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Constructing Czechoslovak and Hungarian Performance Art History: Guardians and Narrative Shifts

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Abstract

During and after state socialism, issues of identity and ideology, as well as stratified meaning and criticism of culture in Central and Eastern Europe, were thoroughly explored in performance artworks. Despite extensive historizations and theorisations of regional practices, no research has focused on how the related body of ephemera was shaped through interpretation, exhibition, criticism, and academic work. The essay argues that the building of narratives in Central and Eastern European performance art was the duty of intellectuals and networkers, that we call guardians. Therefore, through exploring narrative shifts of performance art, the essay examines the role of guardians in the processes of shaping interpretations, discourses, and canonical understandings, while actively engaging in creative practice. Tracing historical encounters of performance as theory and artistic practice, the focus is on the creative and discursive processes of knowledge formation with examples from Czechoslovakia and Hungary. With the help of the case studies, the essay outlines a research method, which combines performative creativity and interrelationality and, therefore, can open up ways of discovering multiple perspectives, hegemonies, and fluidity of narratives, while addressing how historical knowledge has been created and (per)formed in and outside of Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords

performance art; Petr Rezek; László Beke; historiography; Tibor Hajas; Karel Miler; phenomenology; Buddhism

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Constructing Czechoslovak and Hungarian Performance Art History: Guardians and Narrative Shifts¹

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Methodological Introduction

On 18 May 1980, the Hungarian artist Tibor Hajas (1946–1980) performed his piece *Vigil* (*Virrasztás*) at Bercsényi College in Budapest. At the time of the event, Hajas was already known as a poet, conceptual artist, and video and performance artist, and he later became a key reference point for Hungarian performance art. Most of his works focused on the body as a raw material to be (trans)formed, and they explored the mediated experience of presence and consciousness. In *Vigil*, the performer's body oscillated between agency and vulnerability as he performed various movements and interacted with the environment. Unlike many other pieces by Hajas, it was performed in front of large audiences.² Both in terms of symbols and materials, the performance used various elements, including a pool of water on the ground, a German shepherd puppy, and the blindfolded Hajas, who destroyed a glowing light bulb and dropped it into the water. Later, two assistants – István Csömöri and János Vető – injected Hajas with a sleep-inducing drug and carried his inanimate body back and forth across the floor, while the performer's pre-recorded voice echoed out from loudspeakers.³

Vigil turned out to be one of the last performances by Hajas due to his sudden death in a car crash in the summer of 1980. Nevertheless, in looking at early reactions to *Vigil* and at the later interpretations which emerged around Hajas's oeuvre through research articles, essays, exhibitions, and roundtable discussions, it becomes apparent how the image of Hajas as a heroic artist ready for self-destruction changed over the decades. It developed, first, into that of an active countercultural actor in the paralysing atmosphere of late socialist Hungary, and then, ultimately, he assumed the guise of a theoretically self-conscious artist engaged in Buddhist philosophy. These shifts were intertwined with changing dynamics in the interpretation of the material and discursive remnants of his life and oeuvre through acts of elimination and prioritization. Hajas's case is just one example of how event-based art in settled state socialisms has gone through various turns in perception, very often including the shift from a narrative of countercultural art and political opposition to one of subversive

1) This essay is partly the outcome of the Hertha-Firnberg project T 1074-G26 Behind the Artwork. Thinking Art Against the Cold War's Polarity (supported by the FWF. Austrian Science Fund).

2) See the photo collection at Artpool: <https://artpool.hu/kontextus/eset/e800518.html>; and János Vető's slide show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRBZkaDBnI>

3) See Tibor Hajas, 'Virrasztás. Performance (forgatókönyv és fotók)' [Vigil. Performance (Script and Photos)], *Bercsényi*, 2, 1980, 17–23.; Annamária Szőke, 'Műleírás: Virrasztás' [Description: Vigil], *C3 Video Archive and Media Art Collection Catalogue*, 30 November 1998, <http://dokumentumtar.c3.hu/index.php?l=hu&id=1496&mid=1090&dokumentacio=1&dosszie=0&kiallitas=1>; András Müllner, 'Saját hangra?' [A Voice of One's Own?], *Apertúra*, Autumn 2010, <https://www.apertura.hu/2010/osz/mullner/>

art and its uneasy co-existence with the cultural directives of the regimes. For this reason, it is important to examine closely how narrative changes influence the understanding of performance art in Central and Eastern Europe. In order to observe and analyse these discursive frameworks, this essay investigates practising artists whose work aligned closely with broader intellectual currents (in the case of Hajas, Zen Buddhism) and art theoreticians whose thinking was inspired by an involvement with (performance) art practice. By focusing on the interconnection of intellectual and creative-performative elements of Central and Eastern European performance art, on the side of both artists and thinkers, an *interrelational turn* in today's art historiography emerges. This turn is motivated by a methodical impulse in art historical research to carefully elaborate on 'glocal' (ie. global and local) socio-cultural contexts, motivations and ideas that were the driver of art production in the Cold War's split worlds. This focus on the interrelation of these elements also includes an interventionist discussion of shifting and persistent views in art history writing.

This essay is an appeal to art historians and performance studies scholars to consciously integrate multiple angles and contexts in the investigation of their historical subjects and conduct an examination which builds on performance art's reflexive, questioning attitude. Histories of performance art can combine various layers of performativity. In this context, 'performativity' means a form of enactment, an action that transforms its subject and changes everything involved in a circle of action and reaction. This can lead to the redefinition of semiotic and hermeneutic dichotomies in the what (subject), the how (method), and the why (question) of their research.⁴ A focus on performativity helps to build on an embodied, transformative, process-based, and participatory understanding of both artistic and research practice where creation and reception cannot be separated entirely. Artists' and intellectuals' archives, if studied closely, preserve a dynamic, non-linear history which is in part carried by the bodies and minds involved in previous performances.⁵ Performance art, when practised, has the potential to generate radical, embodied responses to lived reality, just as it has the potential to make critical comments on the production of history. Critical commentary, alongside such radical and embodied responses, has the potential to impel art historiography towards critical awareness and a productive non-linearity.

Alongside performance, the late 1960s in Central and Eastern Europe saw the emergence of institutional critique and creative, immersive models of cultural institutions. One example could be the work of the Polish art historian, critic, curator, and organizer Jerzy Ludwiński, who introduced the Museum of Contemporary Art (Muzeum Sztuki Aktualnej) in Łódź as an open system that negated a 'formal and hierarchical organizational structure' and introduced a liaison between scholars and practising artists who mutually enriched, influenced each others' works.⁶ In line with such developments, the conduct of art historical research and writing changed as well. Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk wrote in 2006 that it was during

4) Cf. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004.

5) Kata Krasznahorkai, 'The Storming of the Authoritarian Archive – Doing Performance Archiving as an Artistic Act,' in Sandra Frimmel, Tomáš Glanc, Sabine Hänsgen, Katalin Krasznahorkai, Nastasia Louveau, Dorota Sajewska and Sylvia Sasse, eds, *Doing Performance Art History*, 2020, Open Apparatus Book 1., not paginated, <https://doi.org/10.17892/app.2020.0000>.

6) Magdalena Ziolkowska, 'Introduction,' in *Notes from the Future of Art. Selected Writings by Jerzy Ludwinski*, Magdalena Ziolkowska, ed., Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum Public Research #01, 2007, 9–11 (here 10).

the 1970s when art history started accepting that artworks are strongly determined by the political, social, economic and cultural circumstances under which they emerged.⁷ What we propose in the present essay is *a fruitful combination of performative creativity and interrelationality*. Performative creativity feeds from the embodied processing of intellectual thought and history writing, while, by ‘interrelationality,’ we mean the careful examination of the theoretical, cultural, social and political contexts under which performance artworks came into being. The methodological framework that grows out of this combination promises a simultaneous and contrasting investigation of historical context, intellectual backgrounds, friendships, performance art histories, material remains, archival work, and a live history told by guardians and their close circles. Under the term ‘guardians’ we mean key figures who were the primary actors involved in shaping and introducing theories, histories, and sometimes even the aesthetics of performance art, and inscribing them into canons of art historiography and criticism.

The proposed method can be seen as an encouragement for scholars to absorb performative creativity and to engage more deeply with the history of ideas and intellectual currents’ presence and the infiltration of ideas in the field of performance art. The method we propose can perhaps be also seen as an attempt to write (performance) art history in a format different from the North Atlantic paradigm, as described by James Elkins.⁸ Performativity in art history erodes rigid disciplinary frames and may be an inventive step beyond barriers of positivist art history and canonized narratives. Additionally, we aim to give readers an insight into how narratives of performance art history changed over time and how researchers can be aware and attentive and position themselves within (or against?) past and currently trending narratives. As narratives are dominant interpretations and theoretical frameworks in the history of art which define the position of Central and Eastern European performance art in state socialist regimes (like the framing of performance art during state socialism as politically oppositional, clandestine or isolated), we need to look beyond publications that may cement such framings. Scholars of the history of the art of the period and the region should challenge these narratives with reflection and a multifocal, creative investigation that integrates the study of archival materials and oral history interviews with the activation of performance art’s archival remains.

