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**Biography**

Amy Bryzgel is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Film and Visual Culture, School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK. She teaches courses on performance art and postmodern art, with a focus on artists from Eastern Europe, along with a course on Modern and Contemporary Russian Art. She has published widely on performance art in Eastern Europe, most notably her monograph, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester University Press, 2017), which is the first comprehensive academic study of the history and development of performance art in the region. She also published the first monograph on Latvian painter and performance artist Miervaldis Polis in 2015 with Neputns in Riga, Latvia. She has organised numerous performances and art events in Aberdeen and Scotland, and she is active on social media: follow her research on her website: [www.performingtheeast.com](http://www.performingtheeast.com) and on Twitter @PerformTheEast.

**Abstract:**

The relationship between performance art and the camera—be it the photographic or video camera—in Central and Eastern Europe is a special one. Because of the manner in which performance art developed in the region, remaining mainly an alternative form of art, artists preserved their work visually for a range of reasons: as evidence of it having occurred, as a witness to the event, for a future audience that could someday appreciate it, or to be sent abroad as mail art—one of the few ways artists could participate in international exhibitions and networks if they were unable to travel abroad, which they often were. Unlike in Western Europe and North America, where performance attempted to eschew the grasp of commodification, in Central and Eastern Europe, artists did not want their performative work to remain ephemeral. This article will demonstrate how documentation played a very important role in insuring its longevity, and argue that rather than creating performances to avoid commodification, artists deliberately used the camera to preserve these ephemeral acts, either for distribution at the time, or preserved as a record of the event. It will also show how artists developed innovative ways to integrate this essential tool, the camera, into their actions.

**Keywords:**

Performance art, Eastern Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, audience, ephemerality

*Against Ephemerality: Performing for the Camera in Central and Eastern Europe*  
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## **Introduction**

The relationship between performance art and the camera—be it the photographic or video camera—in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is a special one. At the risk of making a categorical statement, performance art in Central and Eastern Europe during the socialist period was almost always documented, and documented deliberately. Artists preserved their work visually for a range of reasons: as evidence of it having occurred, as a witness to the event, for a future audience that could someday appreciate it, or to be sent abroad as mail art—one of the few ways artists could participate in international exhibitions and networks if they were unable to travel abroad, which they often were. Unlike in Western Europe and North America, where performance attempted to eschew the grasp of commodification, in Central and Eastern Europe, artists did not want their performative work to remain ephemeral. This article will demonstrate how documentation played a very important role in insuring its longevity, and argue that rather than creating performances to avoid commodification, artists deliberately used the camera to preserve these ephemeral acts, either for distribution at the time, or preserved as a record of the event. While this may have been the impetus for documenting the work, artists developed innovative ways to integrate this essential tool, the camera, into their actions. In the following text, I employ a comparative method to demonstrate the varying manners in which documentation of ephemeral art forms in CEE, with either the photo or video camera, enjoyed a symbiotic relationship. I compare the use of the camera by artists across region, both before and after the system change, to highlight the unique relationship between the artwork and the lens it is performed for in Central and Eastern Europe.

Performance art, the genre of live art practices, wherein artists use their bodies or the bodies of others in creative expression, emerged in CEE at the same time as it appeared elsewhere around the globe—primarily in the 1960s, in the form of happenings, events, and actions.<sup>1</sup> We are well aware of the narrative, in Western Europe and North America, that performance art, in many instances, developed as a way of resisting commodification, yet in the circulation of images, videos and texts of performances, it failed in this aim (Lippard and Chandler 1968). In Central and Eastern Europe, performance art emerged in the context of the command economies of communism. While markets existed, insofar as people still bought and sold goods, *consumerism* was not as robust as in Western Europe and North America.<sup>2</sup>

Artists in Central and Eastern Europe seeking to develop their artistic practice beyond the state-prescribed socialist realist propaganda—which was, admittedly, adhered to haphazardly and to differing degrees in different parts of the region—or the anodyne socialist modernism, the purely formalist art that was tolerated in places such as Poland and Yugoslavia,<sup>3</sup> often turned to ephemeral art forms such as performance and conceptual art, as these genres offered a free zone for artistic expression. Insofar as performance art was not acknowledged by the state as a legitimate art form, there were no restrictions regarding its creation, other than the fact that it wasn't officially allowed or considered to be art if it did take place. Consequently, artists working in these genres felt free to experiment and develop their work utilizing this form of expression, so long as it was kept, for the most part, private (see, for example, Morganová 2014). Indeed, in many areas of Eastern Europe, performance art was usually only enacted for close friends, in private spaces such as studios or alternative venues, such as clubs or at exhibition openings, or in the countryside. In some instances, it was *only* performed for the camera, in the artist's studio (see Pintilie 2002 and 2013, 33).

