

## Introduction

This book represents the first attempt to write a comprehensive account of performance art in Eastern Europe – the former communist, socialist and Soviet countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe – since the 1960s. It is indebted to groundbreaking studies on the subject such as Zdenka Badovinac's *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present* (1998), the first exhibition to examine body art practices in the region, which was accompanied by a catalogue that serves as a precursor to the present volume. As this book will demonstrate, performance art – which encompasses a range of genres, among them body art, happenings, actions and performance – developed in Eastern Europe *in parallel and in dialogue* with practices in Western Europe and North America, despite its exclusion from the canon of that history. There were several ways in which this occurred. Artists from Eastern Europe were creating their own forms of performance art, but they also travelled to the West and, conversely, artists from the West travelled to the East; at times, artists from East and West encountered one another and their works at major venues such as the exhibition *Works and Words* at the Foundation De Appel, Amsterdam, or the Edinburgh Arts Festival, Scotland. In her recent reassessment of the communist period, Agata Pyzik commented on this interconnectivity: 'artistic creation on both sides reveals how much the two Blocs were intimately dependent on each other and closely tied up together'.<sup>1</sup> In short, although the Iron Curtain divided artists in the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe from their counterparts in the West, artistic activity in the region indicates that that curtain was decidedly porous. It was often artists who, working in a grey area between culture and politics, were among those who managed to transgress political boundaries through their work.

Artists in Eastern Europe considered their work as part of an array of artistic practices being explored throughout the globe from the 1960s through the 1980s, and my research reveals that this was surely the case. While Eastern European artists developed their own manifestations of genres such as performance, Land Art and Conceptual Art, they did so not in a vacuum. As I try to

show in my text, artists in the East were inspired by artists they encountered from elsewhere (both East and West), yet also created their own distinct forms of creative expression, which emerged from their unique cultural surroundings. They used the art they encountered from the West as a resource, not a source. Indeed, the manner in which performance art developed in the East varied not only from region to region, but also country to country, and even within the different areas of each country, stemming from local histories, traditions and the different ways state-sponsored socialism was enacted in a given locale.

This book has several aims. For one, it seeks to fill a regrettable gap in the literature of art history and performance studies in providing the first in-depth academic analysis of performance art practices as they evolved since the 1960s, in the following countries: the former Soviet nations of Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova; the Central European satellite nations, specifically, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Romania and Bulgaria; the former Yugoslav nations of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, FYR Macedonia (henceforth referred to as Macedonia), Montenegro and Kosovo; and the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and non-aligned Albania.

While this list admittedly comprises a vast range of locales and traditions, I have selected (and limited my study to) these twenty-one countries, as the performance art practices in these places all emerged from, and are connected to, European traditions, especially those of the avant-garde. Despite their marginalisation as Eastern European, these artists primarily thought of themselves as *European* artists.<sup>2</sup> Yet this volume does not focus on the impact of Western European performance art on that of Eastern Europe; it attempts to outline the paths of reciprocal cultural exchange between East and West as well as across the East, examining the varied meanings of practices in these varied contexts. For example, while artists in the West, such as Allan Kaprow (1927–2006), staged happenings in the countryside in the 1960s as a possible means of escaping the commercial zone of the gallery and the city, artists in Czechoslovakia and Russia did so in the following decade out of necessity – while artistic activity was often heavily monitored in urban locales, rural areas were, by contrast, relatively free and un surveilled.

Secondly, in exploring the various manifestations and meanings of performance art across Eastern Europe, I highlight the diversity of artistic practice, including the different moments and ways in which performance emerged, along with its relationship to each country's sociopolitical climate. In places such as Moldova, the artistic environment remained somewhat conservative until the 1980s and 1990s, with experimental practices taking place in the realm of painting, as opposed to expanding beyond that medium. In Albania, however, where experimental practices also did not emerge until the 1990s,

this delay was due not to the conservatism of the art world, but to a far more restrictive political environment, which did not even tolerate expressionism in painting.

