

**Performing the East: Performance Art in Russia, Latvia and Poland Since 1980.**

By AMY BRYZGEL. Pp. 303. London and New York: I.B. Tauris. 2013. £59.50. Hardback. ISBN: 9781848859487.

Performance art in the West is frequently defined through its rejection of the art object in a capitalist commodity market. This raises questions regarding the conditions, possibilities and motivations of performance art in Eastern Europe: if countries within the 'Soviet sphere of influence' (p. 14) – such as the nominally socialist countries – did not have an art market or commodity culture in that sense, then how could, and how did, performance art develop in this sphere? Furthermore, how did its mechanisms change after the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the shift to capitalism from the 1990s onwards? In six case studies divided into three chapters, Amy Bryzgel seeks to illuminate these questions by looking at East European performance from the 1980s through to the 2000s, charting a graph of its role in transitional economies from socialism to free-market capitalism.

In the first chapter, Bryzgel focuses on questions of national identity in Russian performance art in the first years after the fall of the Soviet Union. She begins by discussing Sergei Bugaev's (known also under his artistic pseudonym, Afrika) *Crimania* project, spanning several years from 1993 onwards. This is followed by an analysis of Oleg Kulik's *Russian Dog* performances from between 1993 and 1997. The second chapter looks into questions of public appearance and media in Latvia before and after the introduction of capitalism. Miervaldis Polis' *Bronze Man* performances ran from 1987 to 1992, and Gints Gabrāns carried out his *Starix* project between 2000 and 2004. Bryzgel's third and final chapter considers Polish video art – which she conceives of as filmed performance art – and its inquiry into gender. She begins by looking at Zbigniew Libera's *How to Train the Girls* from 1987, and then moves on to Katarzyna Kozyra's 1997 *The Women's Bathhouse* and 1999 *The Men's Bathhouse*.

Bryzgel presents a clear chapter structure and her choice of performers and performances is exciting and convincing. She is at her strongest in the description of these works, supplemented both by black-and-white photographs and a section of twelve coloured plates. It is, however, precisely the strength of the volume's conceptual arc and its descriptive specificity which expose an occasional weakness in performance analysis. This may be due to the fact that Bryzgel seems to source her interpretative conclusions mainly from interviews with the artists, employing an 'oral histories' (p. 28) methodology.

An example of such an approach might be the following: 'his [Kulik's] search resembles Afrika's in that it is a personal, inward-looking journey that the artist hopes will translate into a collective healing and harmonic coexistence for all of mankind' (p. 69). Bryzgel fails to annotate or expand upon what appear to be Kulik's and Afrika's rather banal and idealising verbal interpretations of their own performance, leaving out the cruel, brutal, and wounding qualities of this work. Indeed, she simply takes over their notion of performance as a 'healing process' (p. 35) as her own analytical thrust for the Russian chapter as a whole.

In the subsequent chapters, too, she repeatedly places all emphasis on therapy, enablement and liberation, as if the performances she presented provided

easy answers and did not, in the first instance, establish resistant and challenging questions or problems. In the Latvian chapter, she argues that Gabrāns' *Starix* project, in the course of which the artist turned a homeless man into a reality TV star, could serve as an inspirational model for ordinary citizens: 'Gabrāns [...] gives his viewers the tools and motivation to become the artists and creators of their own fame, and their own lives, themselves' (p. 150). Bryzgel neither touches upon possible ethical problems with taking a homeless man off the streets for a sustained art action, nor considers any parodic spark in Gabrāns' project. The argument that the artist simply provided a self-help toolkit for becoming famous in a freshly Westernized TV culture, and the implication that the introduction of such a culture is ultimately nothing but enabling for the individual, work to undermine the critical relevance *Starix* might have had.

In the same vein, Bryzgel concludes an initially critical and important discussion of the dominant role of the Catholic Church in Poland by asserting that 'if the capitalist system introduced was the enemy of the Church, it was certainly the friend of the artist in terms of freedom of expression and speech' (p. 162). An analysis along the lines of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' insufficiently simplifies the complexity of Poland's economic transition as well as the artistic responses to this transition. It seems underwritten by an all too well-meaning belief in the degrees of freedom, apparently afforded by or affordable in capitalism.

The lack of precise and critical performance analysis, paired with an approach that sometimes reads like a pro-liberal Westerner's account of East European performance art, ultimately disappoints the expectations set up towards what might have been far-reaching theoretical and historical implications regarding performance art under socialism, as well as under capitalism. But in spite of its shortcomings, the volume constitutes a crucial contribution to the study of performance art in its de-marginalisation of work from 'the East'. The performances Bryzgel describes, and her own archival care in doing so, deserve attention from a wide readership among those interested in the region and/or in contemporary performance and video art.

LISA JESCHKE

*University of Cambridge*

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