The present essay is a preliminary and not entirely completed testing ground for this methodical approach. First and foremost, our intention, with this method, is to disclose processes of historicization by going back to performance art’s intellectual triggers and to reactivate them for past and present creativity and interrelationality. The key concern driving our historiographic and methodological revisions to twentieth-century cultural histories is the wish to understand the motivations behind the histories presented or written by guardians

7) Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006.

8) ‘... scholars who are familiar with the protocols, narratives, forms of argument, modes of citation, standards of evidence, historiographic precedents, publication standards, conference etiquette, use of theory, sense of neighboring disciplines, range of references, current interpretive methods, principal scholars, and modes of employment and advancement, of what I call North Atlantic art history.’ James Elkins, ‘Afterword,’ in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, eds, *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2015, 203–229 (here 210).

and disclosing these motivations as creative projects, while simultaneously disclosing artistic projects as intellectual endeavours.

Therefore, this study acts within a methodological framework that is transparent about archival hurdles, narrative detours, hierarchies in performance art itself, untold stories, and silenced evidence. Taking up the thoughts of Amelia Jones, we argue that revisiting historicizations of performance requires a closer look at the circumstances under which a performance came into being and how changing circumstances affected its interpretation. Jones meditated on a performance art history that is inclusive of discrepancies and continuities in regard to historical detail and transforming memories and histories.⁹ Building on Jones's concept, we take each step in the construction of narratives into account, including the situation from where (and by whom!) observations and investigations were made and (hi)stories were (re)told in order to take a potentially different path.

This article investigates the ways in which Eastern and Central European performances were (and are) treated and written about, both in the past and the present. This focus enables the establishment of a critical understanding of how accounts – and the image of art and culture under state socialism – have been formed through practices of selection and narration over time. We will challenge these narratives with creativity coming from practising artists' intellectual involvement and art thinkers' artistic engagement expanded by a close up into the historic material related to both.

The essay first provides a short historical overview of performance research narratives in Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, Hungary and the former Czechoslovakia including the methodological challenges of how these narratives have been shaped. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s socialist Hungary experienced fluctuating, nuanced political control over art. It developed a socialist modernity that leant both towards the capitalist world and towards the Soviet Union.¹⁰ This oscillation and a permissive cultural politics allowed for relative artistic freedoms and cooperations. In Czechoslovakia, a pluralist culture flourished during the 1960s, lasting until the end of that decade when so-called 'Normalisation' swept the country after the Soviet invasion of 1968, ending the 'Prague Spring' reforms by the Czechoslovak government.¹¹ After that, most nonconformist art, including performance art, went 'underground' and existed, but was no longer officially supported.¹² The essay focuses

9) Amelia Jones, 'Unpredictable Temporalities: The Body and Performance,' in Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade, eds, *Performing Archives / Archives of Performance*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2013, 53–72.

10) Edit Sasvári, 'Autonómia és kettős beszéd a hatvanas-hetvenes években' [Autonomy and Doublespeak in the Sixties and Seventies], in Edit Sasvári, Sándor Hornyik and Hedvig Turai, eds, *A kettős beszéden innen és túl. Művészet Magyarországon 1956–1980*, Budapest: Vince Kiadó, 2018, 9–17; Sándor Hornyik, 'A szocialista realizmus reformja. A keleti, szovjet típusú modernizáció és a nyugati modernizmus találkozásai,' [The Reform of Socialist Realism: The Meeting of Eastern, Soviet-Type Modernization and Western Modernism], in *A kettős beszéden innen és túl. Művészet Magyarországon 1956–1980*, 113–135.

11) '... the Party's first secretary by a fellow Slovak, Gustav Husák [...] presided over a harsh political crackdown that would set the tone for the two decades following the invasion, years that came to be known as normalizace—a term that captures the mixture of ironic resignation, boredom, and often despair that characterized the 1970s for many people, in particular for the writers, artists, and other intellectuals who had taken advantage of the newly creative public life of the 1960s.' Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent. Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012, 12.

12) Andrea Bátorová, *The Art of Contestation. Performative practices in the 1960s and 1970s in Slovakia*, Bratislava: Comenius University, 2019.

on two case studies: the various, transforming past and present interpretations of works by the Budapest-based artist Tibor Hajas and the Prague-based artist Karel Miler (1940-). These artists have been chosen here as exemplary for their common featured interest in Zen Buddhism. Central and Eastern Europe, from the 1960s well into the 1980s, was particularly rich in artists and performers with intellectual and philosophical interests: the Polish artist Maria Pinińska-Bereś had an ambivalent relationship with Western feminist theory,¹³ while members of the Romanian Sigma Group (formerly Group 1+1+1) were enthusiasts of cybernetics, bionics and psychology.¹⁴

One main task of this essay is to examine the performative character of historical narratives, which is dominated by various acts in and outside the archives such as structuring, taking side notes, exhibiting ephemera with comments and individual interpretations, building discourses, and/or (re)circulating knowledge. The construction of narratives of Central and Eastern European performance art was traditionally regarded as the ‘duty’ of intellectuals and networkers who were close to the respective art scenes. For this analysis we have picked two figures who in the 1970s and 1980s interpreted the work of Hajas and Miler, and were close to the people and sites of Hungarian and Czech performance art: over the course of the 1970s and 1980s: László Beke (1944–2022) and Petr Rezek (1948–2022). These two, whom we describe as ‘guardians’ of performance art, and will be discussed in greater detail in this essay, created a circuit of discursive paths and knowledge production that was often neatly connected to performance artists and their dematerialised artwork. Accordingly, we analyse the role of guardians in the processes of shaping interpretations, discourses, and canonical understandings, while actively engaging in creative practices. The essay outlines how Beke and Rezek influenced the field by creating narratives and intertwining them with contemporary performance practices. Interference between critical and creative work can offer a new understanding of guardians’ vital role in historization processes. The closing part of the essay will summarise the advantages of narrative revision and a multifocal context-bound analysis in alignment with the investigation of discursive and creative practices. The interrelational approach is not only a multiperspectival method, but one which can access historical works of performance art as frameworks for the history of ideas in the arts and as grounds on which researchers can critically retrace and reconstruct how (political) systems shape historiographies. The challenge of this essay is to make these pivotal elements visible and to begin working on them.

13) Agata Jakubowska, *Sztuka i emancypacja kobiet w socjalistycznej Polsce. Przypadek Marii Pinińskiej-Bereś* [Art and the Emancipation of Women in Socialist Poland: The Case of Maria Pinińska-Bereś], Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2022, 12.

14) Attila Tordai-S., ‘The Sigma Experience,’ in Marta Dziewanska, Dieter Roelstraete and Abigail Winograd, eds, *The Other Trans-Atlantic: Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2017, 181–196 (here 182).

Narrative shifts in Central and Eastern European performance art: Tibor Hajas and Karel Miler

The historiography of the exceptionally intense and active event-based art scene of the 1970s and 1980s in Central Europe has gone through various narrative turns in recent years. Throughout the 1990s and well into the early 2000s, most of the performances that had taken place in the state socialist setting were regarded as acts of rebellion, or at least as subversions of the Cold War status quo and the regulative regimes behind the Iron Curtain. One of the first comprehensive volumes on event-based art during and after state socialism, *Body and the East: from the 1960s to the Present* (1999), kicks off with a sweeping and isolating statement: ‘art in the East, particularly in the sixties and seventies, acquired a special utopian dimension, resulting in the emergence of a special type of bohemian artist marked by a heroic individual stance.’¹⁵ While the often critical attitude of performance artists towards hierarchies cannot be completely denied,¹⁶ a shift can certainly be observed towards more differentiated narratives of ‘oppositional’ performances.¹⁷

The process of narrative shifts that affected East and Central European art in general affected performance art too. According to Maja and Reuben Fowkes, in the 1990s, interpretations of Eastern European art tended to respond primarily to the West, while the next decade was marked by looking at local art histories, which then started to expand towards transnational connections.¹⁸ While *Body and the East* stressed how limited the international connections of (performance) artists in state socialisms were, there is currently a boom in publications, conferences, and research projects proving the opposite.¹⁹ Knowledge of event-based art practices in Cold War decades has become more dispersed, and currently focuses more on (border-crossing) collaborations, uncovers archival as well as research gaps, and revisits

15) Zdenka Badovinac, ‘Body and the East,’ in *Body and the East: from the 1960s to the Present*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1999, 15–16.