The first edition of Roselee Goldberg's pioneering study of performance art, which was published as *Performance Art: Live Art, from 1909 to the Present*, contains no references to artists from Eastern Europe, with the exception of the Russian Futurists. In revised editions, entitled *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (2001, 2011), the author devotes two pages to the topic of performance art from 'the former Communist countries,' mentioning a limited number of figures and movements: Marina Abramović (Serbian/Yugoslavian, b. 1946), Vlasta Delimar (Croatian/Yugoslavian, b. 1956), Katarzyna Kozyra (Polish, b. 1963), Oleg Kulik (Russian, b. 1961), the New Academy (Russian, 1990s) and Tomáš Ruller (Czech, b. 1957). Goldberg characterises performance in the region rather myopically, as a form of political protest, stating that 'performance art had functioned almost exclusively in the East as a form of political opposition in the years of repression.'<sup>3</sup> While there *were* artists who made overt political statements in their work, a topic addressed in chapter 4, numerous other manifestations of performance, action art and body art indicate that these instances are far more limited than Goldberg asserts. In fact, more often than not, performance offered artists in Central and Eastern Europe an arena of freedom in which to experiment, rather than comprising a vehicle of dissident political activity. Even in the post-communist period, performance became a preferred genre among many artists both because of its open-endedness and its conduciveness to experimentation; many artists felt that it enabled more direct and visceral acts of expression that were not possible through other art forms.

Aside from those individuals mentioned across the two-page spread of the 2001 and 2011 editions of her book, Goldberg offers no further discussion of the range of performative activity practiced by artists working in the region. This is truly remarkable, given that Goldberg met Marina Abramović following the latter's participation in the 1973 Edinburgh Arts Festival.<sup>4</sup> Although Goldberg discusses Abramović's work several times in those later editions, no mention is made of the seminal performative activity of Abramović and her colleagues at the Student Culture Centre in Belgrade in the 1970s, let alone throughout the rest of Yugoslavia or the region.

Furthermore, Goldberg characterises the significance of performance in the East rather reductively, describing the genre's immateriality as its central allure for artists working under communism. In her words, 'with the constant threat of police surveillance, censorship and arrest, it was not surprising that most protest art related to the body. An artist could perform anywhere, without materials or studio, and the work left no traces'<sup>5</sup> While to some extent it is true that performance art appealed because of the ability to perform 'anywhere'

and ‘without materials,’ in fact performance art in Eastern Europe (as in the West) did leave significant traces: photographic, textual and (in rare cases) video documentation. Indeed, in the absence of a body of critical discourse surrounding performance art in the region, these records make it possible to trace and assess the evolution of this genre in Eastern Europe. Finally, Goldberg notes the focus on the ‘individual’ inherent in body art, which she contrasts with the collectivist impulse in communism. For example, she interprets Kozyra’s *Olympia* (1996) as emphasizing ‘the autonomy of the artist, a significant achievement in countries that had for more than half-a-century rejected individualism outright.’<sup>6</sup> While communism undeniably emphasises the collective at the expense of the individual, this research demonstrates that, more often than not, artists opposed state control not with individualism but with self-organisation.

Following an introductory section (chapter 1), in which I outline the chronological development of performance art in the region, I explore the practices that comprise performance in Eastern Europe through a range of recurrent themes: the body (chapter 2), gender (chapter 3), politics and identity (chapter 4) and institutional critique (chapter 5).<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that these categories emerged from the research, as opposed to preceding or being applied to it. Over the course of two years of extensive research in the field, I met with and interviewed more than 250 artists, art historians, art critics and art practitioners in the region, following which I grouped their work in a way that formed a coherent structure for presentation. The fact that these categories bear similarities to those often used to discuss performance and body art in the West further supports my contention that these artists are in fact part of the European tradition of experimental and avant-garde art practices. At the same time, in examining these performative works through familiar lenses, I reveal the manner in which these artists used the genre to create their own unique statements, expressions and manifestations. It is only through such juxtaposition that we can shed light on both the continuities and the distinctions, thus illuminating these figures’ singular contributions to performance art.

