

Laine Kristberga

Art Academy of Latvia

Performance Art as an Intermedial Form of Art in Latvia in the 1970s

My PhD project deals with the genealogy and history of performance art in Latvia in the late 1960s and 1970s. I propose that due to the fact that this genre in this time period could not exist legitimately due to ideological strictures and a historically established arbitrary hierarchy of arts, it adopted the features of an intermedial work of art and appeared in different other media such as photography, silk-screens, painting and film. This versatility allows examining performance art through the medium specificity and especially the (re)mediation of performance by technology or brushstroke.

As regards my methodological and analytical approach, initially I looked at the various forms of media as different forms of documentation; however I realised that in the discourses of performance and theatre studies the mediated and the live have been considered fundamentally opposed, as, for example, manifested by the debate between Peggy Phelan (1993) and Phillip Auslander (1999). A much more useful interpretative framework to avoid such a polarization is the notion of intermediality, since it moves away from the theoretical polarisation of the live versus the mediated and provides a lens through which to explore the patterns manifesting across media within the theatrical frame. The 'inter' of intermediality implies a between space, and the intermedial exists between previously assumed ideas of medium specificity. It therefore extends the historical dynamic of hybridisation and cross-disciplinary fertilization (Klich, Scheer 2011: 70-71). Intermediality can be both a creative and an analytic approach based on the perception that media boundaries are fluid and recognising the potential for interaction and exchange between the live and the mediated, without presupposing the authenticity or authority of either mode (Klich, Scheer 2011: 71).

The migration from one medium to another, as well as from one author, to another raises numerous other questions. One such a question is the politics of form in the framework of Soviet ideology. Why, for example, nudity was accepted in one genre such as fine art photography or painting, but totally prohibited and considered pornographic in another?

Another question, which is probably interrelated to the previous one, is the question of appropriation. Since performance art in Latvia in the Late Socialism period manifested itself as an art of appropriation, it can be claimed that it was very postmodern. Yet, there was no theory of Postmodernism in Latvia in the Late Socialism period, and therefore this appropriation cannot be considered an intentional strategy applied by the artists. Rather, it was an outcome of ideological strictures – some kind of camouflage to bypass the KGB and censorship. Latvian art theoretician Eduards Kļaviņš (2009) suggests that it is possible to speak of certain mutations in the art of Late Socialism period, coining a term ‘the Socialist Post-Modernism’. According to Kļaviņš, such works of art possess a double code, when “the subject matter chosen by the artist may have been in line with the iconographic typology which was forced onto artists by Socialist Realism [...] at the same time being in line with the artist’s subjective orientation toward a world of democratic images” (Kļaviņš 2009: 104).

To sum up, it seems that both intermediality and appropriation were not part of the DNA of performance art in Latvia, but the result of the socio-political circumstances and especially the restrictions of artistic freedom.