16) Corinna Kühn, *Medialisierte Körper. Performances und Aktionen der Neoavantgarden Ostmitteleuropas in den 1970er Jahren*, Cologne: Böhlau, 2020.

17) See for instance the following books on the complex counterdiscourses articulated by female Polish artists’ body-reliant works: Karoline Majewska-Güde, *Ewa Partum’s Artistic Practice: An Atlas of Continuity in Different Locations*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2021; Jakubowska, *Sztuka i emancypacja kobiet w socjalistycznej Polsce*.

18) Zsuzsa László, ‘On East European Art: Positions we can stand behind and speak from – Interview with Maja and Reuben Fowkes from Translocal Institute,’ *mezosfera.org*, October 2017, <http://mezosfera.org/on-east-european-art-positions-we-can-stand-behind-and-speak-from/>.

19) See e.g. Antje Kempe, Beáta Hock and Marina Dmitrieva, eds, *Universal – International – Global: Art Historiographies of Socialist Eastern Europe*, Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau, 2023; Beata Hock and Anu Allas, eds, *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, New York and London: Routledge, 2018; Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny and Piotr Piotrowski, ‘Introduction: Geography of Internationalism’ in Bazin, Dubourg Glatigny and Piotrowski, eds, *Art beyond Borders. Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe [1945 – 1989]*, Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2016, 1–28; Bojana Videkanic, *Nonaligned Modernism. Socialist Postcolonialist Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985*, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020; Caterina Preda, *Art and Politics in Modern Dictatorships. A Comparison of Chile and Romania*, London/New York/Shanghai: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; *ARTMargins*, Special Section: Artists’ Networks in Latin America and Eastern Europe, 1: 2–3, June–October 2012. See also the following research projects and conferences: *Resonances: Regional and Transregional Cultural Transfer in the Art of the 1970s*. Artpool Art Research Center Budapest / Comenius University Bratislava / Academic Research Center of the Academy of Fine Arts Prague / Piotr Piotrowski Center for Research on East-Central Europe at the Adam Mickiewicz University, 2021–2024; *Die globale DDR: eine transkulturelle Kunstgeschichte (1949–1990)* conference, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen and Technische Universität Dresden, June 9–11, 2022; *Socialist Exhibition Cultures. International Exhibitions in the Socialist World, 1950–1991*, 2021-, research project and workshop series, <https://socialistexhibitions.com/>.

materials published by performance art's gatekeepers. It looks for genealogies of embodiment and it complicates the relationship between experimental non-conformist aesthetics and the state, with its socialist ideology-in-practice.²⁰ The most recent narrative turn's challenge is perhaps a methodological one that is currently mapping the (documented and untold) circumstances under which artworks were produced and relates both artworks and their context of production to the previous and present trends in historiography.²¹

Following this challenge, it seems crucial to stress 'the importance of an artwork's specific spatial and political context (its situation).'²² Under the aegis of the term 'interrelationality,' Amelia Jones suggests 'that we need to look at each project individually as it enacts and affects specific bodies within the complexities of its unfolding over time in particular spaces.'²³ The present histories of performance art in state socialisms are the outcome of multiple perspectives and research approaches that exist in the field of Central and Eastern European Studies. We suggest a thorough analysis of the evolution of how evidence, on which histories and narratives are based, was previously made, considering the position(s) from where those observations and investigations were made. The following paragraphs reveal the transformations of narratives in the case of the emblematic performance artists Tibor Hajas and Karel Miler.

Regarding *Vigil*, for example, the previously-described performance by Hajas, one of the first respondents was the art historian and critic Lóránd Hegyi, who argued that the piece powerfully expressed a sense of 'existential loneliness.'²⁴ In 1980, the Hungarian art historian and networker László Beke interpreted Hajas's artistic practice as a metaphor for life: through various flashes and glowing images the discrepancies of art and the absolute and even the battle between good and evil could be seen.²⁵ This narration of Hajas's works as an existential search in a world of lies was strengthened by most posthumous exhibitions, notably the 1987 event at the Museum of St Stephen in Székesfehérvár and the 1997 exhibition at the Ernst Museum of Budapest. In 1990 the Anderson Art Gallery in the US opened a retrospective on Hajas's works under the title *Nightmareworks*, which sought to connect Hajas's practice to those by Western European and US-based artists (e.g. Viennese actionists and Chris Burden) thereby strengthening the narrative of a confrontational activist whose pivotal works sought to grasp freedom in a world of limitations.²⁶ Furthermore, in 2005, the Museum Ludwig in Budapest hosted an exhibition dedicated to Hajas's oeuvre titled *Emergency Landing*

20) For instance, Maja Fowkes, *The Green Bloc: Neo-Avant-Garde Art and Ecology under Socialism*, Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2015; Emese Kürti, *Screaming Hole. Poetry, Sound and Action as Intermedia Practice in the Work of Katalin Ladik*, Budapest: acb ResearchLab, 2017; Katalin Cseh-Varga, *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism: Art of the Second Public Sphere*. London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2023.

21) This challenge has been recognized by other scholars too: *What is to be Done? Methodological Challenges to Art Historical Research in Central and Eastern Europe*, conference, ICMA – The Institute for Multidisciplinary Research in the Arts, 'George Enescu' National University of Arts, Iasi, October 12–13, 2023.

22) Jones, 'Unpredictable Temporalities,' 63.

23) Jones, 'Unpredictable Temporalities,' 68.

24) Lóránd Hegyi, 'Erdély – Hajas – Legény – Pauer. Alternatív művészet és a művészet státusza' [Erdély – Hajas – Legény – Pauer: Alternative Art and the Status of Art], *Bercsényi* 28–30, 2, 1980, 9.

25) László Beke, 'A performance és Hajas Tibor' [Performance and Tibor Hajas], *Mozgó világ*, 10, 1980, 98–112.

26) John P. Jacob, 'Recalling Hajas,' in *Nightmare Works: Tibor Hajas*, Steven High, ed, Richmond, VA: Anderson Art Gallery, 1990, <https://www.c3.hu/~ligal/CafeHajas.htm>.

(*Kényszerleszállás*), which also stressed the position of the performer within the Kádár regime as a lonely and conscious offspring of the Viennese actionists and the happening actors in Cologne and Düsseldorf.²⁷ This account can be seen as exemplifying the above-mentioned phase of turning towards the West for interpretative frames. The reading of Hajas's artistic practice offered a story of a pure artist who wanted to break away from all ruling traditions and socialist compromises, while presenting the 'physical and intellectual risks of freedom without self-interest.'²⁸

However, back in 2005, at a conference dedicated to Hajas's oeuvre held at Eötvös College in Budapest, Csaba Marczinka gave a paper on the influence of Eastern philosophies and metaphysical works on Hajas's texts, claiming that Hajas should not be regarded as a politically oppositional artist or as a *samizdat* poet, but rather as a metaphysical writer.²⁹ This shift in perception was strengthened by more recent interpretations and exhibitions such as *On the other side of in-between existence (A köztes lét túldalán)* staged in 2019 at the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts in Budapest, which offered a new narrative layer embracing Hajas's connection to both Eastern philosophies and meditation practices.³⁰ In fact, *Vigil* used many motifs of the circulation of body, soul, and death which seemed to have been inspired by Buddhism. In addition, earlier pieces by Hajas also showed a clear commitment to this topic, such as the photo action series *Tumo* (1979)³¹ and the performance and photo documentation work *Chöd* (1979). Both terms come from the book *Tibetan Mysteries (Tibeti misztériumok)* and they refer to body and meditation practices.³² Hajas's interest in Buddhism originated from a 1944 translation by the Hungarian 'philosopher Béla Hamvas who re-edited the 1935 edition of *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*, a book which introduced Hungarian readers to the entire belief and dogma system of the Tibetan Buddhist Lamaism.'³³ Reinterpreting the original edition, Hamvas's Hungarian version emphasized two Tibetan mysteries: the practice of inner fire development (Tummo) and a drastic visualization practice on the ego's liquidation (Chöd).³⁴ These were terms and practices that underpinned Hajas's works between 1978 and 1980.

According to Béla Kelényi, curator of the 2019 exhibition, in *Chöd* Hajas reinterpreted a specific meditation technique during which the ascetic offered his own body to otherworldly

27) Veronika Baksa-Soós, 'Kényszerleszállás. Hommage à Hajas Tibor' [Emergency Landing: Hommage à Tibor Hajas], *Catalogue of Ludwig Múzeum*, Budapest, 2005.

28) Károly Szűcs, 'Test és kép' [Body and Image], *Balkon*, 6, 2005 (URL: http://www.balkon.hu/archiv/balkon05_06/02szucs.html).