In preparing this text, I fully acknowledge the position from which I am writing. As an American art historian, I received my undergraduate training in the United States in the 1990s, at a time when none of these artists were included in standard art history courses, at least not at Boston University. That said, from 1997 to 2000, I lived in Poland, where I learned the language; and from 2004 to 2009, I lived in Riga, Latvia, where I learned Latvian, and from which I made frequent trips to Russia and Poland, conducting research for my dissertation. For this book, from 2013 to 2015, I conducted extensive field research, travelling to every country mentioned in this text with the exception of Ukraine, owing to the political circumstances at the time of writing, and

meeting with the vast majority of artists discussed here.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, one of the contributions I make with this study is in presenting the voices of the artists. It is for that reason that many direct quotations from these individuals, taken from my interviews with them, are included here. My aim was to produce a study that is at once based on rigorous research and historical contextualisation, but is also infused with the voices and perspectives of the artists, lest those impressions perish with the artists themselves.

Finally, in presenting the contributions of contemporary artists working in the region since 1989, I also aim to illustrate both these practices' continuities as well as ruptures with the past. The year 1989 is a convenient marker for comparative analysis across the region. Of course, other significant moments and their respective dates dot the landscape of the communist era, among the most notable being Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, the start of the Thaw and the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and the Prague Spring in 1968. On a local level, additional pivotal moments come to mind, such as the mass demonstrations against price hikes in Poland in 1970, or the declaration of Martial Law in that country in 1981. In the field of visual culture, turning points abound. They include the 1962 Manezh exhibition, the first-ever showing of nonconformist works of art in an official art exhibition, followed by Nikita Khrushchev's public smackdown of the featured artists; and the 1974 Bulldozer Exhibition, in which a group of unofficial artists staged an outdoor showing without permission from the authorities, and the KGB was brought in to stop the event. It seems, then, that there are a number of points from which we can position ourselves to examine the conditions of 'before' and 'after'. Thus, one wonders whether the focus on 1989 – the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall – remains the most productive, because perhaps in perpetuating the focus on this divide we continue to resign ourselves to the Cold War binaries that we in the field claim to want to shake off. At the same time, one cannot deny the significant developments that ensued as the result of the flood of East Germans crossing into West Berlin in the early hours of 9 November of that year.<sup>9</sup>

While I do not mean to diminish the indisputable impact of the events that took place in the aftermath of the fall of the Wall and the Soviet collapse that followed two years later, I propose that we perhaps expand the inquiry, moving beyond the normative binaries of East and West toward what the late Piotr Piotrowski referred to as a 'horizontal art history'. As opposed to the Western 'vertical' paradigm, Piotrowski sets forth the notion of a shift in perspective, looking not from the centre to the periphery but the reverse, to see how such an approach might not only challenge but also overturn perceptions regarding art history, artistic styles and the canon. This book aims to do just that, by viewing the genre of performance art through the lens of the East. But, in addition, I suggest that this could also be achieved by looking at the so-called peripheral dates and turning points as a way of moving on

from the 'before and after' binary paradigm, which will effectively disrupt the East-West model.

In this way, I propose to *rethink art's histories* with this volume, which raises a number of significant questions that have recently been, and continue to be, discussed in the field: Why and how is the discipline of art history divided into East and West? How can we move beyond the East-West binary into a truly global art history? How do we position artists from the region? It is my hope that this research, and this publication, will answer this last question, through examining performance art practices and making the following overarching claim: that artists from Eastern Europe were both connected to and independent of developments in the West, developing their performative and experimental work *concurrently* with artists in Western Europe and North America. Questions of influence are interesting, but secondary.

Although this volume is decidedly ambitious in its goals, it cannot cover everything pertaining to the topic. The knowledge that this would be the first comprehensive academic text to appear on performance art in Eastern Europe has created a significant intellectual burden. While in writing the study I have tried to include as many artists and artworks as I can, I am also aware of the possible pitfalls of doing so, and have attempted as much as possible to avoid producing a mere catalogue of artists working in performance. And it is important to note that much of what has been included is influenced by the nature of the research, dependent at least in part on which artists I was able to meet and whether secondary source material was available.

While I utilised a similarly comparative approach in my first book, *Performing the East: Performance Art in Russia, Latvia and Poland Since 1980* (2013), the style and method used here are also indebted to Piotrowski, which he employed most effectively in his *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (2009) and *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* (2012). While my first book took a case-study approach to six artists in three countries of the former Soviet sphere of influence, it provided the foundation and starting point for the more comprehensive history presented in this text. It is my hope that *Performance Art in Eastern Europe* does for performative practices in the region what *In the Shadow of Yalta* did for avant-garde and contemporary art traditions.

