

Two forms of resistance: Ion Grigorescu and the KwieKulik duo

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Before the fall of communism, art in many Central and Eastern European countries existed under the more or less strict principles of the political regime, whose level of persecution varied in intensity from one country to another. Translating into local cultural and social conditions, there was therefore a predisposition towards instability that was more pronounced than in other parts of the world.

However, the rigid paradigms of socialist realism, the only official doctrine of art, were gradually weakened. Nevertheless, it took several years for more liberal policies to permeate all aspects of society, including the cultural sphere. However, at a general level, culture remained under state control.

Contact with Western art was limited, and efforts to organise experimental art exhibitions were largely rejected. Despite this, a complex network of alternative production and exhibition channels developed. The views of experimental art in Eastern Europe between 1950 and 1990 fluctuated and behaved in response to the political and social upheavals of the period.

Performance was frequently used as a form of social protest. However, during the communist period in Eastern Europe, this artistic act often took on a nuance of opposition to the political system of the time. Performative art in Eastern Europe between 1950 and 1990 was, in fact, a way for artists to express themselves through their bodies, based on a questioning of local history and culture.

Performances were rarely held in public spaces, but rather in private locations. These artistic endeavours often went against restrictions, especially those concerning freedom of expression and movement.

Ion Grigorescu is considered unique in Romanian contemporary art due to his experimental works focusing on the human body. Being to some extent connected to the changes in the international visual arts scene, Grigorescu approaches the artistic trends present in the 1960s and 1970s, when the artist's body became a suitable medium for works of art. In addition to performance art,

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Grigorescu has also used film and photography in his practice, these two media serving as objective witnesses to his artistic endeavours in terms of the experiments he has conducted with his own body¹.

Grigorescu's art develops in what could be called a dialectic of open anticipation. As with other conceptual artists, his performances are not necessarily captured on camera, but rather prepared and staged for the camera. Grigorescu seeks to give a specific meaning to intimacy and to the objects he finds around him, using the camera as a tool in his attempt to make them visible to another gaze. In most of his performances, the artist seems to convey a sense of isolation, yet he slips in coded references, thus creating a type of intimate communication between himself and the audience².

Starting in the late 1960s, Grigorescu placed the human body at the centre of his work. Thus, the individual human body became both a medium and an instrument through which the artist questioned various social and even political issues³.

Grigorescu's works rejected the canon of "realism" imposed by the paradigms of the time, with the artist producing creations that seem to have a more documentary-style realism. His works thus become documentaries of how people lived during the communist regime, with the artist presenting reality without mystifying or disguising it, documenting it per se⁴.

Some of Grigorescu's artistic actions in the early 1970s were dedicated to mundane, everyday acts, where their reality influenced art. In Grigorescu's conception, banality becomes a kind of theatre, in which the artist becomes an actor in his own life. In *Bucătăria* (The Kitchen), a performance created in 1976, the artist presents a fragment of his existence, within the confines of a block of flats' kitchen, performing various actions from ironing a shirt, cutting food and eating it, writing, to painting at an easel or playing the violin.

All these gestures take place in the confined space of the kitchen, suffocated by furniture and everyday objects. Thus, through this type of artistic expression, Grigorescu raises the question of an equivalence between life, with its banality, and the work of art.

¹ Zdenka Badovinac (1998). *Body and the East – From the 1960s to the Present*, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana.

² Ovidiu Țichindeleanu (2024). *Ion Grigorescu: A Political Reinvention of the Socialist Man*, retrieved from: https://www.afterall.org/article/ion-grigorescu_a-political-reinvention-of-the-socialist-man, accessed on 12 January 2024.

³ Bogdan Ghiu and Maria Rus Bojan (2011). *Performing History*, "IDEA art+society", No. 38, Idea, Cluj.

⁴ Marina Alina Asavei (2011). *A theoretical excursus on the concept of political art in communism and its aftermath*, retrieved from: https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/44653/ssoar-studiapolitica-2011-4-asavei-A_theoretical_excursus_on_the.pdf, accessed on 13 January 2024.

