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Domanin: Theatre and Performing Arts

Body and Space in Performance Art in Romania

PHD. THESIS SUMMARY

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In the 1960s, performance art appeared in different parts of the world, both in America and well as in Eastern Europe and Romania. The political and social context in Eastern Europe under Communism and the context in Romania, Romania being the focus of this research and archival paper, influenced the artistic scene. The direct consequence was the lack of a public presentation of performance art works, their recognition and the possibility to create an archive, possibility which, after 1989, was transformed into a continuous attempt of artists, historians, and critics to to give an overview of art and to legitimize performance.

Because this type of art has an immaterial character and has elements of theater and visual arts, it has been seen at the border of domains, and has become, over time, a rather marginal element.

The present paper aims to create and systematize a common archive of performers in Romania before and after communism, making a map based on the fundamental relationship between body and space, one of the fundamental aspects of performance art.

The starting point of the process of organizing the material obtained during the period of documentation lays in having noticed in interviews made with the practitioners the relationship and the common discourse, each generation having its own reference points. The present paper aims to bring together the voices of Romanian performance in order to define the borders between common trails and originality.

In order to investigate the wide sphere of "actions" and performances in Romania, it was necessary to recover the lost performative events, documentation and analysis according to the context of their appearance, in order to obtain a complete and nuanced image of these artists who started exploring the virgin field of performance art in Romania before their integration into the present performance context.

In the United States, the term performance art applies at the same time to happening, to the Neo-Dada Fluxus movement, as well as to a multitude of performative formulas of the 60's, located on the borderline between genres. At the present moment, at the international level, the use of the phrase "performance art" may be diverted by the term "performing arts" which refers to the broad field of performing arts, the two aspects are not opposed although there are intersection areas between the two areas. For the present research, we chose the use of the term *performance with reference in particular to an artistic practice defined by certain conceptual and aesthetic elements*. The option reflects the interest in the artistic practice described above in order to fit the wide variety of contemporary works that we have

approached under a unitary and plurivalent designation, while maintaining specific differences in theater or dance, forms of "performing arts".

As a medium of artistic expression has been accepted and recognized in America and Western Europe since the 1960s, RoseLee Goldberg's book *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* has until now been one of the most important analyzes of the context where appeared performance art and the most prominent artists of that time.

One of the most important books on performance in relation to other arts is Richard Schechner's *Performance Theory*, especially because the theoretician is not confined to the contemporary art context, but challenges the performance elements of religious and medical events.

The volatility of the demarcation lines that are specific to performance art corresponds to a development in the theatrical form since the 1960s in the theatre performances of great creators such as Peter Brook, Georg Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Robert Wilson or Richard Schechner. In their works, the fundamental elements of theatre, such as the relationship with the body and space and the fictional character of the action presented on stage underwent fundamental changes that aesthetically place their approach closer to performance than to theater, the changes being inspired by oriental mysticism and aesthetics, as well as the visionary Antonin Artaud. It is noteworthy that the artistic work of those listed above was largely eccentric to the theatrical environment, often escaping from the spaces for the theater and discovering new spaces or revalorizing spaces. We can see that the area of confluence of theater with performance represents the most fertile field of the last 50 years of theater, the comparative study of the phenomenon of performance in Romania with that of theater being extremely important for both fields, even if the two have not undergone major exchanges and contacts until the present decade.

In the last decade, the Romanian artistic practice has reopened the interest for the experimental side of the performance focused on corporality, for interactivity and for the involvement of the spectator in the artistic process. This return to performance shows us the reopening towards alterity, opposed to the discourse of the *single author* artistic approach, but also the necessity to develop the aesthetic experience specific to performance. The development of contemporary performance practice is observable not only at the level of practitioners and studies in the field but also in the way museums and galleries integrate these performance works into their programs.

