

Species of Spaces in Eastern European and Latin American Experimental Art

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How are we to navigate the historical fields of experimental art in state socialist Eastern Europe and under Latin American military dictatorships? What happens when pedagogy, poetry, sculpture, and sociability bleed into one another, and categories such as Conceptual art, Happenings, or performance art are undone? How are comparisons to be grounded? I want to propose that the problem of space itself may provide a productive lens for comparative analysis. An examination of artists' fascination with space and with ways to occupy it recasts the question of formal and geopolitical frameworks from the ground up.

Artists in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s operated in an extraordinary range of what we might call, after George Perec, "species of spaces"—different spaces that, although they are often "closer to hand" than, say, intergalactic space, are nevertheless not necessarily "obvious," in spite of the fact that "to live is to pass from one space to another."¹ Perec's observation that "space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it" was one shared by artists of his generation around the world.² As such, it allows us to think about creative agency across different political fields from a shared vantage point. Many of the proposals gathered in the exhibition *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980* conquered new species of spaces for personal or collective investigation. So much so that artists' propositions often fostered new forms of agency by repurposing and occupying new spaces.

Surveying the parallel developments in Eastern Europe and Latin America, it is clear that while there were some artists who explicitly interrogated the geopolitical problematics of these regions more broadly, or included in their work references to the specificities of a particular nation-state, for a majority of artists,

these sorts of top-down registers of space were not of primary concern. The regional associations that have accrued though time were secondary to more immediate artistic interests. Experimental artists demonstrated far more consistent interest in micro—rather than macro-spaces—bottom-up registers of space, such as fields, squares, streets, windows, or networks.

In order to explore the art historical dialogues between what I want to refer to as "top down" and "bottom up" conceptions of space mobilized within the framework of a show such as *Transmissions*, I want to look more closely at the spatial claims of a selection of key artistic propositions. With a few notable exceptions, there was an absence of museum and gallery space adequate to artists' needs in Eastern Europe and Latin America in this period, and only limited access to an art market. Although artists were largely *au courant* with North American and Western European critical engagement with the "white cube" and its institutional and political frameworks, in the contexts of state socialism and military dictatorship, the embrace of an expanded field went far beyond a critique of art-world systems.³

The photographic series representing Tomislav Gotovac's first public action, *Showing "Elle" Magazine* (1962), presents a collision between two registers of space: the space of the glossy magazine page and the snowy slopes of the Mèdvednica mountain, at Sljeme, its highest peak. A majority of readings of this action, though, ignore these immediate spaces, and take physical space as shorthand for geopolitical space: *Elle* comes to stand for French, Western, and capitalist, while the snowy landscape signals Yugoslav, Eastern, and socialist. Such interpretations are obviously a hangover from a Cold War approach to space, and the action remains a minefield for political projections

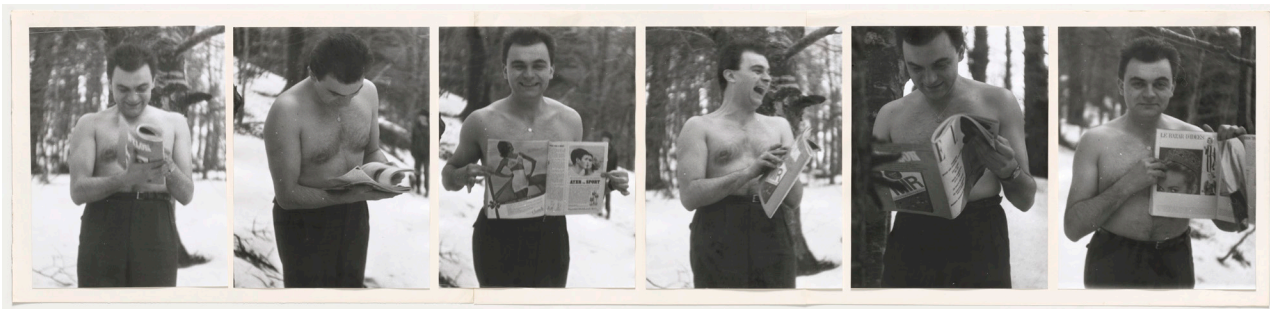


Figure 1. Tomislav Gotovac. *Showing "Elle" Magazine*. 1962. Six gelatin silver prints. Committee on Photography Fund. © 2015 Tomislav Gotovac



