

SOMETHING IN COMMON?

POLISH AND KOREAN PERFORMANCE ART IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUNG DEMOCRACY

Introduction

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The collection of articles entitled *Something in Common. Polish and Korean performance art in the context of young democracy* consists of four articles by Korean and Polish authors, who introduce the history and development of action art in both countries. The articles are the result of the one-week event under the same title that took place in October 2019 at the Patio Art Space of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, organised by the Intermedia Department. It consisted of a show of performance art by Polish and Korean artists: Neung Kyung SUNG, Jaeseon MOON and Marek ROGULSKI, performance workshops with students of the Gdansk Academy and a conference on Korean and Polish performance art. The four articles written by Jin-Sup YOON, Ah-Young LEE, Łukasz GUZEK and myself are based on papers delivered on this conference. They concerned performance art in Poland and Korea, its history and social and political background. Also current performance art activities and history of development of performance art festivals

were discussed in the articles published in this collection. The role of women in the performance art field was also highlighted.

The first impulse for organising the event referring to the relationship between democracy and performance art in Poland and Korea was the already existing collaboration between artists and theoreticians from both countries, connected with the Art and Documentation Association in Poland and Soro Performance Art Centre in Seoul. This began in 2012, when I was invited to take part in the PAN Asia Festival organised by Jaeseon MOON. While listening to the artists' talks and speakers of the conference accompanying the performance shows, I realised that in such geographically and culturally distanced countries, surprisingly, we could find more similarities than one would expect. The two most important common points are performative art practices and pro-democracy policy activism. Poland was under totalitarian power based on the communist idea until 1989, when the first free election took place and the

country turned its course to democracy. South Koreans were also suppressed by a totalitarian military dictatorship. Both regimes, although different in their ideological assumptions, resulted in the same effects, a downtrodden nation seeking independence. In Korea this came two years earlier than in Poland, in 1987. These facts brought me to the idea of comparison of the character of Polish and Korean performance art and its political background. The possibility of organising an event devoted to these issues in Gdańsk, motivated me even more, because it was the workers of the Gdańsk Shipyard that played a significant role in the overthrowing of totalitarian power in Poland. Since then Gdańsk has been considered as the cradle of democracy in Poland. The artists from Gdansk also contributed to the legacy of performance art practices, among them Grzegorz KLAMAN, a co-founder of the Wyspa Institute and current head of the Intermedia Department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk.

For the purposes of the research presented in these articles, the most important one is the timeline of performance art and a search of its beginning in both countries. In both cases the first such artworks were realised in the 1960s. The articles by Ah-Young LEE and Łukasz GUZEK show that the interest of Korean and Polish artists in action art such happenings and events in that time had not simply been an 'imported inspiration' from Western art, where the first happenings took place. The form of Polish and Korean happenings had its root in the cultural and political conditions of both countries. It was the ephemeral and subversive and thus political nature of the live art that made it interesting and useful for artists that were willing to act in particular conditions with all its limitations imposed by the ruling authorities on culture. The distinction between the terms such as 'happening,' 'even' and 'performance' is noted in the presented articles, however it refers mainly to the history of action art, when the term performance art had not been yet come into use.

Performance art that, both in Poland and in Korea, had its root in happenings and events of the 1960s, was created in the time of authoritarian

power and under its constraints. The subsequent military regimes and suppression of individuality in Korean society resulted in various forms of action art, where the body of the artist was engaged. The relationship between the politics of the regime, and action art as the most powerful artistic form of resistance against it, is presented in the most detailed way in Ah-Young LEE's article: "The Korean avant-garde: performance art from the 1960s to the 1980s in the context of the democratization of South Korea." She is writing from the perspective of a researcher, curator and art historian, who also was in charge of the *Performance Art in Asia* archiving project, she also curated the *Performance Art in Asia* archive exhibition in Gwangju in South Korea in 2015 and co-curated the exhibition *Rehearsals from the Korean Avant-Garde Performance Archive* at the Korean Cultural Centre UK in London in 2017.

The perspective of a witness of history and as well participant and initiator of events presenting performance art is clearly indicated in the article by Jin-Sup YOON "Avant-garde-ness and experimentation: renegades as outliers." YOON is an artist, art critic and curator of performance art festivals, such as the Millennium Nanjang Performance Art Festival in Theater Zero (2000) or the Seoul International Performance Art Festival (2000, 2002).

The rebellious and revolutionary character of action art is also emphasized in the article by Łukasz GUZEK. He is both a researcher, witness of the evolution of Polish performance art for over 30 years and an author of the book *Rekonstrukcja sztuki akcji Polsce* (The Reconstruction of Action Art in Poland). GUZEK's article "Happenings-events-performances in Poland: intermingling histories of art and politics" gives the reader a substantive overview of artists, artist-run initiatives and festivals that contributed to the development of this field of art, both in the time of the totalitarian regime and in democracy. He also provided number of comparisons and juxtapositions that enable the reader to imagine the relations between such geographically distant countries and different culturally art milieus that work in the same medium of performance.

Finally, my article concerns the presence of women in Polish performance art. The article “Action art as a way of emancipation. Women's performance art practices in the context of the totalitarian regime based on communist ideology and the young democracy in Poland” is based both on my own artistic experience, observation of the performance art scene and interviews with women artists of older generations. It is based on the art and research methodology. I introduce only Polish women artists and the Polish political context.

However, in the matter of women's rights we can also see some similarities in the situation of Polish and Korean women. Both countries have a number of women performance artists who refer to the position of women in the society. The role of women shamans in Korean society could be also interesting to analyse from the perspective of performative practices in avant-garde art.

The period of rapid industrialisation of both countries resulted in the employment of women, which gave them a relevant independence. However, the traditional expectations towards them referring to the family life were still strong, and the violence against women is a problem that hasn't yet been solved both in Poland and in Korea. Also in both countries, the law on abortion is restricted, which is always a sign of patriarchal cultural rules. The Korean artist Bul LEE referred to this problem in 1988 by suspending her naked body tied to a rope hanging from the ceiling. Both in Poland and in Korea, women also face a gender pay gap and they are not as frequently employed as men in management positions. The first Korean feminist artists using action art as a form of their expression appeared in the late sixties. Among them were Kuk Jin KANG, and Chanseung CHUNG, Kangja JUNG who staged *The Transparent Balloon and a Nude* collaborative happening in 1968. The similarities and differences between the strategies of Polish and Korean performance artists and forms of the performance art works have not been fully covered in this collection of articles. However this appears to be a promising topic for further research for Polish and Korean artists and

scholars that opens up new perspectives and fields of study and thus it creates a fertile ground for future discussions.