The presence of these performances in the gallery is somewhat paradoxical, in the context in which private galleries cannot avoid profit-oriented management, commercial

aspects, and performance is by far the most viable form of art when it comes to profit. However, performance through its ephemerality creates the character of event and social interaction, so necessary for the development of a gallery, which works accompanied by speeches cannot always replace.

Performance has in common with the theater basic elements, such as: "action" "presence" "performance" and "theatricality". These elements come from the common basis of the two forms of expression, namely, the realization of an action in front of the public and the creation of meanings through these actions. Both forms of expression privilege the idea of "presence". The phenomenon of "presence" of the performer with the public, becoming himself active, is, however, specific to performance. In most cases, performance implies the spectator's action, and the lack of action can lead to extreme cases, such as in the case of Gomez de Pena or Franco B., at the death of the performer. For the most participatory forms of theater, direct interaction with the spectator usually remains at a superficial level coming from a ratio of different forces in the theater between the actor and the spectator. Thus, in the theater the actor knows the script and rehearsed for the show, in performance the performer proposes a situation and does not know what will be the reaction of the public, there is no predetermined path, the path becomes defined with the interaction between the two. On the other hand, in the present research, which emphasizes the fluidity of the limits, we must mention the concept of performance and the work of Adrian Ghenie, a painter, a concept brought by Laura Pavel, the theoretician, which broadens the meaning of the term, approaching it Jackson Pollock's performance painting, which we'll talk about later:

„Such paintings display a symptomatic ethical and political *performativity*, and, consequently, they call for being perceived from beyond a purely visual visual angle. Still, the use of a concept like *performativity* might seem somewhat paradoxical in this context, since its sphere of meanings revolves around the esthetic qualities of *presence*, of directness and immediacy..”¹

For a better understanding, we need to look at the artistic movements that have influenced the emergence of this new form. The research paper will begin with definitions of performance, with history, with the precursors of this movement. After that, we will analyze the context when performance art appeared in the United States, but also in Eastern Europe, under socialism. We will analyze the body and the performing space, and we will try to draw

¹Laura Pavel, *Beyond Artistic Aura – Visuality and Aesthetic Ideology*, în *Provocation as Art. Scandal, Shock and Sexuality in Contemporary Cinema and Visual Culture*". Proceedings of 2nd Ekphrasis Conference in Cinema and Visual Culture, 28-29 May 2015, Cluj-Napoca, Accent Publisher, Edited by Doru Pop, p. 44

a draft for an archive of works belonging to the most important creators - performing artists from the Romanian artistic scene. In order to draw up the project archive of performance in Romania, I conducted a series of interviews with the most prominent Romanian art performing practitioners, which sets the basis for a necessary but gigantic archiving body of work that can be based on the artist's personal archives. The present approach is not an exhaustive one, nor does it create an archive, the size of such a project going beyond the possibilities of a doctoral research. The curatorial approach to such an archive requires extensive, long-lasting research and goes beyond the scope of the present work, requiring storage and digitization stages that currently outweigh the possibilities of a major museum.

On the basis of memoirs and analysis of the works, the present paper aims to present the main relations between Romanian and international performance, to present the way in which the practitioners concept of performance is reflected in their works as well as to recover a dialogue between the two generations of performing artists currently active in Romania: the post-2000 generation and the one that started its practice during communist Romania. The systematic exposure of these artists will bring a fundamental recovery to the development of the domain beyond the losses due to historical division and changes. The exhibition *Efemerist. A retrospective by Mihai Olos* in 2017 from MNAC (curated by Călin Dan), the presence of Romanian performers in international galleries, such as Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmuş, but also the growing influence on the theatrical environment of performance - one of the main dialogue partners for theater, is the main argument for the development of the present paper in further research.

The investigative approach shows that there was simultaneity in Europe and America and what was common is the dematerialization of the artistic object and the presence of the artist in front of the public. The artistic movements that are being analyzed are Futurism, Dadaism, Viennese Actionism, Bauhaus School, Jackson Pollock's Performing Painting, Kaprow's Happenings, and the artistic practices of Cordon Craig, Stanislavski, Robert Wilson, Chris Burden, Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneemann. The idea is that the performance has led to greater openness to different narrative voices, very particular, very diverse, such as voices of minorities.