Figure 2. Milan Knížák. *Demonstration of Oneself*. 1964. Envelope, photocopy, and nine gelatin silver prints. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift. © 2015 Milan Knížák/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild Kunst, Germany

and cultural stereotypes. Yugoslavia was non-aligned, and thus not part of the Eastern Bloc, after 1948. For citizens of the USSR in the 1960s, Yugoslavia seemed, to all intents and purposes, Western. Citizens for the most part had travel opportunities and access to consumer goods far exceeding those of their Polish counterparts, although Poland reportedly seemed like America for Hungarians.

Gotovac's chosen location reflected recreational escape from the cares of city life. The artist's apparent delight at the contents of the magazine, with its manicured version of femininity, contrasts with the wild beauty of the spot he has chosen for indulging in the consumerist fantasies proffered by *Elle*. Leafing through the magazine, a private leisure activity primarily envisaged for women, is transformed by a man into a public activity for a group of initiated spectators. The artist has stripped to the waist for the occasion, proposing an edgy connection between the magazine and pornography, posing as a man who has gone to be alone with his desires, but inviting friends to share the joke with him, off camera. Something usually done indoors has been taken out of doors. Gotovac's fusion of the two spaces signals a critical approach to binaries more broadly; male and female, private and public would be themes that he continued to undo in the decades that followed, notably transgressing the taboo of nudity in public space with his streaking actions on the streets of Zagreb.

The streets of Prague were the site for Milan Knížák's earliest public experiments. Photographic documentation of his *Demonstration of Oneself* (1964) shows the action unfolding on a large sheet of paper rather than directly on the cobblestones. Knížák—who was appointed leader of Fluxus East the following

year, when news of his activities spread beyond Czechoslovakia—is dressed in a jacket strewn with patches, wearing a chain, a light bulb, and various pieces of cloth attached by safety pins to his clothing. His demonstration consisted of lying down on the paper, reading a book, tearing out its pages, crumpling them, burning them, sweeping away the ashes, and departing. Echoing Harold Rosenberg's observation that Jackson Pollock had transformed the canvas into an arena in which to act, Knížák repurposed the space of the blank page as a space for individualistic action, foreshadowing Allan Kaprow's tracking of the trajectory leading "From Assemblage, to Environments, to Happenings" (1966).

Demonstration of Oneself played with issues of authorship and intellectual authority in the public space, and tested the boundaries between individual action and audience participation. Spreading the paper on the ground, Knížák allied himself with street vendors, as though anticipating having to pack up and move on quickly when approached by the police. His sign, which asked passersby to participate by crowing as they walked, proposed the street as a space of absurd communal performance rather than commerce, as highlighted by the stipulation that the material evidence of the demonstration be burned. Knížák's commitment to process over product was symptomatic of the ephemeral actions pursued by alternative artists globally during this period. Of course, this raises the key issue of the status of the material documentation of such activities, a problem also highlighted by Perce, for whom the space of the page is perhaps the creative space par excellence. As he notes—and as the many paper documents exhibited in *Transmissions* demonstrate—"at one time or another, almost everything passes through a sheet of paper."⁴

When Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler enthusiastically announced in their essay "The Dematerialisation of Art," in 1968, that "the shift of emphasis from art as product to art as idea has freed the artist from present limitations both economic and technical," their definition might also have served to retrospectively categorize the activities of Gotovac and Knížák as dematerialized.⁵ Lippard later reminisced, "Unfettered by object status, Conceptual artists were free to let their imaginations run rampant,"⁶ but she concluded that "the escape was temporary. Art was recaptured and sent back to its white cell,"⁷ and the "democratic implications" of the "free for all" that was dematerialised art were "never realized."⁸ This question of the democratic implications of a shift away from the object toward action, idea, and process produced different possibilities for artists in Eastern Europe and Latin America. For many of the artists I discuss here, abandoning the "object of art" offered creative possibilities that their undemocratic societies were powerless to prevent—though Knížák did spend the 1960s intermittently in

and out of prison.

