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The Art of the Second Public Sphere or die zweite Öffentlichkeit

In my doctoral dissertation I am focusing on the documentation of performance art in Latvia (1969 – 1988),¹ where I examine both the tension between the evanescent quality of a one-off live performance and a need or requirement to leave a trace in the form of a physical object post performance as evidence or proof of the action's occurrence, and various forms of documentation, mostly focusing on photography. I propose that by looking at these instances as the cases of integrated or hybrid performance aesthetics provides richer grounds for contextualizing such artistic synthesis. The case study of my dissertation is centered on Latvian performance artist Andris Grīnbergs (b.1946), who through both his eccentric persona as a hippy and dandy of his time and the pioneer of performance art in Latvia epitomizes the clash between the dogmatic identity and body politics stipulated in the framework of the Socialist Realism and the freethinking detachment from the traditional disciplines of art so characteristic to the conceptual art in the West.

However, for the purposes of the Forum of Art History of Eastern Europe, I am proposing to look at one chapter of my dissertation – the various parallel art movements or disciplines either existing somewhere on the periphery of the official artistic canon or being discriminated or neglected by the system denying them the status of a professional art form or giving them a low place, if any, in the Soviet hierarchy of art in the late 1960s and 1970s. Such were, for example, amateur activities so promoted in the U.S.S.R., as the citizens had to be occupied in meaningful activities after work, too. These officially recognized and supported activities included amateur photography clubs, pantomime and movement theatre, and experimental theatre groups among others.

¹ The period has been set between 1969, which is the year when Latvian performance art pioneer Andris Grīnbergs (b.1946) created his first happening *Romeo and Juliet*, and 1988, when the exhibition *Riga – Latvian Avant-garde* was organized in West Berlin.

However, there were also other movements and activities that can be referred to as the “unnoticed art” or the “other” art. They often existed only within close circles of the artists, their family and friends, thus establishing some form of the second public sphere or die zweite Öffentlichkeit – here I am referring to the concept coined by Jürgen Habermas – where the totalitarian body of Homo Sovieticus could be subjected to various transformations: it could be painted, dressed and undressed and, consequently, turned into a body free of ideological messages. Such were the first happenings and instances of performance art, staged photographs and paintings, as well as the themed balls and carnivals organized outside Riga or any other urban environments.

Interestingly enough, some of the activities, which initially were intended only for the circles of friends, were exhibited and even praised in the first public sphere in the form of a document. Such were the photographs taken, for example, by the prominent and internationally² well-known Latvian photographer Jānis Kreicbergs. His photographs that documented the happenings created by Andris Grīnbergs were published in photography catalogues and exhibited in photo shows, of course, without indicating the original event, author or art discipline. Thus, performance art managed to reach broader audiences as well, despite the fact that they were not aware of this form of art.

In my discussion of this topic, I am proposing to look at the mutual relationship between the socio-political environment and ideological postulates, on the one hand, and the processes occurring in art, on the other hand. According to Latvian art historian Eduards Kļaviņš (2009), late Socialist Realism underwent specific mutations and phases of transformations, which can be identified not just in relation to the shifting political environment (the deterioration of the integrity of the totalitarian regime), but also in terms of the changes that were occurring within the local art world itself. Kļaviņš claims that two concepts can be applied discussing these works of art – the “Social Modernism” and the “Social Post-Modernism”. Though Kļaviņš attributes these two concepts only to the artists (and their works of art), who positioned themselves willingly or unwillingly as part of the system, in my paper I will examine, whether and how these concepts can be applied to the “other” art in the second public sphere.

² “Internationally well-known” refers to Poland, Czechoslovakia, German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the USA.