As for terminology, I use the labels 'East' and 'performance' deliberately. Because of the legacy of the Cold War, much of the region covered in this book, with the exception of East Germany (which is now part of Germany), is still referred to as 'the East', including the former Yugoslavia, although the latter enjoyed a rather liminal status during its existence. Consequently, the term 'Eastern Europe' is necessary to articulate the distinct sociopolitical conditions under which these artists were working. It does not, however, indicate a distinction in terms of artistic practice. Furthermore, 'Eastern Europe' remains

a label used by artists and arts practitioners in the region, which consequently informs my own use of the term. The designations ‘Central Europe’ and ‘East-Central Europe’ are perhaps more applicable when discussing Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and I do employ the former term as well. However, I rely on the East-West binary insofar as it demarcates a social and political distinction among European countries in the wake of the Second World War.

The choice of the phrasing ‘performance art’ for the title of the book was likewise calculated. Like my chapter themes, this term, as an all-encompassing label to describe practices in the region, emerged directly from the research and relates to the particular conditions in which various types of live art forms entered the creative discourse in Eastern Europe. While the term ‘action art’, adopted by several art historians of the region (Andrea Euringer-Bátorová, Pavlína Morganová, Ileana Pintilie), is relevant to historical Central European, as well as some Russian, examples, ‘performance’ is the only label used with relative consistency across the region.<sup>10</sup> Although one might argue that the designation ‘performance art’ is here applied to a context in which no definitive category existed to describe such practices, this is only partly true. Indeed, in my interviews with artists, many mentioned not initially having a name for this type of work. In some instances, they referred to their work as ‘actions’, ‘events’ or ‘happenings’, but in other cases there was no terminology at all. When the vocabulary did enter the discourse, however, it did so through several well-circulated texts, among them, Goldberg’s *Performance Art*. For example, Bulgarian curator Diana Popova translated the Goldberg volume and circulated it as *samizdat*, while Czech artist Tomáš Ruller used it as evidence in a case against him, when he was taken to court for an artistic performance that was interpreted as a criminal act (both in the early 1980s).<sup>11</sup> By titling the study *Performance Art in Eastern Europe*, I deliberately anchor it to Goldberg’s seminal work, underscoring the manner in which many artists from the region considered their work in relation to the Western tradition. Moreover, several artists from Czechoslovakia and Poland organised and participated in ‘performance art’ festivals in Central Europe in the 1970s, and the Polish art duo KwieKulik (1971–87) used the term ‘performance’ very pointedly, in relation to certain aspects of their work. For them, ‘performance’ denotes a work of art that is commissioned and presented at a venue such as a festival, whereas they refer to the majority of their artistic practice as ‘activities’. In places such as Moldova, Estonia and Albania, performance developed much later than in other areas of Eastern Europe, only after the regime change in the 1990s, and is now the default term for this type of art. In my text, I employ the labels that were historically used by the artists – for example, when referring to Czech art from the 1970s I refer to ‘actions’ where relevant, but by the 1980s, artists began to use the term ‘performance’. However, ‘performance’ is also utilised in the title of the book for the sake of clarity and brevity. I examine performance

not as a category designating stylistic purity, but as one consisting of a range of practices, including actions, happenings, body art and performance.<sup>12</sup>

As noted earlier, this book is the result of several years of in-depth field research, none of which would have been possible without generous funding from the following organisations: The Arts and Humanities Research Council, The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, The Leverhulme Trust and The Royal Society of Edinburgh. It likewise would not have been possible without the support and cooperation of all of the artists, art historians, curators, critics and arts practitioners whose names appear throughout the book, but who are too numerous to list here. I have vetted aspects of this research at various conferences and events throughout the United States, Europe and the United Kingdom, and for all of the insightful responses I received from colleagues in the field, I am grateful.<sup>13</sup> I am also grateful to my colleagues at the University of Aberdeen likewise engaged in the study of performance; their collaboration and kindred spirits have been a guiding force throughout this process. This volume would not have seen the light of day without the eternal encouragement of my parents, Ronald and Patricia Bryzgel. Most of all, I am thankful to Matt Zagrodny, my partner in love and in life, whose support makes all the difference.