Knížák's provision of a paper ground for his activity suggests that the artist remained reticent about physically dissolving "art into life," perhaps acknowledging the extent to which dematerialized practice had to be thought relatively. Interestingly, though, it shows that he still clung to the notion of art as an autonomous sphere. The demonstration space, and its public conquest, is marked out as a measure of the artist's independence from his environment. In its transitional relation to space, then, *Demonstration of Oneself* responds to the desire to move beyond the limits of the two-dimensional picture plane and into the space of the city, and highlights concerns about the sacrifices such a shift entails.

Oscar Bony's *60 Square Meters and Its Information*, shown at Buenos Aires's Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in its 1967 exhibition *Visual Experiences*, also produced a space within a space, though in a manner very different from Knížák. By projecting a filmed close-up of chain-link fencing and laying the same fencing across the floor of the gallery, he invited visitors to interrogate the limits of the space. Though the artist neutralized it by laying it flat, depriving it of this primary function, his ambivalent gesture questions the political status of a corporate-funded institution in the aftermath of a military coup. Bony's fencing drew attention to the degree to which boundaries provide the ground, the foundation, of the gallery space, and played a conceptual game contrasting experiences of projected and physical space, addressing the spectator as both eye and body simultaneously. As outlined explicitly in Daniel Quiles's essay "Mediate Media: Buenos Aires Conceptualism," the piece highlighted the complex complicities at the heart of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in the context of the dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía in Argentina.

The relative technical simplicity of this spatial intervention into the white cube space contrasts with the complexity of a large-format Happening like Marta Minujín's *Simulataneity in Simulataneity* (1966), which took a more opportunistic approach to the space provided by the Di Tella to propose a networked, intermedial field, fostering collaboration between Berlin, Buenos Aires, and New York, with the help of "happeners" Allan Kaprow and Volf Vostell. Working across two continents and three cities, and linking these via an ambitious array of telecommunications, a key aim of this undertaking was to demonstrate the connectivity afforded by technology as a vehicle for overcoming spatial limitations. It is not possible to pay equal attention to all the nuances of this multilayered event here; in spatial terms, Minujín's desire to play at overcoming the distance between Europe and the Americas, North and South, is a key feature of the work's structure. With hindsight, one of the implications of the project was to demonstrate the degree to which media tools,



Figure 3. Oscar Bony. *60 metros cuadrados y su información (60 Square Meters and Its Information)*. 1967. 16mm film (black and white, silent; 3:30 min.), 16mm projector, metal support, freestanding wall, chain-link fencing, and flyer. Installation view, *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 5, 2015–January 3, 2016. Latin American and Caribbean Fund. © 2015 Oscar Bony. Courtesy of Carola Bony. Digital image © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Thomas Griesel

Figure 4. Marta Minujín. *Simultaneidad en Simultaneidad (Simultaneity in Simultaneity)*. 1966. Documents, slides, and ephemera. Installation view, *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 5, 2015–January 3, 2016. Anonymous promised gift through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund. © 2015 Marta Minujín. Digital image © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Thomas Griesel

what Marshall McLuhan had recently dubbed, in his subtitle to *Understanding Media* (1964), "the extensions of man," could overcome center-periphery relations and establish a networked horizontal sphere for shared activity among likeminded artists globally. It is symptomatic of the difficulties entailed in accomplishing this that, when the New York happeners did not phone the gallery at the arranged time, Kaprow's participation had to be simulated by a friend of Minujín's, who called in pretending to be Kaprow in order to satisfy the increasingly skeptical



Figure 5. Anna Bella Geiger. *Passagens 1 (Passages 1)*. 1974. Video (black and white, sound), 9:55 min. Purchase. © 2015 Anna Bella Geiger

and impatient Buenos Aires audience.