However, the banality of everyday life also takes on distressing connotations in Grigorescu's works⁵. The most eloquent example in this case is the 1974 work “Pyjamas” (fig. 1). This takes place in the artist's studio, emphasising the impression of rigidity through the use of a viewfinder that generates the image and, at the same time, the idea that the subject is being watched.



Fig. 1 Ion Grigorescu, *Pijamale*, 1974

The disappearance of private space and individual intimacy was characteristic of that period, but also an important stage for the political system in the construction of the “new man,” a fearsome hybrid whose personal and collective memory had been annihilated. With the camera lens as his witness, Grigorescu's actions largely focused on interrogating the “stopped body,” which in turn questioned a certain “spiritual geography.” The period in which this artist proposed such types of performative manifestations was one in which the body was considered taboo in Romanian society.



Fig. 2 Ion Grigorescu, *Light Bath*, 1979

Grigorescu's interest also focuses on accurately recording his body, both as an expression of his intimacy and in relation to space. The artist also

⁵ Ileana Pîntilie (2000). *Acționismul în România în timpul comunismului* [Actionism in Romania during Communism], Idea Design & Print, Cluj, p. 44.

concentrates on experimenting with different angles and positions for capturing the image⁶.

Baia cu lumină (The Bath of Light) (fig. 2), a performance created in 1979, reveals a figure in which the artist's body is both present and invisible. The long exposure of the photograph preserved the performative character of the artist's action. The work alludes to the daily living conditions of that time, namely the constant lack of electricity and water⁷.

Over time, performance art has allowed the artist to express both his position and his dissent. Thus, another feature of Grigorescu's performative artworks is that of resistance. We can therefore mention “Dialogue with President Ceaușescu”, created in 1978, a work that presents the artist both in his own skin and in the guise of Nicolae Ceaușescu (Grigorescu wore a mask in this case). The performance takes the form of an interview⁸. The artist recorded the supposed interview on a standard 8 mm camera. However, due to the double role played by Grigorescu, the film was shot twice. The film is silent, and the dialogue between the two appears only as text⁹.



Fig. 3 Ion Grigorescu, *Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, 1978

In dual, antithetical roles, Grigorescu wears everyday clothes, while Grigorescu portraying Ceaușescu wears a suit, tie and a mask with exaggerated features¹⁰. In *Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, Grigorescu criticises Ceaușescu's politics.

⁶ Ileana Pintilie (2024). *The Public and the Private Body in Contemporary Romanian Art*, retrieved from: <https://artmargins.com/the-public-and-the-private-body-in-contemporary-romanian-art/>, accessed on 13 January 2024.

⁷ Pomeranz Collection (2024). *Ion Grigorescu*, retrieved from: <https://pomeranz-collection.com/?q=node/76>, accessed on 14 January 2024.

⁸ Amy Bryzgel (2017). *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, p. 226.

⁹ Ileana Pârvu (2018). *Reenactment, Repetition, Return. Ion Grigorescu's Two Dialogues with Ceausescu*, retrieved from: <https://artmargins.com/reenactment-repetition-return/>, accessed on 17 January 2024.

¹⁰ Ion Grigorescu (1978). *Dialogue with President Ceaușescu 1978*, retrieved from: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/146172>, accessed on 17 January 2024.

The artist points out how this had various effects on the living conditions of the Romanian people.

The questions the artist asks the other character take on the tone of an indictment. Through his questions, but also through his overall discourse, Grigorescu reflects on forced labour, the current value of people in the labour market, but also other problems of the system that Grigorescu considered to be consequences of Ceaușescu's belief in economic progress based on his decisions in this regard. To create Ceaușescu's responses, the artist uses various collages of quotes taken from texts used by the official press propaganda of that period¹¹.

