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Poetic Histories: The Moving Body in Contemporary East-Central European Art

“It's about reliving an experience, and how to revive things without telling them...Also how our bodies remember. How it creates gestures. How, in a way, our bodies can sometimes remember in different and maybe more interesting ways than our minds do.”- Anri Sala, about his and Sejla Kamberic's 2011 collaborative film project *1395 Days Without Red*

This dissertation contends that contemporary East-Central European artists use the performed body to speculate about their experiences in a post-Cold War context. Central to my research is this conviction: the experiences of the Cold War, of official Communism, of the Yugoslav Wars are still embodied in our contemporary. History lodges itself in our very being, from the manner in which a fork is held to the basic movement of one's hands. Like the mnemonic repertoire of Stalin blocks or Trabis, that is architectural styles and material cultures that speak of Europe's past twentieth century, the body of the artist, of the viewer, of the everyday East-Central European displays its own mnemonic. As such, the Communist era and its various aftermaths are simultaneously history and reality, a composite of time exercised in our body memory.

Movement therapist Sabine C. Koch and phenomenologist Thomas Fuchs define “body memory” as the dynamic interconnection of our conscious mental life and our physical bodies. The body itself is capable of remembering. The body itself is the quintessential document of the past, of living memory, of history quite literally moving in the world. Body memories materialize through the enactment and re-enactment of local gestures, the choreography of ethnic bodies, the rhythm of life under siege. And because our bodies are in motion, because we imprint on history and in turn history imprints on us *as we are in motion*, it behooves us to begin exploring knowledge about the past as it is communicated and as it is assimilated with the moving body. This involves considering alternatives to traditional practices of writing, receiving, and interpreting East-Central European histories:

a means of historical consciousness that is expressly temporal, phenomenological, and corporeal. Contemporary artists who lived through the vicissitudes of wars and revolutions, shifting borders, dislocated political identities, and highly contested efforts to control the everyday social body have been drawn to the creation of time-based, body-oriented works that explore their recent histories.

I track this phenomenon as it has played out in performance, photography, film, and installation practices, each of which have provided ways for contemporary artists both to investigate the complexities of the actual, moving body and to re-imagine notions of time, of history and of the present. I attend to a selection of contemporary artists who deploy these practices for their own historical expressions, including Tomislav Gotovac (Croatian, 1937–2010), Marina Abramović (Serbian, b. 1946), Anri Sala (Albanian, b. 1974), and Šejla Kamerić (Bosnian, b. 1976). The unifying theme is the aesthetic role of a familiar gesture: the body running. My goal is to anatomize the poetic use of this body gesture to engage the physicality of the past, the memory-experiences within movement, and body knowledge as materials for historical understanding. To better understand the gestures of the artists examined in this dissertation requires an interdisciplinary approach to art historical scholarship, one that threads together human physiology, embodied cognitive psychology, phenomenology, and media studies. The resource base for my scholarship includes self-conducted artist interviews; personal and public archives; film and photograph documentation; and lectures and literatures by relevant artists, philosophers, and psychologists from the early twentieth century to the present. For this cross-regionally comparative study, my methodology transcends national, disciplinary, and linguistic divides to study an emphatically cosmopolitan practice of art- and history- making. To these artists, the cosmopolitan perspective begins precisely with the emotional, physical, sensual, visceral—poetic—performance of the contemporary body.