In the second chapter, *The Body*, we start from the history of the body seen over time from François Poullain of Barre (a Cartesian feminist who considered that the mind has no sex) to Marcel Mauss, who had noticed how the customs body-related issues vary from one society to another. We examine how the use of the body has its roots in rituals and practices in the sphere of medicine. Here also, it is established that every body is the carrier of

a biological and cultural message, and corporal positioning practices are presented according to the place in society.

By applying the working methods, we describe and analyze the main features of performance, such as the use of the body, a tool mostly used in theater and dance. This happens as an effect of the artist's need to express himself directly in a society in which the changes that have occurred cannot be ignored. The immediate attention and reaction to politics and society becomes a defining feature of performance.

The use of the body as an instrument, until its objectification, comes from the valorization and the attention given to the body by the society. We present the beginning of the use of the body and its origins as a starting point in the research. We present the importance of subjectivity and the presence of the performing artist, be it in theater, dance or visual arts. In a society that values the body, it is a natural thing to start using it in artistic projects.

An important part of the work is focused on the body of the performer and actor, with all the layers of meaning that the body brings. The starting point comes from medical and religious practices. The paper describes and discusses how the body has a biological part as well as a cultural side and how they are reflected by analyzing social constructs, such as gender performance, a concept used by Judith Butler. An important part of the analysis focuses on the body of the woman, the body that is subjected to the look, as well as the simultaneity between the apparition of the performance and the apparition of a new wave of feminism.

In *The Space* chapter, the argumentative approach starts from dividing the spaces in the studio / house, nature, public space and exhibition space. Each of these is analyzed and examples from the Romanian artistic context are presented. We analyze how, as a result of the laws of communism, public space was only a place of passage. We also analyze the working methods of the artists of that period. Further on, we present and analyze the modifications and transformations that appeared after the fall of communism - an explosion of events such as the performance festival Zona, Periferic, Annart.

The investigative approach also focused on space and its importance in the artistic process. Here, we analyzed the types of spaces in order to understand what it means to present a work of art in a particular space. It is worth mentioning the lack of freedom during communism, when the public space was a place of transition. After the fall of the regime, the artists occupied the street with performance works.

The above chapter maps the spaces where performances take place, starting from the premise that space is relevant in performing arts. Also, performances that take place in the four types of spaces are analyzed so to see how they are influenced by where they are presented. Thus, nature is a space that significantly alters artistic works, as we notice that artists see it as a space of purity, strength, and rebirth. It analyzes the natural space during the communist period, when the underground artists used it as a final refuge. The ability to use nature for artistic purposes, as a secure space, was born of the artist's need for safety, a safety he could not find in the public space or in the exhibition spaces. The escapist tendency of these works has a strong meaning in a period of oppression.

An important part of the chapter is the analysis of the public space, which, after the fall of communism, was approached by artists with ease. Here, we analyzed some works of the generation before 89, as well as the younger generation, which grew with this freedom of expression in the public space. However, there are many works that take place in the gallery space or are presented performance festivals, a trend we can associate with the need to confirm the artistic importance of performance in a society where it had a peripheral place.

The chapter *Performance in Central and Eastern Europe* helps to correctly contextualize the emergence of avant-garde and performance phenomena in countries in the vicinity of Romania with the aim of creating an overview. The research presents countries such as Moldova, Albania, where artistic elements appeared late, as well as in Poland and Yugoslavia, where there was an important performance and avant-garde movement. We also analyze the implications and risks of underground artists, especially in Russia, but also in the Czech Republic and Ukraine. We conclude that the general tendency is the appearance of performance art in contexts where there was previously avant-garde and in countries where artists were aware of the process of renewing the arts and testing the boundaries of art and of the public. It is also argued that the presence of Western theorists and critics in the East after the fall of communism has led to the creation of an unidirectional and generalized reception pattern of art and artists: a dissident artist as a unique artist model.