The gestures made by both characters highlight a certain discrepancy between them. Thus, while Ceaușescu's character shows self-confidence and authority through his body language, Grigorescu seems flustered and agitated in the presence of the dictator. At one point, Ceaușescu takes off his mask, as if in a moment of self-reflection by the artist. The interview between the two ends with the phrase, "If people cannot lead, they should at least criticise."¹²

As for communication between the two in the 1978 performance, it is non-existent, although it should take place between the two protagonists. This is because Ion Grigorescu filmed the characters separately, so there is no perfect synchronisation between their gestures. This effect in terms of technical details may also suggest a reference to the impossibility of the ordinary, anonymous citizen to contact and communicate with Nicolae Ceaușescu and vice versa. Each character is in their designated space, but the two do not converge, so they become impossible to homogenise and unify. Therefore, this montage of the performance created by Ion Grigorescu captures the difficult-to-bridge gap between citizens and the president¹³.

If in the first performance, in 1978, the lack of communication and synchronisation between the two characters could be a subtle reference to the power relationship established between citizen and leader, now, in the 2007 re-enactment, Ceaușescu seems to be placed in the position of presenting his last words, through which he builds his defence, becoming vulnerable.

"I speak through art as a man who has understood his final judgement," Ceaușescu begins the dialogue of the 2007 performance (fig. 4). The "final

¹¹ Georg Schollhammer (2011). *The Double Body of the Artist. Ion Grigorescu's Reflections on the Public Sphere and Life in Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania*, in Marta Dziewanska (Ed.), *In the Body of the Victim*, Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, p. 54.

¹² Klara Kemp-Welch (2013). *Impossible Interviews with Ceaușescu: Ion Grigorescu and the Dialogical Imagination*, in Alina Șerban (Ed.), *The Man with One Camera*, Asociația Pepluspatru, București.

¹³ Ileana Pârnu (2018). *Reenactment, Repetition, Return. Ion Grigorescu's Two Dialogues with Ceausescu*, retrieved from: <https://artmargins.com/reenactment-repetition-return/>, accessed on 17 January 2024.

judgement” evoked here could refer to the trial that led to his and his wife Elena's execution on 25 December 1989¹⁴.



Fig. 4 Ion Grigorescu, *Post-Mortem Dialogue with Ceaușescu*, 2007

The artist seems to have had a dual purpose: to depict Ceaușescu undergoing a posthumous trial and, at the same time, to try to show him what is happening in the present, years after the fall of communism.

In the Polish context, the 1970s were characterised as a period of liberalism in the sphere of life, which was also visible in an opening towards the West, creating a favourable environment for experimental art and performances.¹⁵

KwieKulik is an artistic duo consisting of Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek, who were active between 1971 and 1987. From the early 1970s, these artists made works with a radical political character. They belonged to the first generation of Polish artists who, in the early 1970s, rejected traditional means of artistic expression and focused on *performance*.



Fig. 5 KwieKulik, *Monument Without a Passport*, 1978

¹⁴ Juliane Debeusscher (2023). *Living and dead bodies. Performing Ceaușescu, 1978-2007*, retrieved from: <https://esse.ca/en/living-and-dead-bodies-performing-ceausescu-1978-2007/>, accessed on 20 December 2023.

¹⁵ Zdenka Badovinac, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

KwieKulik continues to be a major reference for contemporary artists whose practice is aligned with social and political discourse¹⁶.

In 1978, the duo KwieKulik was invited to the Young Art Biennale in Sopot and, in the same year, to Arnhem, for the festival entitled “Behaviour Workshop”. The artists were convinced that they would go to Arnhem, but their passports were refused. Thus, they decided to participate in the Sopot Biennale. There, they presented a performance entitled “Monument Without a Passport” (fig. 5). This artistic endeavour was part of the series “Activities for the Head”. Kwiek placed Kulik's feet in plaster, forming a small pedestal. Once immobilised, her feet remained in this position for the duration of the event. Kulik then raised her hand, showing a folder with the words “Ideas for Arnhem” written on it. Kwiek cut a string tied around a roll of paper hanging on the wall. After the paper in the roll was unrolled, it revealed the following text: (“Monument without a passport”). Finally, Kwiek sat down on a chair next to Kulik, the pedestal incorporating the chair legs being adjacent to the one surrounding Kulik's legs. The two artists remained in this immobilised position for several minutes¹⁷. Thus, through the artists' gesture of immobilisation, we can consider that this *performance* makes a clear reference to the way in which the two artists were stuck in Poland, unable to travel.

