

Routledge Advances in Theatre and Performance Studies

PERFORMANCE ART IN THE SECOND PUBLIC SPHERE

EVENT-BASED ART IN LATE SOCIALIST EUROPE

Edited by
Katalin Cseh-Varga and Adam Czirak



Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere

Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere is the first interdisciplinary analysis of performance art in East, Central and Southeast Europe under socialist rule. By investigating the specifics of event-based art forms in these regions, each chapter explores the particular critical roles that this work assumed under conditions of censorship.

The artistic networks of Yugoslavia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, East Germany and Czechoslovakia are discussed with a particular focus on the discourses that shaped artistic practice at the time, drawing on the methods of Performance Studies and Media Studies as well as more familiar reference points from art history and area studies.

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>List of contributors</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
Introduction	1
KATALIN CSEH-VARGA AND ADAM CZIRAK	
PART I	
Geopolitics and transnationalism of art production	17
1 Beyond “East” and “West” through The Eternal Network: networked artists’ communities as counter-publics of Cold War Europe	19
RODDY HUNTER	
2 Tactical networking: Yugoslav performing and visual arts between East and West	32
MIŠKO ŠUVAKOVIĆ	
3 Connection with the world: internationalism and new art practice in Yugoslavia	45
DIETMAR UNTERKOFLER	
4 Questioning the East: artistic practices and social context on the edge	60
ILEANA PINTILIE	

PART II

Locating the second public sphere 73

- 5 Basements, attics, streets and courtyards: the reinvention of marginal art spaces in Romania during socialism 75**

CRISTIAN NAE

- 6 Performing the proletarian public sphere: gender and labour in the art of Tomislav Gotovac 88**

ANDREJ MIRČEV

- 7 Outside by being inside: unofficial artistic strategies in the former Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s 102**

ANDREA BÁTOROVÁ

- 8 From a local to a national to a transnational public sphere: the emergence of solidarity in Poland from a theatrical perspective 115**

BERENIKA SZYMANSKI-DÜLL

- 9 Surveilling the public sphere: the first Hungarian happening in secret agents' reports 127**

KATA KRASZNAHORKAI

- 10 Performance art in Latvia as intermedial appropriation 138**

LAINE KRISTBERGA

- 11 Escape into nature!: the politics of melancholy in Czechoslovakian performance art 151**

ADAM CZIRAK

PART III

Facets of gender in the second public sphere 165

- 12 Gender, feminism, and the second public sphere in East European performance art 167**

AMY BRYZGEL

- 13 Decision as art: performance in the Balkans 184**

JASMINA TUMBAS

14	Communities of practice: performing women in the second public sphere	202
	BEÁTA HOCK	
15	Artistic collaborations of performing women in the GDR	219
	ANGELIKA RICHTER	
PART IV		
	Post-socialist performance	237
16	Socialist performance replaced: re-enactment as a critical strategy in contemporary East European art	239
	MAJA FOWKES AND REUBEN FOWKES	
	<i>List of Performances Index</i>	253
	<i>Names Index</i>	257
	<i>Terms Index</i>	260

Figures

3.1	Performances/events by Rasa Todosijević (front), Gergely Urkom (centre, left) and Marina Abramović (background, performing <i>Rhythm 10</i>) for the RDG at Melville College, Edinburgh, <i>Eight Yugoslav Artists</i> , Edinburgh Arts 1973. Courtesy: Richard Demarco Archive.	50
3.2	Letter (page 1 of 2) from Richard Demarco to Oto Denes, Assistant Director, Federal Institute for International Co-operation in Science, Culture, Education and Technology, Belgrade, Yugoslavia, with reference to artists selected for possible participation in a proposed exhibition of Yugoslavian artists at the RDG, 1973, 26 December 1972. Courtesy: Richard Demarco Archive.	52
4.1	Ion Grigorescu, <i>Mirrors</i> , the artist's studio, 1975. Courtesy: Ion Grigorescu.	63
4.2	<i>Life without Art</i> , Constantin Flondor's Studio, Timișoara, 1984. Photo: Iosif Király. Courtesy: Iosif Király.	67
4.3	Doru Graur, <i>The Sport Centre</i> , house pARTy, 1987. Courtesy: Doru Graur.	68
5.1	Constantin Flondor, Iosif Király, Doru Tulcan, <i>Contact – Trans Idea</i> , Mail Art Performance, Timisoara, 1982. Courtesy: Constantin Flondor, Iosif Király, Doru Tulcan.	76
5.2	Decebal Scriba, <i>The Gift</i> , public performance, 1974. Courtesy: Decebal Scriba.	85
6.1	Tomislav Gotovac, <i>Zagreb, I love you!</i> , 1981. Photo: Ivan Posavec, Collection Sarah Gotovac. Courtesy: Tomislav Gotovac Institute, Zagreb.	89
6.2	Tomislav Gotovac, <i>Newspaper Vending action</i> , 1981, Collection Sarah Gotovac. Courtesy: Tomislav Gotovac Institute, Zagreb.	95
7.1	Alex Mlynárčik, <i>Eva's Wedding</i> , photo-documentation of the happening, Žilina, 1972. Photo: Miloš Vančo. Courtesy: Slovak National Gallery.	107
7.2	Alex Mlynárčik, <i>Eva's Wedding</i> , photo-documentation of the happening, Žilina, 1972. Photo: Miloš Vančo. Courtesy: Slovak National Gallery.	108