Artists were conscious of the of the manner in which the camera could preserve their ephemeral work. For example, Romanian artist Iosif Király stated that he photographed his actions for a “future audience” (Király 2014), unsure of whether it would be seen or not beyond the actual event. Slovak artist Peter Meluzin talked about the need to document his performances because this made it possible to show the work in future, not to mention enabling future generations to see it. In his words, “without the photographs, these works would be unverified” (Meluzin 2012). Similarly, Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi commented that he documented his work and the work of his colleagues in order to have a “witness” to it, stating that in many instances, he “never thought it would be seen” (Perjovschi 2014). Polish artist Zofia Kulik made a similar statement in 2012, also referring to the documentation as a form of a “witness” to the event (Kulik 2010). When asked why he documented an early work of performance art that he was involved with in Latvia, painter Raimonds Līcītis commented that the artists “decided that it was an important moment, and it needed to be captured and preserved in that way” (Līcītis 2009). In fact, art historians Ivana Bago and Antonia Majaca have characterized the audience for performative work during the communist era as a “delayed” one, insofar as the reception for these works of art was primarily to be found among future viewers, not among the general public present at the time of the work’s creation. With regard to artists working in Croatia in the 1970s, Bago wrote that they “found themselves in an empty space...where the products of their work were neither destined for the market nor desired by socialist society, and could only be stored for a delayed audience, for future use” (Bago 2012, 136). Because performance art was not a genre legitimized by state institutions or historicized in mainstream publications, it often lacked a local audience, outside of the small, select one for whom it was enacted. In some cases it had a wider audience internationally, as much photo documentation of performances was sent abroad as mail art, enabling artists to participate in international exhibitions without being physically present themselves.

For Peggy Phelan, one of the first art historians to theorize the relationship between documentation and ephemeral art, her focus was on the experience of embodiment in performance, as opposed to the descriptive aspect of its documentation. In 1993, Phelan described the “ontology” of performance art as that which could not be commodified, insofar as in its ephemerality it resisted this, in particular the “relentless acquisitive drive of capitalism” (Phelan 2003, 294). Although Phelan did not write about performance artists from CEE, she is often cited by historians of performance art from the region as one of the few theorists writing about documentation.<sup>4</sup> Writing in the 1980s and early 1990s, at a time when the Left was, in Phelan’s words, “obsessed with identity politics and visibility politics,” in 2003 she commented that her earlier text offered a cautionary tale to those focused on visibility: “if one could increase the range of representation’s demographic addresses, capitalism could add more markets to its expanding stage” (Phelan 2003, 294). While it is easy to criticize Phelan for her strict view of the live act, perhaps there is a lesson to be learned with regard to performance art in Central and Eastern Europe, because in many ways, we can witness the manner in which the “relentless acquisitive drive of capitalism” played out in relation to the documentation of performance art works from the 1960s-1980s when they hit the international art markets in the 1990s.

For example, Pavlína Morganová has commented on the significance of both the photographic and textual documentation in Czech artist Jiří Kovanda’s work from the 1970s, describing the consistent manner in which the artist dedicated one sheet of paper to record each action, titling and dating it, and sometimes including a short description, photograph, or series of photographs. In her words, “today these sheets of paper, which he once carried around in well-worn folders to show those interested, are viewed as artifacts. Indeed, they possess a certain aesthetic quality since Kovanda conceived of them as a kind of collage...Yet they were only records and documents, proof that the action took place and the methods used” (Morganová 2014, 33). She further noted the fact

that in the post-communist period, when artists became aware of the commodity value of these documents, artists “changed their perception” (Ibid) of this documentation, coming to regard it more as a work of art than a mere record of events. Just as the documentation of performance art in the West became commodified, through the circulation, exhibition and selling of these visual records, artists in Eastern Europe faced a similar situation upon entering the art market in the 1990s.

But it must be remembered that documentation was not simply an end in and of itself. There were a number of artists who employed the camera quite deliberately in their artistic experiments as a sort-of creative partner. The camera, for artists such as Tibor Hajas, Natalia LL, KwieKulik, Sanja Iveković and Dalibor Martinis, was integral to the live work and the artists utilized it as a co-creator of the piece, without which the work could not exist. There are also instances in which artists enacted performances quite deliberately *for* the camera, meaning that these were performances in the truest sense of the word—planned, deliberate and calculated to present a particular image, be it of a free and open society in the Baltic countries of Estonia and Latvia in the *perestroika era*, as seen in the work of Siim Tanel-Annus and Miervaldis Polis, or to create the image of dissidence, or ambiguity, for example, as witnessed in the performances of the Slovenian rock group Laibach.

### **Issues of Visibility Under Totalitarian Rule**

During times when the system in CEE was totalitarian and surveillance comprehensive, the greater the visibility of the artists engaged in experimental practices was, the greater the risk they faced. Artists accused or suspected of illicit activity faced detention, interrogation and expulsion from the artist’s union. Consequently, at times when, and in places where, control was at its strictest, artists looked for other ways to stay under the radar. In these instances, the camera became their greatest tool and ally for not

only preserving their work and enabling it to have a wider audience, but also for creating it in the first place.

Perhaps the most iconic examples of performance for the camera were produced in the totalitarian environment of Ceaușescu's Romania in the 1970s. Two artists, who were friends and colleagues, employed both still and moving images to arrive at different solutions with regard to their performative work. Geta Brătescu and Ion Grigorescu both created performances in their studios that were documented with photographic or movie cameras. While Brătescu only produced a few such performances, being primarily a graphic artist who created drawings, collages and sculptures, Grigorescu was a painter and restorer of icons who produced a significant body of performative work, both in his studio and in the Romanian countryside.