As for the other parts of the “Activities for the Head” series, they took place in Lublin, also in 1978. Before entering the hall, the audience was given small red flags, which they were instructed to place behind their ears. The viewers sat down on chairs, except for two seats, through which the heads of the two artists protruded.

The audience watched the heads protruding from the chairs, as well as the stage where two curtains hung, one behind the other. After a few minutes, the first curtain was removed and the audience could see Zofia Kulik's head stuck in a sink. Kwiek poured water into the sink and began washing his hands, face and feet, then poured more water into the basin until Kulik's mouth was below the water level. Now Zofia Kulik could breathe, but she could not speak (fig. 6). Kwiek then held a knife to her neck and said, 'Say something, say something... you... you can't say anything, can you?' Later, for the last part of the series “Activities for the Head,” the two sat on chairs with empty buckets on their heads. People began to walk around them and fill the buckets with rubbish (fig. 7).¹⁸

¹⁶ KWIEKULIK, <https://artmuseum.pl/en/publikacje/red-lukasz-ronduda-georg-schollhammer-kwiekulik> accessed on 10 January 2024

¹⁷ KWIEKULIK, <https://www.personsprojects.com/artists/kwiekulik?x=works/works/kwiekulik35monumentpaspsbig-s> accessed on 12 November 2023

¹⁸ Walter Philips Gallery (1986). *Contemporary Art From Poland*, Apache Superior, Banff, Alberta, p. 33.

Therefore, this performative approach questions the status of artists in Poland, who, at that time, were denied the right to speak in the public sphere if their discourse could be considered vaguely political or offensive to the Polish state¹⁹.



Fig. 6 KwieKulik, *Activities for the Head*, 1978



Fig. 7 KwieKulik, *Activities for the Head*, 1978

The performance “Bananas & Pomegranates” (Fig. 8) was staged in 1986 at Dziekanka (the Polish title is “Banan i Granat”, with “granat” meaning both “hand grenade” and “pomegranate”).

Their son, Maksymilian Dobromierz, opened and closed a white curtain throughout the performance. After each opening of the curtain, the audience was presented with a different arrangement of objects (these were either placed on buckets or in the artists' hands). In total, there were twelve such consecutive scenes. Some of them referred to personal experiences (e.g. passports, flags), others to more abstract concepts. However, they all created an endless chain of associations.

This *performance* reiterates, both visually and discursively, yet thus time in a different form, the same issue present in the 1978 performances from the series “Activities for the Head”, namely the status of artists in Poland at that time. They were denied the right to express themselves if what they had to say could be considered offensive to the Polish state.

Thus, through this type of artistic approach, artists encrypt various messages in the form of associations between *performance* and various objects that can take on different meanings²⁰.

¹⁹ Amy Bryzgel, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-236.

²⁰ KWIEKULIK,

<https://www.personsprojects.com/artists/kwiekulik?x=works/works/kkbanana-and-pomegranade1986>, accessed on 18 November 2023.



Fig. 8 KwieKulik, *Banana & pome-grenade*, 1986

By allowing the artist not only to express their stance, but also to embody it in one way or another, performance offers unique opportunities in this regard, given the communist rule in Eastern Europe. Although the circulation of ideas was somewhat affected by the political regime in Eastern Europe between 1950 and 1990, the idea of resistance gained momentum in the experimental arts sphere in this region.

Thus, artists such as Ion Grigorescu and the KwieKulik duo, along with many others, created artistic productions that questioned the artist's relationship to the local political and social sphere, embodying true acts of critical resistance through their performances.

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