in former Yugoslavia represented the official or semi-official platforms for artists' communication and collaboration. In the section 'Institutional critique', the author points out that the functioning of such artistic spaces both evoked rebellion against them among the involved artists and enabled the youth to gather

and direct their rebellion towards artistic experimentation (Bryzgel 2017, p. 302). Amy Bryzgel attributes the former to the fact that these institutions were deemed to be extremely controlled spaces and the artists were dictated to follow the standards of either apolitical abstract art or art that would conform to the ideology. However, as suggested above, institutions had a positive impact on the overall dynamic of the development of performance art in the countries, which enabled productive partnerships and world-famous figures, including Marina Abramović, to emerge. Nevertheless, it can be gathered from the book that the case of Yugoslavia is quite unique for the region, as the country's establishment was relatively more relaxed and allowed some extent of market economy and self-management (Bryzgel 2017, p. 301). Eventhough Student Culture Centres were top-down institutions, artists possessed some autonomy and benefitted immensely from these platforms, which was not the case for most of the countries within the scope of the book, where performance art was merely overlooked by official institutions or even prohibited by state. This forced the artists to work separately and exhibit their work in narrow circles, which results in scatteredness in the history of performance art in most of Eastern Europe and consequently in the character of Bryzgel's book.

One of the strengths of the book is that Amy Bryzgel is careful when relying on common knowledge and traditional definitions. Understanding that art and society developed in parallel but with differences in the East and the West, she does not, for instance, misapply the accepted notion of feminism as the organised political movement to Eastern and Central Europe, instead, she employs the term as 'a consciousness of injustices based on gender hierarchy and commitment to change' throughout the 'Gender' section, because the pursuit of gender equality and the questioning of gender roles did not manifest themselves in the form of established movement in the region but were apparent as persistent ideas in the works of such artists as Natalia LL and Katalin Ladik (Bryzgel 2017, p. 167).

In her performance *The Screaming Hole*, Ladik uses a strategy of overidentification with the male gaze, exposing it by engaging into the behaviours that seemingly aim to confirm it and thus functioning as a mirror (Bryzgel 2017, p. 188). The author of the book traces the same approach in the political critique that performance artists expressed in their work. The so called 'subversive affirmation' was not only powerful and forced the audience to be critical and active when trying to understand artist's intentions, it also served as protection to the artists, because it could have easily been concluded from seeing such performance that they were acts of support of the regime (Bryzgel 2017, p. 44, 230).

Some of the performances described in the book blur the lines between art and life to a degree that it is almost impossible to tell one from the other. At a few points of the book, Bryzgel raises the question of distinguishing between them. Personally, having studied the history of film and of its acceptance as an art form, I found it peculiar how some performance artists considered that the presence of camera recording is what constitutes performance as such (Bryzgel 2017, p. 108). Moreover, recordings and photographs also enable a work to be passed on to its delayed audience, whom, firstly, some artists deemed their real audience, meant to understand the work better than contemporaries and secondly, to whom the works which had been created without a certain perspective in mind, acquire this specific perspective thanks to the 'death of the author', as in the case with performances now seen as feminist (Bryzgel 2017, p. 167, 300). Interestingly, the use of recordings and photographs as evidence or even substitute of a work itself, causes alterations to a spatio-temporal dimension of a performance. When we analyse artists' reasons for the presence of camera during performances, Bazin's 'mummy complex' – image's ability to 'preserve [the subject] from a second spiritual death' – comes to mind (Bazin 1967, p. 9-10).

The book represents a productive starting point in the research of Eastern and Central European performance art and an attempt to represent it as having equal value in art history as Western European and North American one. However, there is a persistent imbalance in the

amount of the representation given to different countries in the book. It is understandable that, for instance, Yugoslavia is of great interest to Bryzgel, as partial institutionalisation of performance art brought some dynamism to its development, as discussed previously. Yet, one cannot help but notice the disproportionate sparseness of the representation of Ukraine in the book, which Bryzgel does not address at any point, apart from mentioning in the introduction, that the political situation in the country prevented the author from visiting it in the process of research. Before I suggest the possible reasons for the lack of pages dedicated to Ukraine in the book, I will try my best to briefly trace the main characteristics of the development of performance art in the country.