For both of these artists, the studio was a sanctuary. Living and working in Bucharest, these individuals lived with the possibility that, within the public space, they could possibly be under surveillance at any given moment. It is for this reason that the private space of the studio, which was usually only visited by trusted friends, or the less scrutinized space of the countryside, offered the most suitable backdrop for the enactment of a performance. Street performances did take place in Romania, but they were rare under Ceaușescu, and rarer still in Bucharest.<sup>5</sup> Brătescu, in particular, has spoken of the significance of her studio to her work: "The studio for me...The studio is myself. It's like me. Like my house. [...] Like the kitchen. [...] I'm not uncomfortable in the kitchen. I like to do things gracefully. With a certain elegance. And a certain beauty" (Brătescu 15:26-16:44). Brătescu and her husband built the studio in their house, in what used to be her mother's room; prior to that she had a studio at the School of Fine Arts. The studio, like her home, became a space of absolute freedom, and offered a place for her to create outside of any institutional requirements that might have governed her working in a studio at the art academy. Likewise, Grigorescu engaged in what some might consider—and certainly

what the authorities would have considered—subversive activity in his studio, namely, his short performance and film *Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, in which he wears a mask of the country's leader in order to engage in the titular “dialogue” with him.

In *Dialogue with Ceaușescu* (1978), Grigorescu played two roles: first, he recorded himself, as himself, asking questions to the Romanian president. Then, he recorded himself as Ceaușescu, wearing a mask with a painting of the leader's face on it (which Grigorescu painted himself), answering those questions (fig. 1). He then superimposed the two rolls of film so that that, when viewed, it appears that Grigorescu is interviewing the leader of his country—a feat that would have been completely impossible in real life, especially with the questions he posed. This so-called dialogue is in fact two monologues, as there is no interaction between the two figures; it is also highly critical of the government, with Grigorescu highlighting the forced labor, oppression of farmers and totalitarian rule that characterized the country at the time. It is not simply that it was the 8-millimeter camera that made the meeting of these two individuals possible, but also the performance of the artist within the shelter of the studio. When Grigorescu revisited this piece in 2007 and created *Posthumous Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, he did so on the grounds of the Palace of the Parliament, the seat of Ceaușescu's government when he had been in power, and a symbol of his megalomania (it is the heaviest building in the world, the most expensive administration building to run, and thousands died during the forced labor used to build it). In the post-socialist period, the camera performs a similar function in making possible this interaction with a dead man, and preserving it, but it is now possible to enact this conversation in the public space, not only because of the fact that Ceaușescu is dead, but because the repression and terror that characterized his rule is no longer a consideration for artists.<sup>6</sup>

Similar circumstances exist in contemporary Belarus, under President Alexander Lukashenko, as did in Romania under Ceaușescu. Following a wave of protests in the



early 2000s, the government cracked down on public demonstrations, going so far as to ban applauding in public, lest the gesture be used as a signal of dissent. Marina Naprushkina, a contemporary artist and political activist currently living in self-imposed exile in Berlin, created a performance in Minsk in 2007, *Patriot*, which was only able to take place in public because it took place quickly, and was preserved with a video camera (fig. 2). After purchasing a portrait of Lukashenko in a shop, she proceeded to carry it home, under her arm, with his face visible. Similar to Grigorescu's performance with his country's leader, because of the ambiguity of the act, or the unusual appearance of the artist walking around the city carrying a large portrait of him—which could have been interpreted positively or negatively, as either voicing support of him or mocking him—the artist did not want to attract a large audience, lest she risk being stopped and, much worse, arrested. Consequently, the video recording of the piece was crucial not only to insuring its longevity, but in underscoring the danger of such an act. The performance *needed* the video recording because it could not utilize a live audience to witness it. Furthermore, the recording preserves and confirms a dangerous act, capturing the very fragility of such a moment, that could have been stopped by the authorities at any time.

The situation was similar in the 1970s in Czechoslovakia, the so-called “Normalization era,” during which the government was forced to bring the country back in line with Soviet policies, following the liberalization of the failed Prague Spring. Jiří Kovanda created subtle actions and interventions in the public space in downtown Prague, actions that were only possible because they were not perceived as actions or performances—let alone art works—as such. Like in Naprushkina's piece, the camera, then, became crucial, a tool or vehicle by which the performance could, in fact occur. For example, in *Theatre* (November 1976), the artist stood on Wenceslas Square, one of the main public squares in Prague, and made normal, everyday gestures, such as scratching his nose, running his hand through his hair, etc. (fig. 3). While it was not at all problematic

to enact these completely innocuous gestures in public in Prague at that time, it would have become problematic if the artist had attempted to define them as art, or even if he had drawn attention to himself loitering in a public square.<sup>7</sup> During this period, only painting and sculpture fell within the category of art, and only traditional forms thereof; performance art was simply not recognized as a legitimate form of art. Following Philip Auslander's claims that it is the act of documenting a performance that marks it as such (Auslander 2005, 26), here the documentation of these actions, then, is what marks them as *art*, separating them from the everyday activities of scratching and touching.

### **Documentation as Performance, Performance as Documentation**

Insofar as the act of documentation provided a vehicle for its longevity in CEE, the camera became a co-creator of the work of art. Some artists demonstrated an awareness of this fact by underscoring the *act* of documentation and highlighting it in their performances. The documentation then became part of the performance and integral to it, not merely an add-on or afterthought. Polish artists KwieKulik (Zofia Kulik and Premysław Kwiek), Hungarian artist Tibor Hajas and Croatian artists Sanja Iveković and Dalibor Martinis have all deliberately employed the camera and the documentation of actions in order to call attention to the manner in which the relationship between performance and the lens that observes and records it can in fact be a creative one. Furthermore, Polish artist Natalia LL is a photographer and conceptual artist whose performative work effectively plays with the camera, utilizing it as a partner. And Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović went so far as to proclaim the live performance as obsolete in the face of the camera. After he documented his performance *The Foot-Bread Relationship* (1977), he exhibited it as a photo-book in 1979 at the De Appel Gallery, showing it in lieu of the live performance. All of these artists focused on the artistic relationship between the camera and the performative in their work.