Anna Bella Geiger's performance *Passages 1* (1974) also engages with the problem of the conquest of space. Black-and-white video shows the artist climbing different sets of stairs in Rio de Janeiro. First, to the accompaniment of loud street noise, the protagonist makes her way up the stone staircase of an apartment building. The viewfinder picks out her careful passage from below, as she rounds corner after corner, floor after floor, steadily ascending. The stairwell is dark, and there are flowers on the tiled floor, as though to draw attention to the feminization of this shared, semi-public space. While we see shafts of light through high windows, the space is isolated from the city outside. Three minutes in, the camera switches to another staircase, this time outside—a long flight of stairs strewn with litter, with dogs barking in the background, and the constant buzz of traffic, now slightly dimmer. The artist rises slowly, determinedly; each time we think she is reaching the top it seems as though the journey begins once more from the lowest rung. Finally, Geiger ascends a far grander staircase that leads to a public building. In an invocation of the registers of early Structuralist and feminist video, Geiger is shot ascending diagonally, first from left to right, then from right to left, before she comes to the summit. Her figure is dwarfed by a series of enormous pillars at the foot of the building.

The video serves as a forum for meditating on a simple repetitive activity carried out anonymously; the woman is shot from behind, and her head and shoulders remain mostly out of view. Two parallel narratives pertaining to the conquest of space are proposed by the simple sequence of montaged scenes: the passage from private space to public space, and the gendering of the urban fabric. If we go against the



Figure 6. Jiří Kovanda. *White String at Home*. November 19–26, 1979. Gelatin silver print. Committee on Photography Fund and Committee on Media and Performance Art Funds. © 2015 Jiri Kovanda

grain and read into the deadpan scenography of these restrained actions, we might also discern a literalist illustration of the rise to power of a determined female protagonist that flies in the face of the avant-garde trope of the *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Geiger's minimal action opens up a wide interpretative field, potentially ripe with political subtexts.

In Czechoslovakia, the 1970s saw an extended period of repression, known as “normalization,” intended to secure political conformity and passivity after the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. When dissident intellectuals signed Charter '77, they referred to the Helsinki Accord and to the United Nations' Conventions on Human Rights, and expressed their regret that in Czechoslovakia these rights existed only on paper. While it was difficult for unofficial artists to make direct contact with an audience beyond a close circle of acquaintances in this period, the abnormal conditions of normalization provided Jiří Kovanda with a highly charged framework for exploring what “normal” relationships might be like. The artist is best known for his experiments of 1976–77 in the public space, such as *'Contact', Sept. 3* (1977), the title of which uses inverted commas because the action consisted in aggressively bumping into passersby on the street.

Kovanda later retreated from the public space, focusing instead on minimal indoor installations, such as *White String at Home* (1979). Photographic documentation of the intervention shows a fine thread very inconveniently suspended diagonally across Kovanda's bed-sitting room at a height that must have made daily activities a constant struggle. Avoiding entanglement in this way may have served as an exercise in being conscious of his movement through and occupation of everyday space. The self-imposed restriction, or trap, echoed a number of propositions by Marcel



Figure 7. Sanja Iveković. *Trokut (Triangle)*. 1979. Four gelatin silver prints and printed paper. Committee on Media and Performance Art Funds. © 2015 Sanja Iveković

Figure 8. CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte). *Inversión de Escena (Scene Inversion)*. 1979. Video (black and white, sound), 20 min. Gift of the artists. © 2015 CADA (Colectivo Acciones de Arte)

Duchamp—notably *Trebuchet and Mile of String*—whose retrospective Kovanda had visited in Prague, at the Václav Špála Gallery, in 1969. Like Duchamp’s, Kovanda’s humble proposals were insistent in the conquest of space, serving as exercises in the freedom that day-to-day mindfulness could bring.

