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## **Photography as performance and participation in the work of Kharkiv unofficial artists in the 1960–1980s**

In my dissertation project I attempt at critical appraisal of the work of several groups and communities of amateur photographers consolidated around the Kharkiv photo club in the 1960s–1980s—“Vremya”, “GosProm”, “Fast Reaction Group”. In the course of almost 3 decades they participated in an ongoing critical discussion, mostly about the premises of contemporary photography as an art practice. This discussion was performed by the weekly conversations at the photo club, but also by photography making intervened with the actual shared living experiences. Ekaterina Degot insists that, “The body of work of Kharkiv photographers, who all knew each other and incessantly discussed their own work, is a dialogue in structure. While in contemporary art it is expected that an artist progresses in relation to his or her earlier work, the [Soviet] unofficial artists progressed in relation to the work of other authors”<sup>1</sup>. In the three chapters of my dissertation I explore how their underground creative work empowered by a nonconformist lifestyle was transgressing the social and artistic confinements of the totalitarian Soviet state—in the domain of bodily practices, engagement with public space and production of alternative institutional systems.

In the first chapter of my dissertation I specifically address the presence and performance of human body in their work. It is true that in the postwar decades both in the “First” and “Second” worlds the discourses and practices of the body have started to evolve by leaps and bounds against the perhaps equally oppressive regimes—capital and colonialism in the West and totalitarian state in the East—but the character and the scale of oppression were of different nature in the two contexts. While in the West the body was reaffirming itself as “the subject in all of its peculiarities of race, class, gender, sexuality and so on”<sup>2</sup>, in the Soviet society a more

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<sup>1</sup> Екатерина Деготь, Харьковская фотография. Производство свободного времени, 5.6, №7, май 2013

<sup>2</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art. Performing the subject*, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p.11

general liberal agenda was at stake. The status of body in the Soviet society could be eloquently portrayed by the means of a late Perestroika anecdote, “There’s no sex in the USSR”, born out of a slip of the tongue of one of participants in the first Soviet-American TV-bridge in 1986. Responding to an American’s comment that advertising is all about sex in the US, an ordinary Soviet woman said, “Well, there’s no sex here... and we are positively against it”, meaning there’s no sex in advertising, not the USSR. However, the wording was so absurd and so literate at the same time, that the phrase became a universal rhetoric hit to denote the hypocrisy of Soviet social life, especially those related to body freedoms. A Soviet citizen was supposed to have no body at all, so any related images, discussions or practices were literally banned from art, public discourse and academic research, while noncompliance could and often would result in social ostracism, professional denouncement and even criminal prosecution. In this context for many unofficial artists body was a strategic tool of artistic production, since “[it] became a site that enabled the artists to act or express themselves in a manner not possible in a public space nor through traditional art forms, such as painting and sculpture, which were regulated by the state,”<sup>3</sup> as Amy Bryzgel rightfully observes.

I explore the bodies produced by the intersection of performance of members of the community and the gaze of the photographer/camera, which, I believe reveals the progressive transgression of the solid modernist subject in its Soviet modification. This attempt is largely informed by contemporary theoretical approaches empowered by social critique, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, feminist and postcolonial studies of both body and art, as well as their conjunction. Theoretical approaches of Linda Nochlin, Judith Butler, Amelia Jones, Lynda Nead towards the body and its representation in art provide me with models of interpretation for the work discussed. However, as those were produced within and in relation to the late capitalist societies, they have their own limitations as to application to the art practices in the Soviet Union. Therefore, this study is equally informed by the work of social and cultural anthropologists of Soviet life—Alexei Yurchak, Natalia Leбина, Svetlana Boym and Igor Kon. Looking at the mundane everyday practices and artefacts of a Soviet person, their work sheds light on the dominant social models, which were largely challenged by the practices I am looking at.

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Bryzgel, *Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, Manchester University Press, 2017