29) See: https://archive.org/details/hri_htk_mp3/20051022-hajas-szekcio2.mp3

30) See Gabriella Schuller's review of the 2019 exhibition: Gabriella Schuller, 'Hajas és Hamvas' [Hajas and Hamvas], *Balkon*, 4, 2019, 10–14.

31) The photos of *Tumo* show Hajas's body with prepared and painted symbols, as well as various medical tools such as a suture needle, gauze bandage, infusion lines, and injection needles.

32) These aim at terminating attachment to the body and the ego, and letting the soul escape the body. 'A closer look into Hajas's intellectual interests at the time and his private relationship with performance artist János Szirtes reveal the organic connectedness of *Vigil* to the blurred line between those who are alive and those who are dead.' Cseh-Varga, *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism*, 123.

33) Cseh-Varga, *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism*, 123. An American anthropologist Yelling Evans-Wentz originally authored the book, but did not understand Tibetan and therefore worked with three translators.

34) Csaba Králl, 'A halál kikényszerített közelsége: Interjú Kelényi Bélával' [The Forced Proximity of Death: An Interview with Béla Kelényi], *Színház*, June 2019, 17–19.

creatures as a bloody feast, cutting himself off from life as material delusion.³⁵ For instance, the performer drank blue paint and then vomited; then, his body, deprived of agency, was put in a pose of utter vulnerability. Meanwhile, a textual montage of Hamvas's *Tibetan Mysteries* could be heard from a tape recorder. Besides *Chöd*, 'Vigil' also has to be understood in this Buddhist context of the separation of body and soul, the first intense experience of which Hajas underwent while in prison at the age of 19: "I can imagine that a person's final moment in life may be longer than his entire life. I have come close to this myself. For this reason, I am interested in this, and in its preparation, much more." The performance invited its audience to observe and perhaps join in the metaphysical journey of Hajas's tightrope walk between life and death.³⁶

Unlike Hajas, the Czech artist, art historian, and translator Karel Miler belonged to performers in Prague's vibrant action art scene of the 1970s, who, until recently, have not received much close attention. Indeed, even with the 2014 publication of Pavlína Morganová's seminal book *Czech Action Art*,³⁷ this situation has not changed much: for a long time, Miler was regarded as 'just' a name in a long list of other Czech and Slovak experimental artists such as Petr Štembera, Jiří Valoch, Jiří Kocman, Alex Mlynarčík, Jan Mlčoch, and Stano Filko. While these personalities became part of the canon of East and Central European performance history, Miler was apparently restricted to what his photo-performances suggested, which was silence. Interestingly, this silence may continue even with the aim of historicizing and reconstructing narrative turns, for in 1979 Miler quitted his artistic activity in order to devote himself strictly to academic and curatorial work at the National Gallery in Prague.³⁸ Five years ago he refused to participate in interviews regarding his performances based on the argument that 'his background is Zen Buddhism which communicates with silence.'³⁹ The extant photographs of Miler's actions should talk for themselves, however, they should also be open for (respectful) interpretation.

When looking at Miler's photo-performances, one can see the following: carefully composed scenes with minimalistic action frozen in a single image, or in a series of images. The body's position in relation to its surroundings is crucial: either a geometric composition or how the artist's body is detached or immersed into its urban or natural environment can be seen. In *Identification (Identifikace)* (1973) Miler is captured when, curled up in a ball, he falls from a pile of concrete panels stacked several metres high, and is relentlessly pulled downward. In the background and on the periphery, socialist-style housing blocks known from Eastern European folk republican scenery can be recognised. Or, the action *Sun – Sun (Slunce – Slunce)* (1979) that explores the relation between the Sun, body and Earth in a series of four photographs could be picked out. In it, the artist demonstrates humans,' and perhaps their souls,' movement of the body on a vertical axis between celestial bodies.

35) Králl, 'A halál kikényszerített közelsége,' 19.

36) Cseh-Varga, *The Hungarian Avant-Garde and Socialism*, 123.

37) Pavlína Morganová, *Czech Action Art: Happenings, Actions, Events, Land Art, Body Art and Performance Art Behind the Iron Curtain*, Prague: Karolinum Press, Charles University, 2014.

38) Luba Kmeťová – Adam Drda, 'Ukončete to, radím vám! / s Karlem Milerem hovoří Luba Kmeťová a Adam Drda' [End it, I advise you! Luba Kmeťová and Adam Drda in conversation with Karel Miler], *Revolver revue*, 109, 2017, 37–69.

39) Pavlína Morganová, email to K. Cseh-Varga, 22 April 2019.

The first reflections on Miler's photo-actions were often presented as conversations with close colleagues, and were frequently circulated in semi- or unofficial publication formats. In a 1979 interview with Karel Srp, Miler mentioned his philosophical approach to the spoken word and explained how it influenced his art.⁴⁰ The Czech philosopher and art theorist Petr Rezek also documented his talks with Czech artists in his book *Body, Object and Reality in Contemporary Art*. 'A meeting with action artists,' an essay in the book on the work of Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch and Miler, is a phenomenological interpretation of their performances as dreams.⁴¹ It is an example of the fruitful liaison of performance theory and practice, which will be touched upon in the second part of this essay. A 1978 article by Helena Kontová and Jaroslav Anděl revisited the use of the photographic medium in contemporary Czechoslovak art, investigating the reasons why Miler explored the potentials of photography in processual art.⁴² This selection of early reflections on Miler's actions shows a richness of perspectives mostly produced by an intimate circle of friends and colleagues that spilled out at the time into internationally recognized magazines, such as *Flash Art*.⁴³

From the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s, there was a pause in scholarly investigation of Czech action art of the 1970s. Almost in line with the identity-seeking wave of East and Central European art described by Maja Fowkes, there was a recognisable urge to catalogue experimental art across the Czech and Slovak lands, often with a focus on how these actions reacted to the politics of state socialism. The first retrospective exhibition of Karel Miler's work between 1970 and 1980, held in Prague City Gallery in 1997, consciously brought the socio-political background of performance into the discussion.⁴⁴ The historicization of the 1990s (and early 2000s), no matter how comprehensive it attempted to be, rarely addressed the intellectual influences, international networks, personal and existential difficulties, gate-opening friendships, or artistic inspirations in detail.

In the past few years, research approaches have become more differentiated and researchers have started addressing the actors, philosophies, media, and spaces Miler was connected to in the 1970s. This has included a topography of the venues where he undertook and displayed his actions, an in-depth exploration of photography's connection to performance including thorough references to Zen Buddhism and phenomenology, and a reconstruction of how Miler's work actually appeared in *Flash Art*. But, in aiming to understand how his photo-performances came into being, an even broader view is needed, in which sources and their presentation and performances are in dialogue with each other. An interrelational approach would also include the status and reception of Zen Buddhism in 'normalised' Czechoslovak culture, the knowledge of contemporary art and philosophy which circulated in the Prague National Gallery's offices where Miler worked,

40) Karel Srp, *Karel Miler: možnosti, Situace č. 2 (příloha Bulletinu Jazz)* [Karel Miler: Options, Situation no. 2 (Annex to the Jazz Bulletin)], Prague, 1979.

41) Petr Rezek, *Tělo, věc a skutečnost v současném umění* [The Body, Object, and Reality in Contemporary Art], Prague: Jazzová sekce, 1982, 97–102.

42) Helena Kontová – Jaroslav Anděl, 'ČSSR fotografie' [Photography in the ČSSR], *Spot*, 11, 1978, 7–29.

43) Perhaps the most prominent analysis of Czech action art's international distribution through the art magazine *Flash Art* is *Networking the Bloc* by Klara Kemp-Welch. See: Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc. Experimental Art in Eastern Europe, 1965–1981*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2018, 369–383.

44) *Karel Miler, Petr Štembera, Jan Mlčoch: 1970–1980, 25. 11. 1997 – 25. 1. 1998*, exhibition curated by Karel Srp, Prague: Prague City Art Gallery / Old City Hall), 1997.

the organisation of the artist's photo archive, and understanding of the points at which intellectual impacts shaped Miler's actions.

As much as it may be tempting to follow current trends in the internationalisation of socialist culture or regarding artists ignoring the political setting of their home country, neither Hajas nor Miler can be separated from the politicised realities of state socialisms. Despite the intentions of some of the guardians of performance archives, or the wishes of the artists themselves to be viewed as apolitical subjects, most East and Central European performers had to leverage a life and culture dictated by the state. To achieve such a twist in approach, the image of what socialist culture (and politics) was actually like must be redefined. With his photo-performances, Miler practised the general behaviour of Czechoslovak people 'who showed little interest in public life and politics' and simply did not want to get involved.⁴⁵ Due to his intractable behaviour, Miler was even removed from his academic staff position, although he was able to rejoin the National Gallery as an art historian and curator.⁴⁶ Subversion may not be completely erased from the narratives on performance art during state socialism, but it has to be nuanced by individual life stories, artistic techniques, and transcultural influences.