Polish artists Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek, who worked together from 1971-1987 as KwieKulik, put forth an expanded definition of performance art, which included: 1.) the preparatory work for the performance—the planning and conceptualizing of it—2.) the action or performance itself; and 3.) the documenting and archiving of it after the live event, in photographs, drawings and slides. They deliberately and methodically collected and preserved the documentation of their performances in an archive they created in their home, which they called the Studio of Activities, Documentation and Dissemination (PDDiU, or Pracownia Działań, Dokumentacji i Upowszechniania). Their studio, in the suburbs of Warsaw, was a meeting point for artists visiting that city from around the globe, and the artists prepared slide shows of their work to share with visitors. In this sense, the documentation and archive was used pedagogically, to provide a history of their activity in the form of a mini-art history lesson. This self-archivization was not uncommon in Central and Eastern Europe; with very few institutions exhibiting, collecting or documenting this work it became the responsibility of the artists themselves to preserve it, and it is only in the post-socialist period that these archives are garnering institutional attention. For instance, KwieKulik have plans to donate their archive to the new Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, under the condition that it be given a proper space for display—to be treated as an artwork in and of itself—and remain on view, so that it can perform its intended function.<sup>8</sup>

Hungarian artist Tibor Hajas had a symbiotic relationship with the camera, utilizing it as a partner in the creation of actions. His 1978 performance *Dark Flash*, which took place at the Remont Gallery in Warsaw, involved the artist hanging from the ceiling with his hands bound and his eyes blindfolded, while he used a camera flash to attempt to take photographs in the dark room. In another performance enacted at an opening for the exhibition “Exposition,” the artist sat blindfolded in the middle of a chalk circle, holding a camera, listening to instructions given by his assistants who tried to help him take a

photograph of another camera that was on auto-exposure, which was hanging from a rope (Fowkes 2014, 65). Hajas also had a creative working relationship with the photographer János Vető, and the two collaborated from 1975 until Hajas's death in 1980. Vető, in fact, stated that he learned from working with the artist. About Hajas, he said: "He was my master and friend...we complemented each other very well" (Beke, 1994).

These examples of Hajas's work recall the work of Vito Acconci, for example his 1969 *Photo-piece*, which performance theorist Philip Auslander has used as an example in his discussions about the documentation of performance art. For Auslander, this piece underscores the manner in which the very act of documenting an action is what makes it a performance. We can see the manner in which this plays out in Acconci's, as well as Hajas's, work: in *Photo-piece*, Acconci walked down the street carrying a camera in front of him, ready to shoot. He tries not to blink, a task at which of course he fails, so every time he blinks he snaps a photograph. With both artists, the act of taking the photograph is the action itself—the photograph is not a documentation of the action, it *is* the action. In Auslander's words, "it is only through his documentation that his actions exist qua performance" (Auslander 2005, 26), a statement that could equally be applied to Hajas's performance at the "Exposition" opening.

Edit András has stated that for Hajas, it wasn't just the possibilities of performance that offered the artist freedom, but also the photograph. According to her, "the only sites of freedom that remain for Hajas are his own body and the medium of the photograph" (András 2009, 123). Because of the fact that the artist was not able to live out his reality in an unrestricted manner in communist Hungary (he was arrested in 1965 and imprisoned for one year, following his participation in a street demonstration), photography offered the possibility of constructing a different reality, much like the studio did for Brătescu. According to András, Hajas believed that "the photograph was a medium of freedom and

the inverse of reality, instead of being a mere documentation of it” (András 2009, 121)—it existed, therefore, in the realm of art. This aligns precisely with Auslander’s views—that photography is more than documentation, it is part of the act—and demonstrates a further level of engagement with the camera, similar to that of KwieKulik. In both Hajas’s and KwieKulik’s work, the camera does not simply document the artistic process, it is part of the artistic process, and the document produced, and the archive in which it sits, is not merely a cursory document, but an artwork in and of itself.<sup>9</sup> In the particular socio-political circumstances in which these artists were working, however, photography was a necessity for these ephemeral acts to both exist and survive, unlike in the work of Acconci.

Hungarian art historian László Beke also highlights another important aspect of the use of the camera and flash with regard to Hajas’s work, commenting that the artist used a flash in darkened rooms because of the physiological effects on the viewer’s eyes, insofar as it would produce a momentary visual imprint of his work, and thus the artist’s body, on the retina. In Beke’s words, Hajas “required the audience participants to take home the image, burnt into their eyes” (Beke 1998, 105), thus involving the viewer physically in the piece. Performance art has often been described as offering a more visceral experience for the viewer, insofar as it often presents a live body in motion to the audience, as opposed to a static painting or sculpture. In capitalizing on the physical and physiological effects of photography with regard to the viewer, Hajas pushes that experience one step further, literally creating a physical reaction in his viewers, without physically touching or involving them directly. Here it is the camera, and specifically the camera flash, that makes that visceral experience possible. In the simple act of looking, the viewers become part of the performance.

Similarly, Yugoslav/Croatian artists Sanja Iveković and Dalibor Martinis were concerned with the act of looking and, more precisely, the politics and power structures of the Gaze. In 1977, Iveković created and executed the installation *Inter Nos*, a video

performance during which the artist appeared on the TV screen in the gallery, connected with her viewers via closed-circuit (fig. 4). She could only interact with the audience through the intermediary of the camera and its projection on the TV screen, however the interaction among attendees (the title translates as 'among/between us') was foregrounded in the absence of the artist. Once again, the camera both documents the performance and facilitates it, being an integral part of it.