Through analysis we looked at how avant-garde influenced other sub-forms, finding that they were strongly linked, concluding that in a country with a rich avant-garde the chances of emerging artistic forms are increasing. There are also examples of countries that did not know of the avant-garde: in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine artistic experiment appeared in 1990.

Another pattern that we analyze is how the politics influence the artistic domain. We noticed that the Czech Republic is one of the countries strongly divided by the political scene,

which divided the country's artistic history in pre-1968 and post-1968 periods. Yugoslavia was a country with great openness to art, and even to Contemporary art, which favored the emergence of the performance, Belgrade, the city where the first contemporary art museum appears after the Second World War, is also the city where Marina Abramović presents her first performances. In Hungary the tradition is that an exhibition opened with a performance, which made the performance be better accepted by the local artistic scene.

We can conclude that all these events, despite the differences between countries and the approaches of artists, have created a fierce context, even if, often, in underground space. I believe that despite the limited visibility of performance in some periods, it continued to shape itself until its acceptance in the public space and exhibition spaces.

The Chapter *Performance in Romania* starts from the moment of the Romanian avant-garde in arts and literature, in order to determine the simultaneity with the avant-garde in the European space. *75H.P.*, *Point*, *One*, *Urmuz* and *Meridian* magazines are avant-garde magazines, which were joined by Tristan Tzara, Ion Barbu, Ilarie Voronca, Victor Brauner, Gellu Naum, Marcel Iancu. We discuss the opening of the *Contimporan* exhibition in 1924, where Hans Arp, Paul Klee, Hans Richter and other important artists are presented in the exhibition. We debate the emergence of avant-garde not from a social and political need, but as an aesthetic need, from the desire to question the limits of art.

The research places Romania in a complex context of Eastern Europe, which, at times, is influenced by the West, in other periods is open towards the West. Also, there are withdrawal periods as a result of the oppressive system. Moreover, we analyzed the political and social contexts of the Eastern and Central European countries, concluding that the political sphere strongly influences the artistic scene.

Further on, we analyze the theater context of Romania, where there is a contrasting position between the theater of the private and the national theaters. What is interesting to observe is in the interest of some stage directors such as Ion Sava or Soare Z. Soare for the image on stage. In analyzing the context in Romania, the present research clearly divides the periods according to the national laws and decrees, the moment in 1947 representing the turning point, together with the USASZ Congress, which blamed the bourgeois artist. The analysis describes how the followers of socialist realism benefited from the compromise made with the system, as well as how underground artists were being watched by Securitate. We also analyze how the new law of theaters encourages putting on stage of Romanian texts, we analyze the re-theatralisation process in theatre. We observe an present the change that occurred after the fall of communism and the opening towards the West. The transition period

was difficult for artists performance art was still marginal and we conclude that the political context influences the development of artistic space.

Art often expresses a part of the context in which it takes place. Therefore, it is to be expected that during or after a dictatorship there will be times when artists question the usefulness of art in relation to what is happening in the world. This type of rethinking and reporting to society has a strong impact on art and on artistic thinking as well as on artists.

Further on, we present the most important Romanian artists from visual arts, dance and theater to demonstrate how the limits of theatre, performance and dance change. For the research, we took interviews that are found in the Annex of the PhD thesis.

The chapter archived and presented the most important works of artists in Romanian art that had the most important contributions to performance. It also highlighted how performance art, initially coming from visual artists, became of interest for dancers, choreographers and actors, especially with the 2000s. The observed tendency is to open up towards performance art.