Hajas's immersion in the mediated and re-edited Hungarian versions of Buddhist texts was combined with a radical practice of self-harm along with a conscious use of technical media as means of deconstructing presence through splitting the agonising or unconscious body and the objectified recorded voice. This split between the body and consciousness must have been in dialogue with his personal experience with the Hungarian socialist authorities and their repressive strategies, as in 1965 he was imprisoned for 14 months and then permanently banned from every college and university in Hungary.⁴⁷ The accounts of Hajas's works were determined by various guardians (László Beke and János Gát, for example) who prioritised certain interpretative frames (for instance, existential battles and performative meditations) over others (such as the questions of gender).

As has been shown here, discovering the various narratives of an artist's performances and reflecting on these narratives' knowledge-making processes can shed light on the changing understanding of the memory and afterlife of state socialist regimes and their regional art scenes. Today, we already recognize the permissive-repressive nature of real existing socialism and its complex political bargaining processes, socialist realism and internationalism received differentiated scholarly attention, yet, we do not know much about the processes shaping knowledge and theoretical work in the arts.⁴⁸ This was primarily the work of guardians who had their fair share in (performance) art production and history. A focus on guardians' archival, intellectual and creative work can offer a different angle on, and insights into state socialist culture. On the one hand, through examining cases of performance art, the following questions can be asked: what discourses of bodies were possible? how much

45) Bátorová, *The Art of Contestation*, 153.

46) Pavlína Morganová, 'There Would Be No Kovanda without Miler,' *Revista ARTA*, 20–21, 2016, 27.

47) Annamária Szóke, 'Életrajz' ('Biography'), *C3 Video Archive and Media Art Collection Catalogue*, 30 November, 1998. (URL: <http://dokumentumtar.c3.hu/lindex.php?l=hu&id=1496&dok=cv&dokumentacio=1&dosszie=0&kiallitas=1>).

48) An exception may be the work of Nancy Jachec: *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940–1960*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, and Jachec, *Europe's Intellectuals and the Cold War. The Society of European Culture, Post-War Politics and International Relations*, London, New York and New Delhi: I. B. Tauris, 2015.

were these bodies monitored? and how invisible and visible restrictions of the past and the present can help us to present a more nuanced image of state socialisms? On the other hand, through studying the narrative shifts pertaining to performance art, agencies, hegemonies, and discursive-creative practices of historization can be closely monitored.

Guardians and Creators of Narratives: László Beke and Petr Rezek

Speaking of performance art's narratives and their turning points over the past decades, it seems essential to identify those who stand behind various narratives. Who were the narratives' primary sources? How did they determine the most appropriate historiographical interpretations of past performances? We will continue examining the formative voices in Central and Eastern European performance art of the 1970s and 1980s. We go back in time to the first interpretations of Hungarian and Czech works of performance art and will identify and elaborate on the entanglement of theory and art practice.

We argue that in Central and Eastern Europe it was often intellectuals who responded first to performance pieces, and that their publications are the key works upon which future narrative production rests.⁴⁹ Critics, artists, art historians, friends, and family members, the so-called guardians, not only create narratives, but they ensure that the archives and memories of past performances from the 1960s onwards are being kept intact. While this essay considers gatekeepers, advocates, and caretakers alike to be guardians, there are slight differences among them. Gatekeepers dominate the (past) discourse and history of performance art, and their publications remain the primary references for the region's action-based art. Advocates similarly promote certain narratives, and often have impressive networks which they can use to share their knowledge, yet their international visibility is lower than that of gatekeepers. Caretakers are the often overlooked actors who care for archival remains (the remnants of past performances), and also produce mostly local theoretical notes on performance art; as such, they are the key primary contacts in accessing ephemera⁵⁰ Tracing guardians' biographies, motivations, collection procedures, and intimate relationships with the making of performance art *per se*, can lay the foundation for a critical and non-linear genealogy of performance art history in the region.

Besides reconstructing the path of how performance art history's narratives shifted from a politicized subject to an analysis of regional or transnational exchanges, a thorough look into archival strategies and guardians' histories may offer something even more substantial. During the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the intellectual production around / with / in performance art was characterized by diversity, and the ways it was documented and theorized often existed hand-in-hand with the artistic production. Many figures of Central and Eastern European art

49) This interview conducted by the Hungarian art historian and networker László Beke, for instance, represents an important attempt to understand and contextualize the first Hungarian happening of 1966: 'Beszélgetés Szentjóby Tamással: Hangszalagra vette Beke László, 1971. március 11-én' [Interview with Tamás Szentjóby: Taped by László Beke on 11 March 1971], *Jelenlét*, 1–2, 1989, 252–262.

50) The role of archival caretakers is often taken on by the former, often likewise artistically active partners of artists who passed away. In Central and Eastern Europe we have seen a number of examples in which archival caretakers are women, as it is the case for artist Zofia Kulik who produced a series of films on her work in and with the KwieKulik archive entitled *Cultivating the Archive*.

were forced to leave the path of officially promoted aesthetics and to act as active promoters, organisers, and creators of experimental tendencies. One can see a fusion of roles and openness on the part of guardians towards new form and experiment. The two exemplary cases of Petr Rezek and László Beke will help demonstrate here the entanglement of *thinking* and *doing* performance during the 1970s. We have already seen that both Beke and Rezek played substantial roles in shaping the understanding of Hajas's and Miler's oeuvre, and we will disclose their input in inspiring the original performance aesthetics and show that they were performing actions themselves.

Petr Rezek was not only an early witness to performances by Štembera, Miler, and Mlčoch in the 1970s, he was also their collaborator, who even provided a location for Miler's retrospective in 1977.⁵¹ Rezek, an expert in phenomenological psychology and phenomenology, was close to the existential phenomenologist Jan Patočka, who studied directly from Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. In the 1970s Rezek provided a theoretical armature for the work of a number of intellectually highly sensitive artists. Rezek regularly visited the offices of Štembera and Miler, who in the 1970s worked at the National Gallery in Prague.⁵² It seems that these personalities formed an intellectual hub and were constantly looking for chances to exchange and broaden their knowledge. He turned his conversations and notes with the three performers into a thorough analysis of their actions, in which he combined his expertise in philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics.⁵³ Additionally, he produced self-published volumes on contemporary art both from Czechoslovakia and abroad. The *samizdat* publication series, published between 1978 and 1984 and consisting of 40 issues, demonstrates Rezek's comprehensive knowledge of contemporary international art trends.⁵⁴ The themes he touched upon in the series stretch from Fluxus to artist books and body art. His information network can be compared to that of László Beke, since between 1976 and 1981 he gave mostly unofficial lectures on American pop art, conceptual art and minimal art which were most likely transferred into the aforementioned *samizdat* series and other publications.⁵⁵ Rezek's 1976 book *Philosophical Notes on Recent Art*, with a lengthy chapter on Czech action art, was officially published in 1982 as *Body, Object and Reality in Contemporary Art*. This important monograph offered an in-depth investigation of the body's role in contemporary art – an interest triggered and intensified by his direct encounters with the Czech action artists.⁵⁶

51) Pavlína Morganová, 'Bytové výstavy: médium neoficiálního umění sedmdesátých až osmdesátých let' [Apartment exhibitions: a medium of unofficial art from the 1970s until the 1980s], *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, 25, 2018, 72–97.

52) Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*, 373.

53) Rezek, *Tělo, věc a skutečnost v současném umění*, 95–102.

54) This publication series was basically a reader with summaries and translations on art styles, genres, -isms and personalities usually inaccessible to general audiences in Czechoslovakia of the time due to political restrictions. Topics included: Vito Acconci, artist books, Joseph Beuys, Body Art, John Cage, conceptual art, Fluxus, Happening, Dick Higgins, Christo, Milan Knížak, Land Art, Minimal Art, Hermann Nitsch, Performance, Frank Stella and Donald Judd, Wolf Vostell, Andy Warhol. Self-publications like these were usually circulated in small circles, thus expanding the public spheres offered by the respective socialist regimes. The series can today be found at the Research Centre of the Czech Academy of Fine Arts, Prague.

55) Petr Rezek, 'Phenomenology of Pop Art,' in *Hot Art, Cold War – Southern and Eastern European Writing on American Art, 1945–1990*, Claudia Hopkins and Iain Boyd Whyte, eds, London and New York: Routledge, 11–28.

56) Rezek, *Tělo, věc a skutečnost v současném umění*, 1982.

