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### **Participation and Collectivity in Art of the Soviet and post-Soviet Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine since the 1970s**

*Only within the collective, certainly not within the isolated subject, can perception, language, and productive forces take on the shape of an individuated experience [1].*

*Paolo Virno, The Grammar of the Multitude*

The main objective of this research is to investigate collective artistic practices in Soviet and post-Soviet Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova since the 1970s with respect to contemporary theories of participatory art, political philosophy and sociology. Contemporary art scholars generally consent that social participation in art has grown out of and in relation to consumerist alienation of late capitalist societies, and could not develop likewise in the context of state-imposed socialism. However, such features of participatory art as collectivity, privileging process over product, collaborative output, visual and material poverty are likewise characteristic of many “unofficial” Soviet and post-Soviet art practices, yet with a completely different motivation behind. While artists in the West aspire to “*repair social bond*” or “*explore and disentangle a more complex knot of social concerns about political engagement, affect, inequality, narcissism, class, and behavioural protocols*” [2] by involving a spectator in the art production, (post-)Soviet art tradition is substantially social — falling short of mediation by the art system, it performs an alternative social order rather than makes a statement about it.

Almost a decade-long practice of group “Vremya” (“time” from Russian) that emerged in 1972 in the circle of amateur photographers in Kharkiv is exemplary of the above-described condition. The driving force and motivation for the young Borys Mikhailov, Evgeniy Pavlov, Yuriy Rupin and their group mates was a an overpowering desire to make an image that would “blow” its spectator’s mind. Yet their only spectators for many years

remained themselves only. With a state ban to shoot in public space and zero access to exhibition facilities, this initial social impulse of “Vremya’s” photographic practice was internalized and acted out within the group. As Katerina Degot asserts, *“The body of work of Kharkiv photographers [...] comprises a dialogue in structure. In contemporary world it is expected that an artistic oeuvre evolves in relation to the artist’s earlier work, but Soviet underground artists and photographers were advancing in relation to their colleagues’ work. This was their principle position which requires a different approach to analysis and perception of their work [3]”*.

The described type of work was flesh and blood with the social condition of artistic production in late Soviet Union, where any freedom of expression (even pronouncedly apolitical) was preempted from public space onto private territories. In one of the dialogues between Illya Kabakov and Borys Groys they come to a conclusion that the best metaphor for Soviet unofficial art would be “komunalka” (a communal apartment). A secluded and intimate space of one’s home had to be shared with a number of similar “homes”. As Kabakov recalls, *“it is impossible to live in it, yet impossible to live other way because it is very improbable that you would have a chance to leave the communal apartment. It is this combination — you can’t live like that and can’t live differently either — that describes the Soviet situation in general [4]”*. The impossibility of what we would call “normal social functioning of art” resulted in production of a compelled social participation within artistic practices. This internalized participation substituted for the social verification of artistic practice within the relevant art system and have to a larger extent sustained itself until present day.

This research specifically focuses on the work of artistic collectives from the cities of Soviet and post-socialist cultural periphery — Minsk, Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv, Odessa, Chisinau — the black spots on the art map of the (post-)socialist East. While the discourse of Eastern European art has recently achieved a certain visibility in contemporary theory, curatorial and museum work previously dominated by Western historiography, it is similarly discriminatory of its own margins. This work aims at challenging both — the arthistorical discourse on Eastern Europe that has systematically overlooked particular areas, and the theories of participatory art traditionally understood as a socially motivated

and project-based work. Contrary to the latter I suggest to analyze critically art making as practice rather than social practice as art.

Literature:

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