8.1	Strikers on a wall of the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk in August 1980, photographer unknown, Fot. Ośrodek KARTA, Warsaw.	120
10.1	<i>No title</i> . This photograph documents Andris Grinbergs's happening <i>The Green Wedding – Summertime</i> (<i>Zaļās kāzas – Summertime</i>), 1973, Atis Ieviņš' Private Archive. Courtesy: Atis Ieviņš.	143
10.2	<i>Cave Paintings</i> (<i>Alu zīmējumi</i>), 1973/1974, Atis Ieviņš' Private Archive. Courtesy: Atis Ieviņš.	147
11.1	Milan Knížák, <i>Stone Ceremony</i> , 1971. Courtesy: Milan Knížák.	153
11.2	Lubomír Ďurček, <i>No. 25 from file RUSOVCE. Crossgeneration friendly meeting by the lake</i> , 1978. Courtesy: Lubomír Ďurček.	160
12.1	Sanja Iveković, <i>Un Jour Violente</i> , Bologna, 1976. Courtesy: Sanja Iveković.	173
12.2	Natalia L.L. at an LGBT rally in New York City, 1977, holding an image from the <i>Consumer Art</i> series. Courtesy: Natalia L.L. and lokal_30 Gallery, Warsaw.	177
12.3	Orshi Drozdik, <i>Nude/Model</i> , Budapest, 1977. Courtesy: Orshi Drozdik.	178
13.1	Raša Todosijević and Marinela Koželj, <i>Drinking Water</i> , performance, April Meeting, Student Cultural Center, Belgrade, 1974. Photo: Marinela Koželj.	188
13.2	Cover of <i>Studentski List</i> , 1981. Photo: Mijo Vesović, Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, Archive.	197
14.1	Dóra Maurer, <i>Bird and Image Story</i> (1997), 1999. Photo: Miklós Sulyok. Courtesy: Dóra Maurer.	209
14.2	Judit Kele, <i>I Am a Work of Art</i> , 1979–80, installation view at the exhibition <i>Agents and Provocateurs</i> , Institute of Contemporary Art Dunaújváros, Hungary, 2009. Photo: Miklós Klotz.	215
15.1a and b	Karla Woisnitza, <i>Face Painting Action</i> , 1978–79, 2 Photo Collages, 40 x 30 cm (with Marie-Luise Bauerschmidt, Sabine Gumnitz, Monika Hanske, Christine Schlegel, Cornelia Schleime, Angela Schumann, Karla Woisnitza), private archive: Karla Woisnitza. Courtesy: Karla Woisnitza.	225
16.1	Janez Janša, Janez Janša, Janez Janša, <i>Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav on Mount Triglav</i> , 2007. Photo: Gaja Repe. Courtesy: Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana.	245
16.2	Irina Bucan, <i>Auditions for a Revolution</i> , 2006. Courtesy: Irina Bucan.	248

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Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere is to be viewed as a historical phenomenon and is accessible today mostly through documents. The documents we had been dealing with were made available either by the artists themselves or by archives, collections and other institutions focusing on East European art history. Both of us are thankful to all of these parties, whom we consider to be partners in contributing to a better understanding of the second public sphere's history.

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Katalin Cseh-Varga and Adam Czihak



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Introduction

Katalin Cseh-Varga and Adam Czirák

The Hungarian visual and performance artist El Kazovszkij talks about her experience of entering the second public sphere as if it had been a *rite de passage*, an initiation that went hand in hand with the transformation of her world view, aesthetic conceptions, and social status. She experienced this transition during the first encounter with Péter Halász's famous apartment theatre in Budapest at the beginning of the 1970s:

You could only approach them with the help of a friend. The “entrance ticket” was a connection as well. I got here by chance – on one occasion, a friend of mine, who attended almost every performance, invited me to come along. Even the way we got in was exciting. It started with the invitation, and it was already underway as you entered the house and, along with others, you slowly made your way towards the door of the apartment. Your “entrance ticket” almost turned you into a conspirator.

(Kazovszkij 1991, p. 38)

The story recounts a singular event, indeed an induction, which, though not necessarily random, was by no means bestowed on each and every participant. Kazovszkij describes a spatial and cultural transition that at the same time has political and epistemological consequences. A new horizon opens up for her beyond the communication system of 1970s Hungary, which was regulated and controlled by the state and could be called the first public sphere. This public sphere was strongly influenced by socialist ideologies, in fact it was functionalized by them and therefore exclusively served the realization of the communist project. This official public sphere, the discourses of which were regimented, if not totalized, was kept under surveillance by the state and regulated by censorship, as well as bans on writing, display and performance. One could say that, with regard to its hierarchical order, the first public sphere was actually not public at all but simply a domain where the policing of discourse could exercise its power.