Western performative practices can be considered a factor of influence but they did not determine the emergence of performance art in Ukraine. Body art, for instance, has had a long tradition in Ukrainian culture and can be traced back to the heyday of futurism (Shumska, 2013). Some artists aimed to express their urge for social or political change, in which case their work blurred the lines between performance and action art or actionism (Kalyta, 2019). Most importantly, though, the medium arose from artists' desire to add a performative dimension not only to their work, but also to various traditions practiced in creative circles, such as New Year celebrations, when artists would arrive dressed in carnival costumes and showcase their work. Thus, it would be fair to say that in the 1980-s and 1990-s in such centres of performance as Kharkiv, Kyiv and Odesa a tendency for, so to say, the performative lifestyle of artists dominates any intention to develop performance art as an independent medium, although in Lviv, the unofficial capital of performance art in Ukraine, where a more deliberate and systematic approach nowadays manifests itself in a school of performance art and an annual festival (Shumska, 2013). And it is peculiar that while performance art very much represented the unofficial culture of Ukraine at the time, its creators always came from an official background (Levchenko, 2022). For example, one of the first significant performances in Lviv was co-staged in 1975 by Vasyl Bazhay, a Lviv Academy of Arts graduate and a subsequent member of the National Union of Artists of Ukraine. The artist created and himself smashed in the end of the performance) a kind of mirror maze which symbolised the distinction between someone's true identity and a persona impacted by outside opinions, changes of circumstances (Shumska, 2013). Similar official background applies to one of the most prominent figures of Ukrainian performance – Fripulia, who, as Bryzgel mentions, was also a member of the Artists' Union.

Hanna Tsyba, a curator of a series of events dedicated to Ukrainian performance art, notes that the absence of written sources has posed great difficulties for researchers who have attempted to study the area (Kalyta 2019). And while scholars have been deriving most research from interviews with artists, exhibition curators, festival organisers and other contributors, the lack of more official sources, especially from before the fall of the USSR, may be attributed to the already mentioned attitude with which artists themselves viewed performance art. Because the performative aspect was only viewed as additional to their work, it could be the case that these works are classified as examples of other types of media, be it painting or theatre. Consequently, no schools or artistic networks, apart from scattered and short-lived groups were formed.

It would be completely unfair to state though, that no historical data about performance art in Ukraine in the 60-80s and especially later on is available to us, as most of the bibliography used for this text proves. What is striking to me however, and even more so than the frankly glaring lack of the representation of Ukrainian performance art in Bryzgel's book, is the fact that the author does not even bother to provide much (or any) Ukraine-specific social and political context in which a few works by Ukrainian artists that she mentions were created and which undoubtedly triggered the emergence of these performances. Such context is reduced to assuming Ukraine's complete uniformity with other European Soviet republics. If Hungary, Poland and Serbia are presented as unique cases, Ukraine simply helps divide these countries from Russia. In other words, Ukraine does not exist for the author in the book, at least not as a self-standing instance. In

this regard, Bryzgel moves away from the initial methodology, thus a kind of horizontality of its own even within a 'periphery' (that is Eastern and Central Europe).

In *Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, Amy Bryzgel succeeds in her aim to present an account of performances and artist of the region by not creating a mere catalogue but by conducting an analytical study where all of the prerequisites, purposes and artists' methods which by coming together provide answers to why performance art, as well as every individual performance had to emerge. Hopefully, at least some of these works will stop being ignored and will make it into the future histories of performance art in the world, especially given that some of the Eastern European countries acquire proper representation in the Eastern European studies to begin with.

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**On Eastern European performance art and why it did not make it into art history (so far)  
(Bryzgel, A., 2017, *Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.)**

*It is rare that, when reading an art history book, whose geographical scope is claimed to cover the whole world, one is not confronted by a major recurring issue. 'The world', for some reason, is only represented by Western Europe and North America. Of course, the art of Asia or Africa may occasionally appear but they get othered and their historical, aesthetic or any kind of value is evaluated solely based on either how well it aligns with the Western standards, or how much impact the work made, when it was presented to the Western public. Eastern Europe, on the other hand, is usually omitted completely. To Western scholars, the region appears to be too European to be an 'Other' but not European enough to be included into cannon.*

*In this article, I familiarise the reader with professor at the Northeastern University Amy Bryzgel's 2017 book «Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960» in which the author, aware of the above issue, aims to research performance art in the region through an independent, though not isolated perspective, possibly pioneering in this intention. In succession, I consider some of Bryzgel's arguably most important and peculiar conclusions regarding the development and forms of performance art, as well as the author's methodology and some points on the nature of performance art.*

*However, the book fails to avoid the unequal treatment of the countries within its scope. Resulting partly from its institutionalisation and partly from the relatively relaxed type of regime in Yugoslavia in the 1970s, the dynamism of performance art in Marina Abramović's homeland is of great interest to Bryzgel, but Ukraine's performance art and culture in general seem to be obscure in this study. This is why I attempt to investigate the reasons for this inequality of representation, as well as do justice to Ukrainian performance art by examining what Bryzgel's book could benefit from – the context of the country where East and West meet.*

**Keywords:** Eastern Europe, horizontal art history, performance art, institutionalisation, Amy Bryzgel.

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