Also, the chapter analyzes the important performance works by artists like Paul Neagu, Ion Grigorescu, Mihai Olos and Alex Mirutziu, Veda Popovici, Sinko Ferenc. Some common tendencies have been pursued, with the intention of comparing and analyzing artists' works as best as possible, putting them in a common context and trying to draw common conclusions wherever possible. We analyzed the artists in relation with the artistic scene, and I have noticed different models: the retired artist who does not question the political context, like Geta Bratescu, the dissident artist working in the studio, like Ion Grigorescu, the artist who provokes the spectator, like Farid Fairuz, the artist at the intersection of arts, Sinko Ferenc. The confluence between performance and theater is more and more visible, and I think it will be more recurrent on the Romanian artistic stage.

In *Reception of Performance* we present and analyze the most important theories of theater performance and performance art, as well as the interest of museums, galleries and theaters to give participants a more personal experience, an interaction with the performer in a society where reality show has an important place. We debate the idea of reality and reality in an artistic act that requires the presence of an audience and an artist, as well as the manipulative coordination of a work that seeks an immediate reaction from the spectator. The issue of capitalizing a performance work is approached in a context of the artistic scene that is very mobile, occupied, mostly, of painting.

With the opening of the geographical borders, the Romanian artists wanted to connect to the international context, since they were seeking validation. I think this is one of the

reasons why at this moment most of them relate to the international context, not to the national one. Moreover, it is the international context that has the model of the successful artists, and it is the international scene that has a powerful art market. Therefore, artists want to be connected to it, for recognition and for the need to acquire a "listing position".

This research outlines the investigative approach by analyzing the context of performance in both Europe and America, analyzing the body's valences and interpretations, the instrument of the performer as well as the space. Features of performance and its proximity to the theater are presented, in order to systematize an archive of performers in Romania to have a clear picture of the artists in this artistic area. Also, documenting the performing arts in Romania, as well as its alignment with the theatrical context, leads to a clarification and contextualization of the artistic phenomena of that period, in order to have a complete history in a country where it was not unusual for authorities to rewrite history.

Years after its appearance in Romania, performance is still perceived as a new form of art, road opener, controversial and sometimes ridiculous. This is because of its ignorance and acceptance from other artistic forms, which leads to seeing it in a minimalist perspective by which the artistic approach loses its value and becomes exclusively an intriguing presence in a negative sense. This point is very important when it comes to art. Most of the time, the public values the craftsmanship. With centuries of painting and drawing behind, where craftsmanship is important, the emergence of performance has troubled the world, even though there were stages that prepared the public before.

Returning, the idea that art is validated by craftsmanship was now questioned more often than at any other time. We can say that the public was forced to adapt to the contemporary art scene. Pressure on the public is unexpected, and for many viewers, accustomed to listening to the verdict of a critic, it becomes very unclear what value is.

I believe that performance and theater are closely related, and that theater will increase interest in performance areas, especially in terms of activating the artist as a creator in the artistic process.

The work begins by analyzing the beginnings by establishing the simultaneity between the two continents, Europe and America, and the similarities and differences between theater and performance, such as authenticity and dematerialization. Since the two modes of expression have common features, their establishment is important for the research.

Bulgarian philosopher Alexander Kiossev analyzes and presents in the *Self-Colonization of Central and Eastern Europe* the tendency to unify the world's artistic context, the concept introduced by him, self-colonization, can be used in cultures that give up his own

voice in order to align with the West, tendency visible especially in Europe. This process is not imposed from outside, but from within a country that adopts the values and criteria in the West.

In the interviews conducted for this paper, I noticed that the tendency is that artists relate to the international context. This research attempted to bring together artists before 1989 and after 1989, where they would be put in a common context, as in a critical dialogue, in order to have an overview of the Romanian artistic scene. The research also highlights both the historical roots of performance, its links with theater as well as its contemporaneity.

Considering the issues presented so far, I believe that the trends observed in the theater and the visual arts confirm the interest of artists and the public towards experience and personal aspects, that will be more and more present in the theater performances as well as in the exhibition halls. The area where dance, performance, and visual arts meet is a fertile space that needs to be traced and analyzed in order to understand artistic trends.

Key-words: theater, performance art, artistic trends, archiving, body as a tool, the importance of space, interaction, reception, romania, europe

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