A 1976 video work by Dalibor Martinis, *Open Reel*, captures a performance by the artist in which he became the film reel himself, as he took the videotape emanating from one reel and wrapped it around his head, which became the second reel (fig. 5). In *Video Immunity* (1978), the artist is showered by the stream of the video recording, as he replaces a showerhead with a video camera, and proceeds to bathe under it. In these pieces, the pervasive role of the captured image and the media are underscored, as the artist, and his actions, become one with the camera and the film, irrevocably intertwined with it.

It is also worth mentioning Iveković's well-known May 10, 1980 performance *Triangle*, during which she sat on her balcony, reading and drinking whisky, and pretending to masturbate, while Tito's motorcade passed by beneath. Although she was hidden from view by the wall of the balcony, the security services atop a nearby building must have seen her during their surveillance, radioed to the security services on the ground, who entered her building and knocked on her door, and asked her to remove herself (and her things) from the balcony. When the piece is exhibited, it consists of four photographs and a text, but there are no photographs of the "action" (by the security services) that ended the performance. The artist has very specific instructions for exhibiting the piece: a series of four photographs are laid out in a sideways T-shape, with the text describing the performance placed nearby. The images are as follows: on the left side, in a column from top to bottom: a view of the top of the high-rise building as seen

from the artist's balcony, with the security services atop it; Tito's motorcade on the street below; and a view of the police officers on the sidewalk beneath her building. The picture to the right, in the middle of the column, shows Iveković reclining in a lounge chair on her balcony, reading a book.

While the images document some of the action, they do not document all of it, in particular the movement of the security services into the building and the movement of Iveković as she left her balcony. The moment at which the guards entered her building and knocked on her door was the crucial moment that completed the so-called "triangle," yet is, for obvious reasons, not documented. Interestingly, Mechtel Widrich has pointed out that we can only take Iveković at her word that the last part of the action did indeed take place. The point is not that she may have made the story up, but rather what the documentation of the performance does and does not document, and what it facilitates. The documentation definitely records for posterity the placement of the guards, and gives witness to the idea that they could have indeed observed her from the skyscraper across the street. It also functions as a foundation for the climax of the performance, which remains ephemeral. Here, the documentation serves as a frame or placeholder for the key bit of action that completed the performance.

Also from Croatia, many of Tomislav Gotovac's first performances were deliberately and expressly created *for the camera*. Gotovac was in fact a filmmaker, not to mention film buff and enthusiast, with an encyclopaedic knowledge of film, who was known to frequent his local cinema several times per day and famously stated "as soon as I open my eyes, I see a film" (Janevski, 2014). Consequently, the artist thought more like a filmmaker than a performance artist, and this is reflected in his performative work.

Gotovac created one of his first photographic performances in 1960, *Heads*, a series of five photographs in which he dressed up and pretended to be an actor in a French film (fig. 6). These early pieces bear an uncanny resemblance to Cindy

Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), even though they predate them by nearly twenty years. Two years later, in winter 1962, he performed *Showing Elle Magazine*, on the snowy Sljeme Mountain outside of Zagreb. Gotovac removed his shirt and flipped through a copy of *Elle*, showing pages to the camera. The artist simultaneously objectified himself, by presenting himself half naked, while showing the objectification of a female underwear model on the pages. He had originally wanted to appear entirely naked, but, according to Darko Šimičić, curator of the Gotovac Institute and archive, because there were women present, he did not, out of courtesy. But it is clear that the performance was not staged for those present on the mountain. Rather, it was staged precisely for the camera in order to throw the camera's gaze back at itself and call out the camera that was used to objectify the bodies depicted in the magazine advertisements. By allowing himself to be objectified by the lens, he stands in solidarity with the underwear models.

The artist did bare all in subsequent performances, so much so that he earned a reputation for public nudity in his home city of Zagreb. His first streaking performance, however, took place in Belgrade, and once again was performed deliberately for the camera, as it was part of a scene in the film *Plastic Jesus* (1971) by Lazar Stojanović. For a few brief seconds, the artist ran through Sremska Street in Belgrade, naked, pumping his fists in the air, shouting "I am innocent." As Darko Šimičić recalled, the artist ran from one parked car to another, to avoid being detained or arrested (Šimičić 2013). But this public nudity formed the basis of the vast majority of Gotovac's subsequent performances, so it is important to bear its cinematic origins in mind.

On Friday, September 13, 1981, Gotovac built on that initial 16-second performance in Belgrade, when he walked down Ilica Street, one of the main thoroughfares in Zagreb, completely naked, shouting "Zagreb, I Love You!" The piece was entitled *Zagreb, I love you (running naked, kissing the asphalt)*, and he enacted all that is described in the title.



The piece was captured in several iconic photographs by Ivan Posavac before it was brought to a close by the police, who arrested the artist for public nudity.

Gotovac has spoken extensively about the significance of nudity in his work, citing childhood memories of family baths, the crucifix in his neighbourhood church where Christ appears half naked, and a statue that is part of a fountain in front of the National Theatre by Ivan Mestrovic, which depicts several naked, writhing bodies (Gotovac 2006, 11). (Incidentally, a number of Gotovac's subsequent performances, in which he appears naked, took place in front of *and in* this fountain.)