The official public sphere of art production

The formation of an ideologically one-dimensional public sphere in which the production and reception of art could take place in the so-called Eastern Bloc has a

long history. As part of an effort to establish socialist realism as the dominant ideology, after 1948 cultural life was strongly regulated. Thus the visual and performance artists who strove for artistic autonomy in the satellite states of the Soviet Union inevitably became adversaries of the hegemonic art system. The starting point of the all-encompassing expansion of socialist realism, which until the 1960s was the only artistic style in Eastern Europe endorsed and legitimized by the state, can be traced back to the Stalinist Soviet Union of the 1930s. Socialist realism replaced the heterogeneous artistic endeavours of the Russian avant-garde and became the dominant aesthetic theory and practice in the Soviet Union. As an artistic ideology, it called for a radical break with tradition and the existing social conditions, in full accord with the nationalisation of private property.

The fact that this demand strongly resonates with the avant-garde desire to abandon the museum and emancipate art from “art history” is a paradoxical coincidence which made the avant-garde artists’ relations to the aesthetic principles of the Bolshevik party propaganda of the 1930s highly ambivalent. Already in the avantgardistic drive to “change the world instead of representing it” we can recognise a key slogan of Stalinist artistic agitation.

Despite these similarities between propagandistic and avant-garde ideas, a clear distinction was made in the Soviet Union and its satellite states between autonomous and ideological – that is, between nonconformist and social realist art – and this was justified by their differing stylistic intentions. The latter, in accord with party guidelines, proclaimed an antiformalist politics of representation that propagated the building of socialism and the performative creation of a reality not yet existent but in the making. One could say that the first public sphere was held together by an ideological project, the creation of a socialist consciousness, and this orientation had a far-reaching impact on the forms and the interpretation of art, including painting, sculpture, film and theatre arts. The governments of these states tried to use their artists for political aims, not considering aesthetic experiments worthy of support, and had a vested interest in maintaining the “dominance of the political discourse over the aesthetic one” (Franz 2002, p. 24).

In his groundbreaking monograph *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) Jürgen Habermas points out that the historical, social and ideological constellations of a given situation necessarily shape and transform the structures of the public sphere. Focusing on Western European societies, Habermas describes the transformation from a feudalistic public sphere of representation to a rational-critical public sphere of the bourgeoisie and its negative developments in the age of mass media (Balme 2014, p. 5). Habermas focuses on a period that is historically and geopolitically very different from late socialist Eastern Europe. A few decades later, feeling the need to respond to his critics, Habermas reflected on some of his widely discussed statements and admitted that he had previously neglected the “coexistence of competing public spheres and [did not take] account of the dynamics of those processes of communication that are excluded from the dominant public sphere” (Habermas 1992, p. 425). These two aspects, which are missing from the monograph, are relevant to understanding how public spheres function in any

society, regardless of whether it is based on socialist or capitalist values. Habermas's notion of the public sphere refers to a *forum for communication* that is structured and transformed by various mechanisms, e.g., the relations of power. In the paper quoted above, Habermas also touches upon the relationship between dictatorship and communication. In the classical understanding of totalitarianism, communication channels and contents are controlled by the state and therefore no "autonomous public spheres" can emerge (p. 454). While this formulation was directly linked to the fate of certain communist dissident, Habermas does not mention the fact that even within authoritarian structures islands of limited freedom can appear.

Nancy Fraser belonged to those criticizing Habermas for his bourgeois approach and for focusing only on the public sphere of a single class. Her concept of the transnational public sphere describes the public sphere as a conflictual battlefield of many publics which is heavily politicized (Fraser 2005, n.p.). While Fraser's arguments were developed for late capitalist societies (Fraser 1994, pp. 250–251), the observation that there is a plurality of public spheres is applicable to state socialism too, even though the politicized access to the public sphere was not always possible for the (artistic) practices of an alternative culture under socialism. In a chapter of the present volume Ileana Pintilie calls it "miraculous" that under one of the most repressive dictatorships of the 20th century, Ceaușescu's Romania, performance artists managed to establish their tiny islands of communication and creation despite the comprehensive censorship and discursive control. In this sense questioning the emergence of artistic production in the second public sphere cannot be put on the same level with Fraser's concept of democratic "plurality" or Michael Warner's idea of counter-publics, since the subject of Warner's study, the question of marginalized and stigmatized social groups on the periphery of society (Warner 2002, pp. 423–425) is closer to identity politics than to the problems of underground culture under dictatorship.¹

At this point we could agree that the public sphere is a *material/immaterial platform for communication and opinion sharing*, which in reality (and throughout its history) never existed in an ideal form of unrestricted participation. On the contrary, different opinions sometimes clash with no chance for compromise.² Some scholars of the history of Eastern Europe, however, have recently recognized how important it is to look at the diverse examples of public spheres in the former Eastern Bloc, but they mostly remain on the level of statements and offer no methodology or comparative approach. In the introduction to their book *Underground Publishing and the Public Sphere*, Jan C. Behrends and Thomas Lindenberger agree on the following hypothesis:

This volume shows that a liberal public sphere of the Habermasian type is indeed only one historical model, one serving as an ideal inspiring practical struggles for practical goals during the fight for civic emancipation against the privileges of the arcane powers of late absolutism. Many others have existed and continue to exist in the modern age. They have their own rules and produce their own cultures – like those of censorship and underground

publishing – but they also fulfill specific functions for different regimes. Different notions of the public and the private shape the political cultures of Europe. (Behrends and Lindenberger 2014, p. 16)

As the summarizing quotation from Behrends and Lindenberger has shown, there is an urgent need to review canonized discourses of the public sphere if we want to find proper access to public life in the different phases and regions of actually existing socialism. Unfortunately, there is no further discourse built on these inspiring ideas, and so our volume aims to take a thorough look at the regional, political, social, cultural and artistic layers of public spheres throughout Eastern, Central and South-Eastern Europe.