While Rezek himself, to the authors' knowledge, was not involved in the physical practice of performance art, his philosophy greatly benefited from working and thinking together with, for example, Štembera and Miler. This article has already approached the work of Miler as comprised of meditative, rather static, poses that resonated with his leaning towards Zen Buddhism and phenomenology and the (art) thinkers around him who boosted Miler's minimalistic performances. Although Štembera, like Miler, was passionate about these philosophical currents, his actions exposed the vulnerability of the body more explicitly.⁵⁷ Štembera's actions were less static and showed more nudity, although both artists explored similar terrain, including humans' ambivalent relationship with nature. Mlčoch's enactments were similar to those of Štembera, involving photography and a relentless treatment of the body in terms of how much it can take. Despite all the formal differences between Miler's, Mlčoch's and Štembera's actions, Rezek interpreted their meditative and highly expressive event-based art in the same light. There was mutual inspiration, too, as Czech action artists incorporated much of phenomenological thinking into their works. As much as Rezek can be described as an experimental and open philosopher, Miler, Štembera, and Mlčoch, whose work will be explored in more detail below, can also be characterised as intellectually active and practising artists. Like Rezek, they extracted interpretations of these intellectual currents into their own performances.

László Beke was even more intensely involved in embodied art practices next to his role as a guardian who theorised it. While Rezek's name rarely pops up as a reference for understanding the origins of Czech performance art, Beke is a recurring citation in discussions of Hungarian experimental art, including performance; like Rezek, though, Beke also had solid transregional and international connections. In the 1980s, Beke represented a major voice in theorizing performance art in Hungary through analyzing various works by Hajas. In addition, Beke connected the origins of the genre especially to Hajas as the initiator of performance art in the country.⁵⁸ Beke offered a narrative according to which Hajas differed from other media artists precisely because of the conscious and radical symbiosis of media forms and life praxis in his work. In addition, Beke called attention to the uneasy ethical interconnection of artistic practice and theoretical interpretation.⁵⁹

Besides being an active critic of contemporary Hungarian performance art, Beke was actively involved in planning, executing, and theorizing art productions from the 1970s onwards.⁶⁰ The complexity of all the cultural roles Beke took on is evident in the term 'project artist' that was used to describe him, a term that not only pays tribute to the degree to which

57) This is confirmed by Hana Buddeus, who also reports that Miler attended several of Jan Patočka's lectures. See Buddeus, *Zobrazení bez reprodukce? Fotografie a performance v českém umění sedmdesátých let 20. století* [Display without Reproduction? Photography and Performance in the Czech Art of the 1970s], Prague: UMRUM, 2017.

58) László Beke, 'A performance és Hajas Tibor,' 98.

59) Beke, 'A performance és Hajas Tibor,' 101 and 110–112.

60) Piotr Piotrowski, *Artysta między rewolucją a reakcją. Studium z zakresu etycznej historii sztuki awangardy rosyjskiej* [The Artist Between Revolution and Reaction. A Study in the Ethical History of Russian Avant-Garde Art], Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz University Press, 1993; László Beke, 'CONCEPT ART AS THE POSSIBILITY OF YOUNG HUNGARIAN ARTISTS,' in Felipe Ehrenberg, Terry Wright and David Mayor, eds, *HUNGARIAN SCHMUCK*, March/April 1973. We can also reference the KEMKI Central European Research Institute of Art History's 2023 acquisition of László Beke's archive and a recent event exploring his creative-discursive engagement: World-Famous World-Archives – László Beke 80. Presentation and Discussion, KEMKI, Budapest, May 23, 2024 (URL: https://kemki.hu/en/events/details/59-World-Famous-World-Archives_Laszlo_Beke_80).

he was embedded in the drive of conceptual art, but which highlights Beke's organisational and creative skills too.⁶¹ Beke made meetings and exhibitions happen, collected and shared artworks, and promoted artists abroad: 'Beke proactively built his connections and turned them into events.'⁶² Yet, he did more than that: he also became an initiator and participant of artworks involving his own body. The creative experience of doing performance refreshed the discourses Beke implemented at the time. A couple of briefly explained examples of Beke's artistic involvements can prepare the terrain for analysing the impact of these performances on the Hungarian networker's writings.

Beke opened the second edition of the Szürenon exhibition series with a performative intervention in which he cooperated with photographer László Haris.⁶³ Prior to the exhibition's opening, Haris took a snapshot of Beke at the site of the show while he was reading the script he had prepared for the opening. Besides the photograph, an audio-recording captured Beke's voice too. The photograph was developed into a life-size photographic reproduction of the critic. On the day of the opening (15 September 1979) the life-size photograph was installed in the exhibition hall with a hidden loudspeaker. At the scheduled time of the opening speech Beke appeared in front of his photograph – wearing the same clothes he had worn on the day the photograph was taken. He cleared his throat to give a sign to the technician, who started to play Beke's recorded voice. Beke looked puzzled, turned around a couple of times, and realised that there was no need for him to give his speech since his role had already been taken. He then left the exhibition hall.⁶⁴

This was not the only occasion on which Beke collaborated with artists or organised performances or actions himself. Seven years earlier, in the summer of 1972, he was the main initiator of the now iconic meeting of Hungarian, Czech, and Slovak artists at the Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár near the vacation area of Lake Balaton. Beke staged handshakes between the participants of the artists' meeting, made a dictionary installation of Czech, Hungarian, and Slovak words, and as a highlight of the get-together, realized a rope-pulling performance among all the artists.⁶⁵

61) György Galántai, 'Hogyan tudott a művészet az életben elkezdődni? Adalékok a boglári történehez' [How could Art Begin within Life? Additions to the History of Boglár], in Júlia Klaniczay and Edit Sasvári, eds, *Törvénytelen avantgárd. Galántai György balatonboglári kápolna műterme 1970–1973* [Illegal Avantgarde: György Galántai's Chapel Studio in Balatonboglár 1970–1973], Budapest: Artpool-Balassi, 2003, 43–90 (here 70).

62) Katalin Cseh-Varga, 'Immaterial Countercartographies. Approaches to the Conceptual Art of Gábor Attalai,' in Elize Mazadiego, ed., *Charting Space: The Cartographies of Conceptual Art*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023, 77–98, (here 84).

63) Szürenon was an iconic exhibition series of experimental and independent art in Budapest. The name 'Szürenon' is the equivalent of 'sur et non' which stands for a group of Hungarian artists who turned away from surrealism and non-figuration. Ottó Mezei, 'A Szürenon és kisugárzása' [Szürenon and its Radiation], *Ars Hungarica* 19: 1, 1991, 65–83. See also László Haris, *Cage Action, Documentary Photographs No. 1–7*, Budapest: Ludwig Museum, 1973/2012 (URL: <https://www.ludwigmuseum.hu/en/work/cage-action-documentary-photographs-no-1-7>).

64) Sándor Szilágyi, *Neoavantgárd tendenciák a magyar fotóművészetben 1965–1984* [Neo-Avant-Garde Tendencies in Hungarian Photo Art 1965–1984], Budapest: Új Mandátum Kiadó, 2007, 100.

65) 'Cseh-szlovák-magyar művészek találkozója Beke László szervezésében. 1972. Augusztus 26–27' [Czech-Slovak-Hungarian Artists' Meeting organized by László Beke, 26–27 August 1972], Balatonboglári Kápolnaműterem (URL: <https://artpool.hu/boglar/1972/720826b.html>). See also, Katalin Cseh-Varga, 'Language Paths: Methods for a New Cultural Geography of (East-Central) Europe,' *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny* 35, 2023, 12–40 (here 39).

In 1978, artist Dóra Maurer ‘(...) involved Beke in a new variation of her photo interaction series (for one, two, or more cameras) (KCsV and KD: entitled *Parallel Lines. Photo-action with László Beke (MD170)*). Beke was asked to walk on one side of the street and Maurer on the opposite side was trying to follow the path and the pace of his movement with her camera.’⁶⁶ The list of Beke’s actions, mostly as an organiser or collaborator, is long and deserves close attention, especially in terms of the way this participation shaped his scholarly work.

The link between *thinking* performance and *doing* performance can be the basis of a creative-discursive approach to art historical research. Such an approach, that is inspired by the radical and direct spirit of the use of body in the creation of art, can track down missteps in performances’ cultural memory, its canonization, and labeling. A method that investigates the effect of practising art, theorising art, and putting historical material and context next to it, allows a complementary and critical view of narratives and their turns. In the next section we will explore the outcome of the amalgamation of performance and discourse in Beke’s and Rezek’s involvement with performance art practice. What happens when performance’s directness and unveiling enters the sphere of art critique and theory? What knowledge will be produced? How is that knowledge different from, for example, a reductive framing of (past) performances as political commentaries?