Given that public nudity was prohibited in Croatia and Yugoslavia—and in most Western societies—at the time (and since then), Gotovac most likely expected to be arrested or at least stopped during the action. Posavac, for example, knew well enough to give the rolls of film capturing the performance to a friend before the police would be able to confiscate it (Novak 2015). And the images he took are quite striking—a tall, larger than life bald man walking down a street filled with people in long pants and dark coats. One cannot help but wonder if part of the reason he staged these performances was precisely because of their mediagenicity. Michelle Maydancik has written about the Russian actionists creating street performances in Moscow and elsewhere in the 1990s, utilizing their shocking, extreme nature (walking around on all fours, naked, barking like a dog (Oleg Kulik), fornicating in public (Alexander Brener), spelling out swear words in Red Square (ETI)) precisely because of the fact that it was so mediagenic and would no doubt be documented by newspaper photographers and published in newspapers, thus institutionalizing and canonizing it, in the absence of any such institutions to do so at that time (Maydanchik 2014). One could think of Gotovac's performances in a similar manner, insofar as these performances lend themselves to being documented for their sensational nature. Given that Gotovac considered himself a filmmaker, it would not be surprising if he

was in fact searching for that perfect film still that would capture audiences and draw their attention.

The Slovenian rock group Laibach worked in a similar manner. Their performances and public appearances were deliberately staged for maximum effect, to raise more questions than they might answer. Their June 1983 interview with Jure Pengov, which was broadcast on the show “TV Weekly” in Ljubljana, was completely stylized—a performance itself—as they read from a prepared script. For example, when asked about their connections with Nazi ideology, they stated that

Laibach analyses the relationship between ideology and culture in a late era, shown through art. It discovers and expresses the conjunction of politics and ideology with industrial production and the unbridgeable divisions between this conjunction and the spirit. In designating this imbalance, Laibach uses all expressions of history. In its work, it practises provocation of the revolt of alienated consciousness and unifies warriors and opponents into an expression of the scream of static totalitarianism (Laibach 1983; 2009, 34).

Such a comment was not intended to clarify, but to obfuscate, and in fact the artists did not really respond to any of the questions with any sincerity, but that was precisely the aim. In their stage shows, they copied the iconography of military rituals and regimes. For example, their concert at Ljubljana’s Novi Rock (New Rock) festival, in September 1982, involved the lead singer at the time, Tomaž Hostnik, in the costume and posture of Benito Mussolini. The group gave an aggressive performance to a backdrop of films of military parades and speeches by Tito, Wojciech Jaruzelski<sup>10</sup> and Mussolini. When Hostnik was hit in the head by a bottle, he continued to play with his face bleeding, which was immortalized in what has become an iconic photograph. Laibach’s performances were

styled after images of Nazi rallies and Fascist parades, capitalizing on the power and intensity of those images to create their own powerful impact. Their image, then, is in some ways simulacral, as it performs a photograph, which is then captured in iconic photographs of the group, which create their image. Like Gotovac, Laibach used the cameras quite deliberately to garner a desired effect, one of shock and intrigue.

The relationship between the performer and the camera can also be playful, and if one word could be used to describe the work of Polish conceptual artist and photographer Natalia LL, it is precisely: 'play.' The artist's performative work involves both the artist herself, and models employed by her, playing both with and in front of the camera. Take for example her iconic photo and video series *Consumer Art*, which exists in several instantiations, in both video and still images, in which models engage with various food products, from phallic bananas, sausages and breadsticks, to the viscous puddings and creams, used for their resemblance to ejaculate. The women who bite, lick, suck on, and spit out these food products appear to be enjoying themselves, and were instructed by the artist to improvise playing with these objects. The results invite comparisons with pornography—which is also staged for the camera—the parallels with which are quite overt. In other films and photographs, such as *Artificial Photography* (1975) and *Artificial Reality* (1975, 1976), Natalia herself is seen posing before the camera in a comfortable chair, wrapped in a fur coat, wearing tights, shifting her legs from one armrest to the next, lying down, extending her legs, constantly changing position (fig. 7). In both of these examples, the camera becomes a captive audience—it cannot look away—the models and the artist engage with the camera in way a child would, acting silly and just plain playing around. These are not performances that are meant to be experienced live. It is only the camera that could witness and capture these individuals expressing themselves so unabashedly, without judgment. Their performance for the camera almost parallels the contemporary selfie and Instagram culture, where individuals who know that the camera is

watching strike a particular pose—sexy, silly, serious—that solidifies the manner in which they want to be seen at that point.

In a similar manner, Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović contended that the camera obviated the need for live performance. If it could be documented, then once the performance was enacted, it was enough to exhibit solely its documentation. This became clear in a “performance,” or interrupted performance, of *The Foot Bread Relationship* at the De Appel Gallery in Amsterdam in 1979. Placing a piece of bread against the wall, he moved his leg back as if to kick it, but stopped before he dealt the final blow to the loaf. He then exhibited the photo documentation of the original 1977 performance, which did involve him kicking the piece of bread until it broke, as a photo book, on stage with himself. In creating this book book, depicting a stop-action sequence of the stages of the performance, he turned the act of viewing the book into a performative act, thus reversing the traditional relationship between the performance and its documentation. Whereas previously the action of the performance was documented in photographs, here, the photographs of the performance, and the viewing thereof, constitutes the performance.