As numerous case studies will show, the phenomenon of the second public sphere exists across borders and has a yet unnoticed potential for reflecting on the experimental and alternative art scene. Beáta Hock and Angelika Richter, for instance, pay particular attention to a band of women performance artists who found the possibility of new forms of collective expression in textile workshops and experiments, which seems to be a traditional and apolitical art genre only at first sight. Miško Šuvaković describes different modes of “tactical networking” between institutional and neo-avant-gardist areas of Yugoslavian performance art which undermine the strict division between the first and second public sphere. Berenika Szymanski-Düll shows the extreme expansion of art practices in Poland by examining the dependence of the demonstrations and mass protests of the 1980s on their aesthetic and even theatrical dimensions in subverting the dominant social and cultural ideologies of the time. With this volume on Theatre and Performance Studies we would like to open a new forum for interlinking a precise discourse of the second public sphere with the event-based art forms that played a central role in the Eastern European neo-avant-garde.

Second public spheres

Shortly before 1989, the emblematic year of the system change, a special issue of the magazine *Social Research* was published that presented a wide range of theoretical positions on the idea of an independent society (Benda 1988) which might appear within the sociopolitical framework of late socialism. Sociological models and opinions from within Central and Eastern Europe, inspired by Václav Benda, Ivan M. Jirous and Václav Havel, were for the first time presented in a coherent form to an international (if only “Western”) audience. Participants invited for this particular issue had to reflect on four questions:

- 1 Do you think the term “independent society” is relevant and meaningful under present conditions in your country?
- 2 If so, what would you include as being the essential features of an “independent society”?
- 3 What are the immediate purposes of the independent activities and organizations thus conceived?

- 4 What are the long-term implications and possible consequences of such an “independent society”?

(Skilling cited in Benda et al. 1988, pp. 212–213)

Turning towards his essential concept of a “parallel polis,” Czech political activist and mathematician Václav Benda argued that its main goal is “to tear down or corrode these miniature iron curtains, to break through the communications and social blockades” (ibid., p. 218). Benda also emphasized that the parallel polis exists *beside* the official sphere and totalitarian regimes cannot prevent its existence. Slovak philosopher Milan Šimečka, another contributor to this inquiry, articulated his idea about how “independent thinking/culture” is developing: as a reaction to repressive dynamics in socialist societies it is opposed to their monolithic structure, it represents plurality and sometimes it emerges spontaneously (ibid., pp. 222–226). At some point, the characteristics of this independent society begin to resemble Jirous’s “second culture,” a concept first designed to describe the music underground. The Czech poet’s notion of a second culture stands for a creative one, which is “not dependent on official channels of communication, or on the hierarchy of values of the establishment” (Jirous cited in ibid., p. 212).

If we start thinking about the notion of the second public sphere, the aspects listed above seem familiar. The second public sphere is usually perceived as a Cold War phenomenon typical in the Soviet influence zone representing unofficial activity. However, the historical situation and its explanations are far more complex than this. As the contributors of the special issue of *Social Research* showed, if one considers the sociological reflections on alternative forms of culture existing parallel to authoritarian rule, a more detailed image of sociocultural phenomena appears which is opposed to the cliché of a Cold War dichotomy. The differentiation of public spheres in actually existing socialism is important not only because it enables us to question the idea of a state regarded as a “control freak” and to understand the atmosphere in which a given artwork was produced or presented. To reconstruct the exact functional mechanisms of public spheres in the late socialist era, we need to rethink the categorical distinctions between official and unofficial or legal and illegal. As the following argumentation will demonstrate, the first and the second public sphere are both umbrella terms that are suited to describe the post-totalitarian condition³ and its art production.

Another necessary step is to get to the bottom of the phenomenon called second public sphere, which we take as the fundamental focal point of the present publication. Without presenting an in-depth genealogy of it, it is necessary to reflect on the notion as it was understood in late socialism. It is our conviction that the possibility of developing a *limited forum for autonomous communication* in Eastern, Central and South-Eastern Europe originates from the emergence of communist rule throughout the region. In order not to lose sight of a *regional perspective*, we prefer to explain the phenomenon of the second public sphere by incorporating theoretical and methodological considerations stemming from the region and the era.⁴ The specific features of the second public sphere were described by many intellectuals, philosophers of Eastern European origin who reflected on secret activities and clandestine existence.