Guardians and Performance Practice

When investigating the histories of performance art, scholars are usually concerned with artists’ creations and analysing their formal and contextual qualities, such as interpreting a performance’s straightforward or more subtle political connotations. However, doing this excludes an important component of knowledge production concerning the history of performance in East and Central Europe, namely its milestones in historicization and narrativization. Furthermore, scholars and historians of performance art, perhaps even beyond the region, only rarely focus on how performers influenced the work of intellectuals in a creative sense, or how art critics, art historians, and theoreticians were inspired to test out experimental theory formats through the impact of artistic currents. The cases of Beke and Rezek both show that critical or intellectual work, and artistic work, were often two sides of the same coin.

This section of the essay takes the previous section (aimed at proving that interconnections existed between *thinking* and *doing* performance) a few steps further because it aims to disclose how Beke and Rezek internalised the creative and engaging nature of performance in their writings. The discourse which these theorists built on the art they experienced and promoted has a methodical foundation in performance’s potential for shaking up the status quo. By reconstructing the interconnections of enactment and intellectual production, art history can not only open up towards non-positivist working mechanisms, but may also show ways to leave or reform a binding, North Atlantic academic frame that involves disciplinary hierarchies, canons and methods developed and practised in the Western hemisphere. This

66) László Zsuzsa, ‘Dictionaries of Friendship: Transnational Artistic Dialogues in First Person Plural,’ *ARTMargins Online*, 22 February 2024 (URL: <https://artmargins.com/dictionaries-of-friendship/>).

essay's hypothesis is that through revisiting performative modes of knowledge production, it is possible, on the one hand, to recognise socialist life and culture as aesthetically and theoretically inventive. And on the other hand, to consider developing dynamic academic practices for historical / historians' work based on the combination of *thinking* and *doing* – both science and art. A glimpse into László Beke's archive and writings helps discover the points at which the production of knowledge of relatively underground art and its practice met and influenced each other. Trying out all sorts of creative exercises in producing documents and knowledge naturally led Beke to process-based art, and made him a partner in and initiator of performances. Opening an exhibition with a minimalist action, as in the case of the 1979 Szürenon show, could be mentioned next to the football training sessions Beke organised for Hungarian artists, which he himself participated in, to prepare for a non-realised match between Hungarian and international artists in 1972 at *Documenta 5*.⁶⁷ Drafts, plans, and photographs document his creative involvement, while more analytical texts disclose how he was able to accommodate both his creative and theoretical ambitions.

An avalanche of activities in which he took part in art productions started, perhaps, with his 1971 conceptual art collection project *IMAGINATION (ELKÉPZELÉS)*. Building on the practice of artistic collaboration, he sent out a call to Hungarian artists and poets to submit artworks that documented ideas and artistic concepts.⁶⁸ By activating these artists, Beke not only de-materialised and criticised the concept of art institutions, but also authored an accompanying text with theoretical and creative reflections. These reflections are mainly meditations on the execution and stratified meaning of all 31 de-materialised artworks that now form part of the collection.⁶⁹ For example, the painter László Lakner submitted in an 'art package' exercises to *IMAGINATION* – his set of artworks touched upon events that are inevitable.⁷⁰ One of Lakner's artworks is a series of instructions for viewers about spelling out certain letters put next to each other. If someone starts spelling out 'tuk' repeatedly and loudly in Hungarian without pausing, between 'k' and 't' another sound will appear (namely 'ö'). According to Beke and Lakner, one cannot prevent this from happening. Another component of Lakner's 'art package,' belonging to the genre of conceptual art with components meant to be enacted, is his 'material-poem in a nose and tongue language' (*anyagvers orr- és nyelvnyelven*) which consists of a cigarette butt and clove wrapped in a small plastic bag. The instruction on the 'ready-smell-object' says: 'Throw away after smelling once.' Lakner's ready-smell-object is basically an item that calls for action in which the actor will most probably be unable to

67) For more information, see: Katalin Cseh-Varga and Kristóf Nagy, 'The Anti-Football of the Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde. Crossing Art into Immateriality,' unpublished paper delivered at *The Deep Flows of the Running Sea* Conference, Olomouc, April 2016; Kristóf Nagy, *Interview with László Beke*, Budapest, April 8, 2016; Katalin Cseh-Varga, 'The Art of Contact. Exchange, Immateriality and Ambition,' unpublished paper delivered at the *Exhibitions as Sites of Artistic Contact during the Cold War* Conference, George Enescu University of Arts, Iasi, November 2019.

68) László Beke, *ELKÉPZELÉS. A magyar konceptművészet kezdetei. Beke László gyűjteménye, 1971 [IMAGINATION. Beginnings of the Hungarian Conceptual Art. Collection of László Beke 1971]*, Budapest: Nyílt Struktúrák Művészeti Egyesület OSAS – tranzit.hu, 2008.

69) László Beke, 'Az 'ELKÉPZELÉS'-ről' [On *IMAGINATION*], in Beke, *ELKÉPZELÉS*, ix-xviii.

70) László Lakner, 'TUKTUK-folyamatos nyelvmozgatás a laryngális K és a kakuminális T hang között/ 6.12.1970. budapest' and 'anyag-vers orr- és nyelvnyelven/ 5.4.1971. budapest' [TUKTUK-continuous tongue movement between a laryngeal K and a kakumal T sound/ 6.12.1970 budapest] and [material-poem in a nose and tongue language/ 5.4.1971. Budapest] in Beke, *ELKÉPZELÉS*, 102–103. The artwork package consisted of four pieces, two of which are discussed in this essay.

differentiate between smells. Those smells will fade with time. The text on *IMAGINATION* proves how close Beke was to the sphere of artistic creation, and how he resonated with the often critical approach of artists and poets responding to a call made by an art historian. He did not judge the artworks, but instead viewed himself as a collaborator in producing a text that was genuinely creative.

Beke's enthusiasm for conceptual art expanded in the early 1970s to happenings and fluxus and drove him to seek to understand their essence. Beke interviewed the fluxus artist Tamás Szentjóby on numerous occasions. Not only is there a clearly discernible experimentalism and fluidity in their conversational language, but in a 1973 interview there seems to be an agreement between Szentjóby and Beke that according to the spirit of fluxus, life itself has to be direct and progressive in order to be artistically effective.⁷¹ Although Beke did not follow the radicalism of Szentjóby, who was the initiator and participant of the first Hungarian happenings, he did act/think on the grounds of performance, and therefore produced an art history that in its early years was neatly connected to art production.⁷² In the case of Beke, the scholarly work formed part of his artistic projects and, as a consequence, could be defined as a conceptual artwork that included both theoretical considerations and practical-creative enactments.

Petr Rezek's involvement with performance art also had its origins in artistic collaboration and, more specifically, in his friendship and collegial relationship with Karel Miler. It was through Miler that Rezek befriended Štembera and Mlčoch.⁷³ His first meeting with them was captured in the essay 'A meeting with action artists' that was initially included in 1976 in *Philosophical Notes on Recent Art* and was then reproduced several times thereafter.⁷⁴ The fact of republishing also highlights that 'A meeting with action artists' is regarded as a fundamental text in the genealogy of Czech performance art, and that it constitutes a solid, recurring element of this art form's narrative making. Rezek belonged to those intellectuals who could only imagine thinking of contemporary art in close proximity to artworks and the artists: '(...) in my opinion, there can be no asking even general questions without analyzing the individual art-pieces.'⁷⁵ For the philosopher, the critical observation of art involves a position of responsibility and not a simple one-to-one transmission between an artwork and its spectators / participants / recipients.

A philosophical confrontation with (performance) art is, based on the core message of Rezek's *Body, Object and Reality in Contemporary Art*, the preparation of the artwork for a deep immersion, and this understanding confirms performance to be an intimate connection of bodily and sensual experiences. Rezek wrote: '(...) the critical feat also takes place on the spiritual plane and also makes claim to relate the whole as it happens in a piece of art.'⁷⁶ This was Rezek's point of departure in seeking to understand and become immersed in the performances of Miler, Štembera and Mlčoch.

71) László Beke in conversation with Tamás Szentjóby, *TELEX/1*, 29 March 1973.

72) László Najmányi cited in 'Oral History Kürti Emesének. Beszélgetés Najmányi Lászlóval' [Oral history to Emese Kürti. Interview with László Najmányi], *Wordcitizen's Virtual Home*. Budapest, November 3, 2011.

73) Rezek, *Tělo, věc a skutečnost v současném umění*.

74) Rezek, 'Setkání v akčních umělci,' in *ibid*, 95–102.

75) *Ibid*, 174. Translation from Czech into English by Marcela Bubelová.

76) *Ibid*, 175.