### **Performing for Foreign Cameras**

The idea that others were or would be watching performances by artists in Central and Eastern Europe outside of their immediate environs is brought to the fore by two examples from the Baltic countries of Latvia and Estonia, in which ‘foreign’ (German and Finnish) cameras were not only invited to film performances taking place in Riga and Tallinn, but in fact facilitated them. The collaboration between the artists and these outside observers meaningfully changed the relationship between the performer and the camera, for various reasons. In some instances, these Western visitors to Soviet Estonia and Latvia came with a preconceived notion of what they would see, and that therefore influenced what they wanted to see, effectively becoming directors of the scenes before

them. Likewise, their foreign credentials in some instances made possible that which would not have been even in the *perestroika* years of the Soviet Union.

In 1987, Miervaldis Polis was approached by a German Television director who was in Latvia to “film *perestroika*.” While it is not known what the director had in mind, it seems clear from what resulted was that they wanted to show not only everyday life in Latvia with the new freedoms that *glasnost* and *perestroika* brought, but the fact that there *were* new freedoms. The television director asked Polis to paint his head bronze and walk around the city, but the artist had the idea to “go all the way” and cover his entire head and hands in bronze paint, and wear a bronze suit, hat and shoes. The first *Bronze Man* performance took place in Riga in August of 1987, and was filmed by the TV crew and even shown on TV in both Latvia and Germany, however the tape of this program is now lost (although some video footage has survived) (fig. 8). After the artist fulfilled his commitment to the television crew, however, he continued the *Bronze Man* performances, partly due to his own interest, and partly also due to popular demand. The sight of a living statue, of a man in such eccentric dress, was so unusual and intriguing that the artist was asked to do it again and again. The Bronze Man was even invited to Helsinki in 1990 to create a performance with Finnish artist Roi Varra, who appeared as the *White Man*. He also appeared with an entire crew of Bronze Men in Bremen, when they were invited to participate in an exhibition of Latvian avant-garde in 1988.

The Bronze Man, who quickly became a media darling, originated with the idea of the German television director, who provided Polis with a space in which to expand on his initial concept. While it is impossible to say whether the Bronze Man would have existed without the support of the German television program, the artist did create a gold death mask in 1974, by covering his face with gold paint, having his partner photograph it, and then paint the image in *trompe l’oeil* style, as if it were a real object. Polis had always been fascinated by these forms of memorialization—death masks and bronze statues, for

example. That said, the *Bronze Man* performance only manifested itself when the German TV crew appeared in Latvia and presented the filming possibility to Polis.

A similar situation occurred in the context of Estonian artist Siim Tanel-Annus's work. Annus, who had been creating ritualistic performances in his garden on Mooni Street in Tallinn, on the outskirts of the city, since 1981, was approached by a Finnish television crew in 1987, who asked to film one of his performances (fig. 9). The artist was in agreement, although he told the Finns they would have to get permission from the authorities, which they did. Although Tanel-Annus's performances had grown more and more elaborate throughout the 1980s, the piece that was filmed by the Finnish TV crew was the most elaborate by far, and the artist used the resources available to him to expand on his performance—namely, he was able to use one of the camera dollies in the context of the performance, to move himself toward a paper wall that he had constructed in his garden, and he also made use of pyrotechnics, which would have been impossible without the intervention of the Finnish crew.

The presence of the Finnish TV crew also provided protection for the artist who, after the neighbors called the police regarding his “suspicious activity,” was taken to the police station. After a series of phone calls, the police found out that this activity had been sanctioned by Moscow, so they released the artist and also apologized—a rare occurrence in the Soviet Union. Tanel-Annus had had issues with the authorities previously, as a result of his garden performances, but this time it was the presence of the television crew that got him off the hook. His experience at the police station was even recorded and included in the documentary that was produced about Siim Tanel-Annus by the Finnish TV crew, and even romanticized, with Tanel-Annus cast in the role of the mythological hero, who triumphed over the KGB. In both the case of Polis and Tanel-Annus, the television crew and cameras could be considered co-producers of the respective performances.

## Conclusion

One of the first exhibitions to explore the relationship between performativity and the camera lens, the 2016 exhibition at the Tate Modern in London, “Performing for the Camera,” presented the perfect opportunity to showcase the unique manner in which performance artists in Central and Eastern Europe worked with the camera. It was, as it turns out, a missed opportunity, as in selecting three artists whose work is not exemplary of this distinctive relationship,<sup>11</sup> the curator of the show, Simon Baker, completely overlooked the symbiotic relationship between the camera and the performing body in CEE, and the manner in which this link is distinct from examples that played out elsewhere, primarily owing to the socio-political circumstances of life under state-sponsored socialism.

Although the exhibition was not intended to provide a definitive statement on the history of the relationship between photography and the performative, “Performing for the Camera” did reveal many of the unique ways that these two genres have interacted at least since the inception of the camera. In his catalogue essay for the show, Baker noted that “it is precisely the implication of the potential of the photograph to record actions, from the mundane to the spectacular, the implausible and even the impossible that has brought the camera into the practice of so many artists whose first priorities lie outside the exploration of photography as such” (Baker 2016, 13). In the context of communist Central and Eastern Europe, performance art, live art and actions *were* the “spectacular” and “implausible” events of the contemporary art world. Insofar as Baker notes that “photography has the capacity both to record and displace performances, shifting them from their origins in time and space, isolating and preserving individual acts” (Baker 2016, 18), this was the primary—although not exclusive—function of photography in relation to performance art in Central and Eastern Europe. It is thanks to the documentation of these performances that we now have a material history of performance art in the region, lest it

be lost in its ephemerality forever. Additionally, these performances now have the audiences that many artists craved at the time of their creation.