Václav Havel is using the notion of parallel culture to describe a segment of the public sphere that avoids state-controlled media and information channels. Havel stresses the point that stereotypes and superficial knowledge about the inner dynamics of parallel cultures may result in an overestimation of this sphere (Morganová 2014, p. 27). It would be a mistake to romanticize the parallel culture and to depict it as something heroic. As Maja and Reuben Fowkes show in the closing chapter of this volume, in which they touch upon re-enactments of historical East-European performances after 1989, a contemporary perspective on the history of performance art should not be limited to “mythologizing or sacralizing” its legacy in the second public sphere, but should instead be reflected and acknowledged, even today, as a renewable critical position beyond today’s neo-liberal art market.

Relatively late in the history of actually existing communism, Elemér Hankiss developed a concept of three different social models that referred to different forums of the public sphere under oppression. These three types of society are the first, the second and the alternative society. The first one is characterized by vertical organization, top-down effects of power constitution, state property, centralisation, dominance of politics, over-ideologization, transparency and legitimacy. The second society is slightly opposed to this model. But the third type, the alternative society, is the complete opposite of the first one: horizontal organization, bottom-up effects of power constitution, autonomy of economic and social participants, balance of differentiation and integrity (Hankiss 1989, pp. 110–119). The alternative society is the ideal form of social structure into which actually existing socialism should transform or which should follow a possible collapse of the communist system. Despite its potential, it remained a utopia; but as a model it rests upon the experiences made with the second society and its public sphere: how could the in-betweenness of this temporary condition be translated into guidelines for a democratic social structure? If we take a closer look at the second society and its public sphere, it becomes clear that neither of them is separable from the first society and its public area of influence. As Hankiss himself stated, the first and the second public spheres are interconnected and there is a parasitic relationship between them; one cannot exist without the other (*ibid.*, p. 119). This observation supports our earlier argument that the different layers of the public sphere function as a whole, and this is precisely the reason why the first public sphere, dominated by a totalitarian order, generates an alternative culture, which in turn is not able to unfold its strategies without an opponent. Performance artists were able to subvert the unquestioned rituals of socialist everyday life.

In her case study, Andrea Bátorová sees in artistic interventions, like that of Eubomír Ďurček’s actions at a parade on May 1 (*Mechanical Views. May 1 [Mechanické pohledy. 1. máj]*, 1980), unconventional and confusing views on the political representation of socialism; Amy Bryzgel explains the clashes between the first and the second public sphere by analyzing Sanja Iveković’s performance *Triangle (Trokut, 1979)*, which was carried out on her balcony, a threshold between private sphere and official publicness. An even more radical intervention becomes apparent in Andrej Mirčev’s interpretation of Tomislav Gotovac’s naked walk in Zagreb called

Lying Naked on the Pavement, Kissing the Pavement (Zagreb, I Love You!) (*Lezanje Gol Na Asfaltu, Ljubljenje asfalta [Zagreb, Volim Te!]*, 1981). In this the author precisely identifies how Gotovac exposed the first public sphere's exclusion mechanisms regarding gender, labour and art.

The argument that the first and the second public spheres are interwoven is supported by further Hungarian theoreticians, such as Miklós Haraszti and György Konrád. Haraszti draws our attention to the twofold character of the second public sphere:⁵ on the one hand it has a certain unconscious quality to it, an introverted nature; on the other hand, however, it has a radical potential due to the direct contact with its audiences, which is why it is often oppressed by official politics, as in the case of counter-publics (Haraszti 1986, p. 84). Radical artworks or other cultural products might be pushed into the domain of the second public sphere because some organs of the regime are not able to decode them and fear that they could possibly have unforeseeable effects (Haraszti 1982, p. 79). This was also the case in the first Hungarian happening, which according to Kata Krasznahorkai challenged the authorities' ban strategies, since happenings were a yet unknown way of producing meaning and generating art collectives in the late 1960s. In the chapter, Krasznahorkai argues that instead of prohibiting strange art events, the censors ordered special agents, well educated in contemporary art practices, to decode them and to relate them to the emerging performative genres.

Konrád reflects on the close connection between the two spheres of publicness and also argues that the second public sphere, unlike counter-publics, *extends the possibilities of a given public system* and does not necessarily aim to change it (Konrád 1979, p. iii). The second public sphere is a "byproduct" of the socialist order. Its separation from a system of ideological rules is not helpful because the mechanisms and strategies of an alternative culture can only unfold within or parallel to but not always against the first public sphere.

The manifestations of the second public sphere are acts or experiments to create an autonomous forum for cultural production. The idea of autonomy as a central element of the second public sphere comes up in a number of significant discourses. Here we could once again mention Hankiss or Konrád, but Zsuzsa Hegedűs was also dreaming of a "self-creative society" emerging out of a parallel cultural environment with a "genuinely new capacity to *invent and realize*, and therefore to *choose*, its own *futures* in an *autonomous manner*" (Hegedűs 1989, p. 31). But at this point it is necessary to remind ourselves of Havel's warning against the mystification of the second public sphere, since the domain of alternative culture developed its own dominant figures and hierarchies.

It is not easy to find an adequate definition for a phenomenon with such a wide range as the second public sphere. As an umbrella term for various unofficial activities and strategies, its relevance and manifestations are manifold; they change according to the different stages of the late socialist era. The second public sphere is a (pseudo-)autonomous arena of communication and opinion sharing, a network and cultural production of individuals and groups, which existed in addition to a dominant public sphere, with which it was interconnected. It needs to be stressed

that the second public sphere has an extremely fluid structure which eludes institutionalization or static integration into a dogmatic system (Cseh-Varga 2018).