## Notes

- 1 Agata Pyzik, *Poor But Sexy: Culture Clashes in Europe East and West* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), p. 10.
- 2 See for example Éva Forgács, 'How the new left invented East-European art', *Centropa: A Journal of Central European Architecture and Related Arts*, 3:2 (May 2003), 93.
- 3 Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, 3rd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), p. 214.
- 4 James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010), p. 64. The fact that Goldberg excluded Abramović from the first edition of her text could possibly be explained by the fact that the artists working with Abramović in Belgrade in the 1970s were students at the time.
- 5 Goldberg, *Performance Art*, p. 214.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 I have chosen not to include participatory art in this volume both because of space limitations and because participatory and socially engaged art invokes a different theoretical framework.
- 8 On 21 November 2013, a wave of protests began in Ukraine, centred around Maidan Square in Kiev. Known as Euro Maidan, demonstrators were demanding closer ties with Europe, and calling for the resignation of President Yanukovich and his government. This led to the Ukrainian Revolution of 2014, which was met with violence by the authorities. At the end of February 2014, Yanukovich and several high government officials fled the country. In March 2014, following a referendum that many declared invalid, Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine. At the time of



publication (2017), the country is still in armed conflict with Russia, particularly in the Donbass and Donetsk regions of eastern Ukraine.

- 9 It is also important to note that for East German artists such as Micha Brendel (b. 1959), Else Gabriel (b. 1962) and Via Lewandowsky (b. 1963), this border opening came much sooner, in the summer of 1989, when they started travelling to and exhibiting in West Berlin. Micha Brendel, in an interview with the author in Germany, 5 May 2014, mentioned the fact that when the artists received their passports to attend shows in the West, he recognised this as a sign that things were changing.
- 10 See Andrea Euringer-Bátorová, *Akčné umenie na Slovensku v 60: Rokoch 20. storočia; Akcie Alexa Mlynářčika* (Bratislava, Slovakia: Slovart, 2012), Pavlína Morganová, *Akční umění* (Olomouc, Czechoslovakia: Votobia, p. 1999) and Ileana Pintilie, *Actionism in Romania during the Communist Era* (Cluj, Romania: Idea Design & Print, 2002).
- 11 Of course, this was not the only text that artists referenced; Romanian artist Iosif Király (b. 1957) cites Allan Kaprow's *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* (1966), and Ruller mentions Adrian Henri's *Total Art: Environments, Happenings and Performance* (1974), which he purchased in 1977 while travelling abroad with his father in Western Europe. But in most cases, artists who encountered these publications had already been experimenting with performance art; thus, the discovery of such texts and precedents for this type of activity lent credence to their work, prompting them to develop it further.
- 12 It should also be noted that 'performance art' is the term used in a major study funded by the European Research Council, 'Performance Art in Eastern Europe, 1950–1990', led by the Zurich scholar Sylvia Sasse. Furthermore, the label 'live art', a British term for performative practices, is not widely used in the region.
- 13 A portion of chapter 5 was featured in the paper 'The Adoption and Adaptation of Institutional Critique in Eastern Europe', presented at the conference *Shared Practices: The Intertwinement of the Arts in the Culture of Socialist Eastern Europe*, Kumu Art Museum, Tallinn, Estonia, 24 October 2015; and in the paper 'Role Reversal: Performance Art in Yugoslavia Before and After the Breakup', presented in the panel *Conceptual Art in Eastern Europe Before and After the Wall II: East-Central Europe and Yugoslavia* at the annual conference for the Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), San Antonio, Texas, 23 November 2014. Portions of chapter 3 were workshopped in my talk 'Performing Gender Across Eastern Europe', at the Sofia Queer Forum, Bulgaria, 27 May 2014 (which was also published as a catalogue essay for the Forum); and in 'Performance and Gender, East and West: Then and Now', presented at the conference *Performing Arts in the Second Public Sphere*, Berlin, 10 May 2014. I presented an outline of this book in the paper 'Performance Art in Eastern Europe', at the conference *The Paradigm of the Marxist Critique of Modernism and the Context of Current Approaches of Contemporary Art*, Moldova State University, Chişinău, Moldova, 3 April 2014; and in 'Performing the East: Research as Performance', at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Tallinn, Estonia, 7 October 2013.