The “time capsules” that these artists left for future or delayed audiences have now been opened, and many of these artists achieved, at least in part, their aim of acquiring audiences for their work, sometimes in unexpected ways. For example, the private works enacted in the studios of Grigorescu and Brătescu were relatively unknown to the current generation of Romanian artists, who did not usually learn about their work in art school, but haphazardly, or through the Internet. Veda Popovici, for example, recalls learning of their work after she began her artistic practice, which includes performance, and felt bolstered to continue in this genre, knowing of these artistic precursors in her own country. It goes without saying that the material history of performance art in Central and Eastern Europe would be entirely lost, or at least reduced to a solely oral history, reliant on storytelling for its recuperation, if it had not been for the deliberate documentation of these works of art. While Phelan’s desire to focus on the experience of embodiment is admirable, it is a model that simply does not fit in a society where the drive was toward communism. Now that these former command economies have entered the global marketplace, the utility of Phelan’s argument in the region remains to be seen.

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## Figures

**Fig. 1.** Ion Grigorescu, *Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, 1978, Bucharest, film still from film performance. Courtesy: Ion Grigorescu.

**Fig. 2.** Marina Naprushkina, *Patriot*, 2007, Minsk. Video still. Courtesy: Marina Naprushkina.

**Fig 3.** Jiří Kovanda, *Theatre* (November 1976). Photographic performance in Prague, Václavské náměstí. I follow a previously written script to the letter. Gestures and movements have been selected so that passers-by will not suspect that they are watching a “performance.” Courtesy: Jiří Kovanda.

**Fig 4.** Sanja Iveković, *Inter Nos*, 1977. Courtesy: Sanja Iveković.

**Fig 5.** Dalibor Martinis, *Open Reel*, 1976. Video performance, film still. Courtesy: Dalibor Martinis.

**Fig. 6.** Tomislav Gotovac, *Heads*, 1960. Photographic performance. Courtesy: Zora and Sarah Gotovac and the Tomislav Gotovac Institute.

**Fig. 7.** Natalia LL, *Artificial Photography A*, 1975. Photographic performance. 5 pieces, 50 cm on 60 cm, original unique vintage prints on board. Courtesy: lokal\_30 Gallery and Natalia LL.

**Fig. 8.** Miervaldis Polis, *The Bronze Man*, 1987, Riga. Courtesy: The Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art.

**Fig. 9.** Siim Tanel-Annus, *Performance at Mooni Street 46A (Untitled)*, 1987, Tallinn. Courtesy: Siim Tanel-Annus.

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<sup>1</sup> There are some examples of Futurist and Dada precursors in Central and Eastern Europe, as there were also in Western Europe.

<sup>2</sup> There are a number of scholars, including myself (Bryzgel 2017), who have made arguments along these lines, with regard to experimental art from the region under communism, see for example (Piotrowski 2009) and (Kemp-Welch 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Socialist Modernism was a term coined by Serbian art historian Ješa Denegri in reference to the modernist, non-objective art tacitly tolerated by the Yugoslav government because it did not and could not support a political message; Piotr Piotrowski has made a similar argument regarding artistic production in Poland (Piotrowski 2012, 93).

<sup>4</sup> This is because, I argue elsewhere, that artists from the region considered themselves part of the tradition of performance art that emerged in Western Europe and North America, not separate from it.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Paul Neagu created public performances in 1968 on the streets of Bucharest, however this was really the last moment when such public actions were possible in that city (Ceaușescu became increasingly tyrannical from the 1970s). Ștefan Bertalan created a performance in the Kalinderu gallery in Bucharest in 1979, *I lived for 130 days with a sunflower plant*, and this was also a rare occurrence. Public performances, though still rare, could be witnessed more often in cities outside the capital, such as Timisoara and Oradea.

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<sup>6</sup> Brătescu, on the other hand, was wary of Grigorescu's politically-oriented work (according to Grigorescu, when she saw the mask in his studio, Brătescu commented that she didn't even want to know what he was doing with it (Grigorescu 2013, 283). Her photographic performances, such as the short film, *The Studio* (1978); and the two photographic series *Self-Portrait: Toward White* (1975) and *Toward White* (1975), were of a more personal nature, reflecting her connection with the studio space in which she created them.

<sup>7</sup> In 1965, prior to Normalization, an action by Milan Knížák, *Walk Through Prague*, was stopped by police on that same square when they witnessed the participants drawing a chalk circle on the ground and walking around the perimeter of that circle.

<sup>8</sup> The idea that the archive constitutes a work of art in and of itself is shared by Scots-Italian arts promoter Richard Demarco, who considers his archive a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

<sup>9</sup> Demarco's archive contains not only documentation of performances that he organized and works of art, but correspondence between himself and artists; reflections on trips to Eastern Europe, meetings with artists, and experiences of performances; and documentation of meetings and encounters that occurred—all of which, for him, constitute a life-long work of art.

<sup>10</sup> First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party from 1981 to 1989, chiefly responsible for the implementation of Martial Law on December 13, 1981.

<sup>11</sup> The artists were: Dóra Maurer, from Hungary, who did experiment with performative work but could not really be described as a performance artist; the Russian artistic duo Komar and Melamid, who did some performances but are primarily conceptual artists; and Ukrainian artist Boris Mikhailov, whose medium is photography and not performance.