Plurality and fluidity, however, manifested themselves not only in the way artists communicated with each other and organized their networks but also in their aesthetics. The principles of representation imposed by the state indiscriminately excluded all alternative styles from the discourse regardless of their aesthetic vocabulary. Thus, artists that did not draw on the topics of socialist everyday life either had to be prepared for the sanctions provoked by their rebellious actions or had to flee into a sort of “inner emigration” and unite as representatives of fundamentally differing aesthetic programs, regardless of whether they were advocates of conservative or (late) modernist, conceptual or progressive movements. In this context, Hungarian sound artist Endre Székárosi talks about an ideological distance to the official art scene, a “difference determined or justified sociologically which, instead of producing an alternative, avant-garde culture, brings forth an underground or counter-culture which by no means has to be radical in aesthetic terms; there are many examples of its conservatism” (2006, p. 80). Underground artists turned away from figurative and thematic painting, the didactic narratives of fiction, and the mimetic methods of representation which propagated automatized ways of identifying with a role originating in Stanislavski’s practice, and ended up in isolation – or as Boris Groys puts it, in “the prison of time” (1992, p. 31).

However, the ontological connotation of Groys’s vividly formulated “prison of time” should not confuse us. The second public sphere ought not to be misunderstood as a fixed state of topological frames or static communities. In fact it refers to a network of human relations which generate their spaces and audiences themselves. As Christopher Balme notes, “the public sphere is almost never a real space but rather a set of rules enabling debate and discussion to occur” (Balme 2014, p. ix). Since the state-controlled cultural institutions did not provide venues where neo-avant-garde artists and their addressees could have met, it is no wonder that these outsiders tended to resort to the same kind of spaces over and over again. As Laine Kristberga, Cristian Nae, and Adam Czirak show in their case studies for the present volume, basements, private apartments or abandoned natural sites served in Latvia, Romania, and Czechoslovakia as preferred areas for performative, fleeting and hard-to-control forms of artistic articulation, as opposed to material or durable artefacts. The claim that communication and art production in the second public sphere were open is also substantiated by the usual terms used to describe the underground scene: “oppositional, dissident, alternative, differently minded, parallel, non-conformist, autonomous or independent” (Eichwede 2011, p. 20). The freedom of interpretation, the plurality of perspectives and the independence from directives of artistic ideology were the most important motivating factors for underground artists to refuse to participate in centrally managed art production and instead support themselves and their art by taking up private jobs.

One can take these restricted conditions of production as an explanation for why the protagonists of the second public sphere have developed so many creative and subversive artistic practices, and why they organized themselves in such an incomparably efficient manner. As the brief introductory remarks on our case studies

demonstrate, it is fascinating to observe what kind of artistic products popped up under “tolerant repression”, a “more liberalized, but still closely watched public sphere” (Fowkes 2015, p. 116). The art communities in Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR were connected with fellow artists in Yugoslavia, West Germany, France, North America, Latin America, and elsewhere. Dietmar Unterkofler’s paper demonstrates exactly this kind of complex international connectedness by providing insights into the participation of Yugoslavian performance and conceptual art at the Edinburgh Festival, as well as into the Bosch+Bosch Group’s event-based collaborations between internationalism and underground existence. Despite the differences in the ideological alignments, stylistic origins, and historical, social and cultural backgrounds of Eastern European artists, they thrived on international cooperation.⁶

Still, as we know, artistic freedom in the underground was ambivalent. The price one had to pay for the emancipation from an art system brought under state control was being subjected to punishments, persecution and control affecting even the private sphere. Artists had to accept that they were continually working against the background of restrictions and that they were to perceive themselves as somewhat ghostlike antagonists permanently excluded from the consolidated orders of representation. This is another reason why public spheres cannot be analyzed independently of each other and why the experiences of socialist everyday life affected artistic expression in the parallel culture too. In the performing arts, one can find a whole slew of emblematic and unique aesthetic motifs like melancholia, silence or reticence (Czirak 2012, pp. 76–111), and orality (Havasréti 2008, p. 212) as a form of invisible, undetectable art. The techniques of ironic exploitation and transforming official strategic patterns through subversive affirmation should also be mentioned here (Arns and Sasse 2006). We can conclude that different public spheres exist in relation to one another, they are intertwined – above all with regard to their antagonistic interdependence filled with conflict, but also with regard to the “double agents”, informants, and “dubious” artists that worked on the border of art scenes that were supported and art scenes that were forbidden.⁷

Performance art in the second public sphere

In a very general sense, the neo-avant-garde and thus most of the examples of event-based art discussed in this book represent a number of artistic variables of expression which, through formal and qualitative “rebellion”, turn against a dominant high modernism. Neo-avant-garde art could also be read as a re-interpretation of historical role models (such as the avant-gardes at the beginning of the twentieth century), as a direct or indirect political comment, or as an experimental, structurally built link to utopia (Cseh-Varga 2018). Just like the second public sphere, it is based on a subversive discourse with no strict compromise and represents an “uprising” against restrictive forces, including institutionalization.