It should not necessarily be assumed that doing a thing in private is any less risky than doing it in public. As Bojana Pejić has pointed out, when we “encounter the privileging of the domestic sphere (...) claimed to be the only secure zone which was outside the reach of the state and thus could ‘resist socialism,’ we are often dealing with a Western cliché.”⁹ It is clear that the political abolition of the security of the private sphere was a cornerstone of life under military dictatorships and state socialism.

Sanja Iveković set out to demonstrate this false opposition in her *Triangle* (1979). Three photographs depict the artist feigning masturbation on her balcony in Zagreb while reading Tom Bottomore’s 1964 book *Elites and Society*; three men on a hotel roof; and a cavalcade with Yugoslavian President Josip Broz Tito. Iveković’s accompanying text explains that her doorbell rang and police officers ordered that all persons be removed from the balcony for the duration of the official cavalcade passing beneath, thus seeming to prove that she had been observed by men with binoculars on the roof across the street and classed a security threat. The piece explored the relationships between sex, gender, and power, the paranoid contraction of personal space under official surveillance and the physical and psychological limitations placed on the individual by the scopic regime of Titoist Yugoslavia.

That same year—six years into the brutal 17-year rule of Augusto Pinochet in Chile—a bold collective action was carried out in Santiago by the Colectivo de Acciones de Arte (CADA). *Scene Inversion* (1979) entailed driving a convoy of eight milk delivery vans through the streets before parking them in front of the National Museum of Fine Arts. The journey around the city made a clear connection between the daily needs of ordinary citizens, the shortages they were suffering, and the immobile grandiosity of the art institution. Photographs documenting the action show young people hurriedly climbing the stairs leading to the museum and scaling tall ladders to suspend on two poles an enormous white sheet. The result was a colossal, if temporary, triumph: an erasure of the façade. By covering the outward-facing front of the institution, they turned the tables, “inverting the scene.” The group suspended an improvised screen blocking the entrance to the museum, turning attention away from the institution and its contents and to the city at large. An intertitle in the video documentation announced, “Art is the city and the body of undernourished citizens.” An institution in which no experimental artists had access to show their work was thus cut off, spatially isolated, from its audience, physically restructuring power relations, albeit only temporarily.

As I hope my cursory survey of artists’ interventions shows, any space—whether a flight of stairs, a balcony, or a gallery—can be politicized in many ways. And any of these spaces can become a space for cultivating new models of subjectivity. As James Baldwin insisted, “Freedom is not something that anybody can be given; freedom is something people take and are as free as they want to be.”¹⁰ Space is no more a given than freedom; it too has to be taken and occupied. The conquest of freedom can be played out in spatial terms,

and conducting politics from the margins necessarily entails seizing space of some sort for the struggle. The first step is to find a space, to think, to meet, to occupy, whether we are speaking of reclaiming the streets, *tierra*, or a room of one's own. Quite simply, as Raul Zibechi reminds us, "politics from below develops in different spaces than politics from above."¹¹

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Organized by Stuart Comer, Chief Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art; Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, Department of Photography; and Christian Rattemeyer, The Harvey S. Shipley Miller Associate Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints; with Giampaolo Bianconi and Martha Joseph, Curatorial Assistants, Department of Media and Performance Art.

Published in conjunction with Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 5, 2015–January 3, 2016.

Support for the exhibition is provided by the MoMA Annual Exhibition Fund.

Special thanks to Jill and Peter Kraus.

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- 4 Perec, "Species of Spaces," p. 12
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- 7 Lippard, "Escape Attempts," xxii
- 8 Lippard, "Escape Attempts," vii
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