The 1976 forerunner of *Body, Object and Reality in Contemporary Art* contains a chapter that did not make it into the 1982 monograph. That chapter is entitled 'A Philosopher's Worries.' In it, Rezek basically expounds his impressions of performers, their embodied practices, and the performances' inner meaning in a meditation about how the analysis and interpretation of ephemeral artworks requires creativity, and can even be regarded as an act of co-production.⁷⁷ Karel Miler's static poses and his body's physical connection to urban or natural surroundings (for example, by posing against a wall or lying in a grassy field) in connection with the artist's leaning towards Zen Buddhism, immediately link the intellectual/spiritual mindset with the embodied expressions. Here, the interconnection between philosophy and making performance becomes obvious.

In 'A meeting with action artists,' Rezek was not concerned with asking artists direct questions about the way they performed or what the goal of their performance was. His intention was rather to grasp performance as it 'stands.' The essay starts off with a mental game on narration, and documents and explains the difficulty of retracing intentions and reasons as the background of such an abstract artform as event-based art.⁷⁸ Rezek's own wording goes like this: 'If Mlčoch said that he climbed a mountain and took photographs on the way, he differs from a tourist in that he did nothing else. He neither luxuriated at the nature, nor watched a sunset. Neither rested, nor hardened himself. / It'd taken me two whole years before I understood this strange way of narrating. Just two years ago I met Jan Mlčoch and Petr Šembera through Karel Miler thanks to my lecture on the interpretation of dreams ([Four lectures from phenomenological psychology and psychopathology, Prague, 1975]).'⁷⁹

This latter connection between the performance artists and Rezek is one potential foundation of their creative-discursive cooperation: Miler, Mlčoch, and Šembera asked the philosopher with a psychoanalytic background to activate this knowledge when interpreting their art actions. 'A meeting with action artists' is thus based on this liaison of a multidisciplinary philosophical approach and the subversive nature of the performances. Rezek's interpretation followed the model of the Swiss psychoanalytic psychiatrist Medard Boss. Unlike Freud, Boss regarded dreams not as placeholders, but as objects towards which the dreamer is open. According to this model, dreams are media that open up potentials. The subject of interpretation are the ontological phenomena that the dreamer encounters.⁸⁰

'A meeting with action artists' includes an interpretation of Jan Mlčoch's dream. In reality, this dream was an often-referenced action by Mlčoch from 1974 that had the title *Suspension – Great Sleep (Zavěšení – Velký spánek)*:

I am in the attic of a huge house, which was most probably a farmhouse or a villa. Two men accompanied me here. We carried a rope and other things. The attic is covered with dust, there are many different cables and boxes – it seems that not long ago craftsmen worked here. The two men approach me, they are only a few years older than me. One of them covers my eyes, the other one ties my wrists and ankles together with a bandage. At the end, they pour liquid wax into my ears – I lie

77) Petr Rezek, *Filosofické skici k umění poslední doby* [Philosophical Notes on Recent Art], Prague: samizdat, 1976, 40–48.

78) Rezek, *Tělo, věc a skutečnost v současném umění*, 95–96.

79) Ibid, 97.

80) Ibid.

on the floor. A rope is tied around my arms and legs and the men pull me up in the air. After a few minutes I give the men a sign that I feel pain in my arm. They quickly let me sink toward the ground.⁸¹

In Rezek's interpretation, the attic is a part of a building that 'closes' it in the direction of the sky. In the attic, both the roof and the outside are close. The attic is, further, a place that has no inhabitants and lies beyond the actual living space. It can be read as a forum of secret games, because through its segregation from the house it offers a space to hide – both for humans and animals. This definition of the attic is, according to Rezek, important in understanding the act of hanging.⁸² The separations as seen in the case of the attic itself, are through the hanging of Mlčoch pushed to extremes. The body loses its connection with the ground. *Suspension – Great Sleep* as Mlčoch's dream is an attempt to position the body, and through it, the mind outside of physical space and to cut the performer off from any tangible point of reference. This aim is apparently working, up until the protagonist complains about pain: 'Up to that moment it is possible to be nowhere, that is to not relate to any one thing and to nearly merge with the rest of the world.'⁸³ Rezek ends his philosophical meditations on *Suspension – Great Sleep* with an ontological-structural analysis that should be part of each dream interpretation.

Rezek's engagement in the practice and respective sensual and mental meanings of performances gave the Czech action artists intellectual backing. Beyond that backing though, Miler, Mlčoch, and Štembera initiated a dialogue with a philosopher, a productive conversation which was sustained over the years.

While the growing burden of Czechoslovakia's period of Normalisation that is reflected in performances expressing the limitations of body and mind cannot be excluded, we have focused here on something else, namely, the development of creative acts that can, in thinking and doing performance, create new sensitive connections to reality. Rezek's analysis of the body's state of suspension saw the bottomlessness of Mlčoch's performance as a way to free oneself from social, cultural and mental burdens. Rezek closes 'A meeting with action artists' as follows: 'The three artists mentioned that what they do is art. If I spent now some two years thinking about their actions, it is because this statement – it is art – has the exact appellative character as a dream we had years ago, one we hadn't understood and which to this day calls for an interpretation, for deeper understanding.'⁸⁴

Conclusion and Outlook

László Beke and Petr Rezek, like many of their intellectual contemporaries in Central and Eastern Europe, developed through being involved in performative practices and through their collegial friendships with performance and conceptual artists. Beke and Rezek were involved in artistic projects as organisers and practitioners, but were among the first art

81) Ibid, 98.

82) Rezek, *Tělo, věc a skutečnost v současném umění*.

83) Ibid.

84) Ibid, 102.

thinkers to theorise regional performance art, while connecting it to larger contexts and trends. These early discourses on Hungarian and Czech performance art departed from an organic entanglement with performance and in liaison with philosophical and intellectual currents crossing physical borders. As both Beke and Rezek substantially contributed to the historicization of performance, their original perspective on this subversive and radical artform was overshadowed by changing narratives. These narratives often came from, and were shaped by, guardians themselves, as in the case of Beke. Although the motivations and aims of presenting the Central and Eastern European milieu of the 1970s was problematic from the beginning,⁸⁵ a discussion of narratives in comparison with their discursive and creative trigger points and transforming inputs was not in the focus of Cold War art historiographies. With this gap the field fails to recognize a ((performance) art) history of socialism the subject of which is genuinely creative, open to renewal and reflection, and is written on the grounds of theory.

Understanding the importance of performance both as a research subject and as a research practise, a future step of the current research should be to retrace how the narrative of a politicised Eastern and Central European experimental art experienced the now-accepted view of the region's connectedness to the rest of the world and the state socialisms' own stake in cultural progress. The early 1990s were the first moment of reflection on the previous few decades of art. In 1993, Beke wrote about Hungary as 'a country where for several decades everybody was accustomed to political opinion being expressed in art in an indirect, abstract or ironical manner.'⁸⁶ It is particularly interesting to think about how this image of performance art changed over the decades, or how radical embodiment's projected heroism outlived recent research. Even guardians' view of their own role in the performance art scene or their positioning of event-based art fluctuates over time following discursive turns, new research trends, and (personal) motivations.⁸⁷ Appropriation and reappropriation in collecting, (re)-forming, and performing knowledge are key parts of these historization processes. Therefore, what a future research project should do is to work with the performativity of these narrative shifts and pave the way for how performance could be elevated to a fruitful disciplinarily-unbound container for historical research.

85) Katalin Cseh-Varga has discussed the topic of ambition in this context before; see Katalin Cseh-Varga, 'The Art of Contact,' Exhibitions as Sites of Artistic Contact during the Cold War,' in Cseh-Varga, ed., *Art Exhibitions in Cold War Europe: Sites of Contact and Exchange*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming.

86) László Beke, 'POLYPHONY: The Consonance of Politics, Society and Art?,' in Suzanne Mészöly and Barnabás Bencsik, eds, *Polifónia. A társadalmi kontextus mint médium a kortárs magyar képzőművészetben. 1993. november 1 – 30. Hely-specifikus művek és installációk. / Polyphony. Social Commentary in Contemporary Hungarian Art. November 1 – 30, 1993. Site-specific works and installations*, Budapest: Soros Center for Contemporary Arts, 1993, 93–94 (here 94).

87) 'In the late 1990s, Piotrowski began to concentrate more intensely on what the essence of the NET that you had organised was. He started to investigate its activity and the mutual relations between artists from Central Europe and other peripheral areas such as South America. It seems obvious today that these places are significant for art, but that wasn't the case back then.' Adam Mazur, 'The Criterion of Attitude: A Conversation with Jarosław Kozłowski,' in Agata Jakubowska and Magdalena Radońska, eds, *After Piotr Piotrowski: Art, Democracy and Friendship*, Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz University, 2019, 21–34 (here 29).



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