As far as the visual arts are concerned, we can distinguish between two strategies of subversion in East-Central Europe. The first one can be located in institutionalized theatre art, and the second one in visual and performance art. In theatres there

emerged a politics of “double talk”: that is, a discursive practice which, despite the censored and strictly controlled repertory, enabled a separation of saying and showing, of textual reference and staged meaning. This representational tactic was a tolerated form of critique, provided it could be kept under regular supervision and control.

The second subversion strategy emerged as visual and action artists created a direct and concrete presentational method of theatrical showing outside the state-controlled forms of communication. The proliferation of happenings, performances and Fluxus actions related to an artistic effort aimed not only at opening a platform of dissent to criticize the maxims of actually existing socialism but also, and more important, at achieving the privilege of self-determination, causing radical disruptions in the social discourse and thereby creating an alternate universe of communication and sociality. In her chapter, Jasmina Tumbas argues that the very decisions artists made in Croatia and Serbia in the 1970s and 1980s, their willingness to be active individuals under a semi-totalitarian regime, resulted in critiquing socialist ideology.

But why were performative art genres forbidden? How can we explain Kristine Stiles’s diagnosis, which she made from a trans-cultural perspective? “Performance recovered the social force of art, and became one of the last and most effective modes of resistance to multiple forms of domination, a claim supported by the fact that performance artists throughout the world, from the 1960s to the present, have been the most frequently arrested and incarcerated artists.” There is certainly something of the protest, of the political, in the fact that performances ignore the imperative of realism and fictionalization, and are characterized by self-referentiality. By making their bodies the actual objects, performance artists were running the risk of having their very bodily existence itself censored and forbidden instead of their works. However, without intending to cast doubt on Kristine Stiles’s general observation, we would like to offer a few further points for consideration and investigate the question of what the specificities of Eastern European performance art are.

As we know, Western performance or body art developed in radical opposition to the principle of imitation in the theatre on the one hand, and the marketing strategies of the visual arts on the other. In Eastern and Central Europe, however, there was no art market at all. As a consequence, a heterogeneous conglomerate of artistic positions emerged which could not be defined by programmatic demarcations. Instead, event-based art connected artists that, first and foremost, found common ground through their exclusion from the first public sphere. They were led, however, by heteronomous impulses.

From a genealogical perspective, around the end of the 1960s the performative instances of creation and presentation begin to proliferate in the works of Eastern European writers and visual artists. In order to avoid censorship, they “performed” their works in the form of readings, spontaneous interventions, or in the framework of short-lived exhibitions often lasting no more than a couple of hours. The flexibility and ephemerality of these events helped them to avoid the danger of censorship. This, however, is only one of the (functional) differences from the “West”.

Another specific characteristic of the Eastern and Central European performance scene is the emergence of a trend contrary to event-like performances. Many artists dismissed the trait of *liveness* and converted their body art actions directly into formats of documentation. Performance artists such as Tibor Hajas, Orshi Drozdik, Jiří Kovanda or Mladen Stilinović – and we could easily expand the list – realized a great number of unannounced performances exclusively in front of their cameras, and then circulated the photographs as manifestations of the ability to avoid censorship.⁸ The photographs attested to the ontological fact of having executed the performance, and on this account they could not be conceived as pure documents. Their performative surplus lies in the fact that they not only authenticated the action but also made it available for an audience for the very first time. In the history of “Western” performance art, the ontology of the event, that is, the phenomenal and non-reproducible nature of the staged body, was the focal point of artistic practice, so performance documentations were for a long time generally considered unintentional remainders of Live Art and only gained recognition in the 2000s.⁹ In Eastern Europe, by contrast, performance documents functioned as media. They were primary manifestations of actions and were assigned existential relevance from the very beginning. Whether we are discussing unrealized instructions or scripts, self-published texts such as samizdat reports, or performances enacted only for the camera, we have to accept that Eastern European performance art cannot be defined on the basis of the criteria of *liveness*. In fact, *flexibility* emerged as a unique feature of the performance scenes behind the Iron Curtain and provoked the creative dissolution of borders between genres, media, egocentric artistic positions and structures of the public sphere. The transgressive and, by definition, hard-to-define practice of Eastern European performance art is intimately interwoven with the structures of public spheres, which gave the actions a political dimension and determined their aesthetics as well. Even if the performances were personal acts, they always confirmed the existence of artistic networks and demonstrated the relative freedom of communication in the niches beyond the official public sphere. Exactly this is the point Roddy Hunter makes by exploring the art practices of networked communities across Cold War borders. His interest in horizontal distribution, transmission, and his reflections on the bi-polar conditions of the 1960s and 1970s leads him to a comparative analysis of Robert Filliou’s *The Eternal Network* and György Galántai’s *Telepathic Music* (*Telepatikus Zene*, 1979), Mieko Shiomi’s *Spatial Poem* series, and Jarosław Kozłowski’s and Andrzej Kostolowski’s *NET Manifesto*.

In view of the aesthetic alterity of neo-avant-garde actions, it is no wonder that, as Kristine Stiles pointed out, throughout its entire history Eastern European performance art was continually threatened by censorship, suppression and even obliteration. Since the use of violence, in the form of actions of self-harm or the highlighting of the artist’s corporeality, was regarded as outside the narrative of economic production and, thus, anti-ideological, the authorities saw a great danger in the performative art forms of direct self-presentation. With regard to the persecution of performance artists, one could speak of the double manifestation of censorship. In addition to the actions being stigmatized as progressive and banned, the

reviews and reports of art events were also controlled and put in the service of ideological propaganda. The example of official art criticism shows that the artworks or actions critical of the system were either not reviewed at all or described only superficially, which ensured that the subversive aspect of neo-avant-garde aesthetics could never be addressed. Descriptions and analyses of performances existed mainly in the records of the state security agencies and even there in obfuscated form. In addition, there was a third level of censorship¹⁰ in Eastern Europe – namely, the complete denial of the existence of censorship itself; the activities of a discursive police were kept secret.

Second public sphere: an analytical backdrop to investigating performance art in late socialism

The aim of the following case studies is to outline the concept of the second public sphere as a foundation for a comparative and transcultural analysis that seeks to explore the centres and peripheries of the Eastern European neo-avant-garde, especially performance art. This approach proved to be productive in the contributions presented in this publication, even if the structure and historical development of the parallel cultures in the so-called Eastern Bloc were heterogeneous. The period of the late 1950s had different dynamics and rhythms in each country, the processes of liberalization took place asynchronously (if at all), the manifestos and the aesthetics of various generations of artists differed significantly. Nevertheless, the simultaneous emergence and disappearance of subcultural scenes beyond the Iron Curtain mean and meant that there is a common denominator for the analysis of the Eastern and Central European neo-avant-garde. All the contributions of this volume support the argument that the concept of the second public sphere does have analytical potential and enables us to ask questions about the significance, political nature and impact of autonomous art under ideological repression, as well as to investigate the specific conditions of production of the era from a transnational perspective. With regard to its actual publicness, performance art was a central artistic medium in the second public sphere. Through the analysis of its sociological structures and the global recognition of its aesthetic strategies it is possible to get a differentiated picture of the avant-garde art of a geopolitical area. Despite the constant examination of the area, Eastern European performance has been marginalized over the decades, at least in discussions in Theatre and Performance Studies.

The following contributions offer an overview of the geocultural circumstances of Eastern European performance and action art, and discuss examples of art production with regard to the question of what the actual constitution of the second public sphere was. How could the protagonists of the second public sphere make themselves visible in the first public sphere? As the authors situate the history of the Eastern European neo-avant-garde in the era of the Cold War, they are consistently interested in the differences and similarities that characterized the roles of parallel cultures or counter-publics in the “West”, the “East”, as well as non-aligned Yugoslavia.

We divided the book into four sections. The first section comprises contributions that have a close focus on the dilemma of how to conceptualize and analyse the geopolitical (ideological, social and cultural) conditions of art production in the former Eastern Bloc from a national and (above all) a transnational perspective. While some of the texts emphasize the importance of international constellations and scrutinize the divided world order during the Cold War, others zoom in on the national level to look for the built-in asymmetries and paradoxes of state socialism. The second section of the present volume includes papers that investigate the relationship between performance practices and spatial dimensions.

Since performance art was almost completely excluded from the first public sphere, artists practicing event-based art were forced to look for alternative or underground spaces that were open to spatial experiments in a rather hostile environment. Performing in nature with minimalist gestures and actions; provocative nudity in public spaces, in cellars, at abandoned, unconventional locations; or turning urban demonstrations into events of theatricality are only a few examples that indicate the plurality of performative venues.

The third section opens up a critical perspective on the gender structures and conditions of art production in the second public sphere. (Proto)feminist and queer strategies in live art can be considered as the most critical examples of artistic explorations oriented towards the acknowledgment of subversive or utopian states of the gendered social body. The approaches taken up in the texts range from an indirect heteronormative critique inscribed into explorations of gender in art to an opposition against monolithic (sexual) order and the absent histories of performing women artists.

Our final section is a closing chapter reflecting on the case studies of the volume while providing an outlook into post-socialist performances in the region. Re-enactments seemed to be the most adequate forum for observing the engagement with the contested legacies of socialism, for performatively challenging the political, social and cultural leftovers of the pre-1989 era as well as the transformations that followed it, and for tracing the second public sphere's historical backlog and considering its potential reimplementation under the conditions of neo-liberalism and neo-bureaucratism.

Notes

- 1 Another important side note is that the second public sphere is not identical with a counter-culture or counter-publics. According to Hungarian sociologist Anna Wessely, counter-publics, just like counter-cultures, are the product of radical denial and seek to reshape social structures. The main goal of counter-cultures is to re-form the political system, since they are not content with small structural changes. Thus the integration of counter-cultures into a social, political system is not possible. This is the reason why the almost "aggressive" attitude of counter-publics has only little in common with the more adaptive nature of the second public sphere. See Wessely cited in Veres 2002, pp. 195–196.
- 2 This definition is very close to what Chantal Mouffe called "agonism", although this particular statement is not limited to late capitalist democracy. See Mouffe 2007, pp. 30–31.