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**Perfoactivism: from *Three Weeks in May*
to *The Museum of Arte Útil***

“The phenomenon of art activism is central to our time because it is a new phenomenon – quite different from the phenomenon of critical art that became familiar to us during recent decades” – wrote Boris Groys in his article “On Art Activism” (2014). Even if we do not go as far back as Gregory Sholette, who, in his polemic article “Merciless Aesthetic: Activist Art as the Return of Institutional Critique. A Response to Boris Groys” (2016), lists 18th- and 19th-century examples of art activists, such as Jacques-Louis David and Gustave Courbet, it is hard to agree with this statement. In my essay, I will focus on the relationship between art activism and performance art, as this genre, since its birth, has been tightly associated with counterculture and social movements – feminist, anti-war, anti-racist, LGBTQ and others.

Lucy Lippard (2015: 76) indicated that art activism and organizations such as AWC, Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, Women Artists in Revolution did not come “from the raised fists and red stars of the ‘revolutionary’ left as from the less consciously subversive reactions against the status quo that took place in the mainstream – primarily in minimalism and conceptual art.” The critic then pointed out that they were blunt and blatantly noncommunicative. This statement comes in accordance with how Polish performance artists, active in the 1970s and ‘80s, described this period. Kwiekulik wrote that, in the reality of the communist regime, it was impossible to create conceptual art, hence the success of contextualism formulated by Jan Świdziński (Załoski, 2012: 79–88). Zofia Kulik said: “We, however, could not be pure conceptualists, because we would have cheated ourselves – that we are fine, there are no institutional or existential problems, there are no potboilers etc. How could one make conceptual art in Poland? Until now I can’t comprehend that” (Załoski: 79). Likewise, in the entire world – the war in Vietnam, the birth of the second wave of feminism, student strikes and events of 1968, the assassination of Martin Luther King and the anti-racist movement and the emergence of AIDS and HIV problem had to induce a reaction from artists.

Naturally, groups excluded from art institutions, such as women and artists of colour, were more likely to take up performance art as their form of expression, as this was a genre that did not depend on them. One could perform in independent venues or even on the street. In the world dominated by art critics, gallery owners, and curators, artists postulated to be present in the work of art, not merely to be re-represented by it. If we were to summarise (and simplify) the development of performance art practice, the '70s was a time when the presence of the artist in their work of art was crucial. In the '80s performance artists started to be involved in institutional critique, and in the '90s the role of audience started to be discussed. This is when the first "delegated performances" started to emerge. In the 2000s some performances were included in the context of the *Arte Útil* concept.

Ephemerality of performance art has been the main way to avoid capitalist commodification and art market, as well as institutions – understood in a colloquial way. Grant Kester also underlines the fact that, in case of performance art, dematerialisation of art object "must be understood not simply as a defensive tactic to forestall commodification but also as a positive or creative moment, marked by an increasing emphasis on art as a process of collaborative interaction. This interactive orientation implies, in turn, an art experience that extends over time" (2013: 53). The form of presentation of performance art – symbolic and manifestation-like – has been favoured as a means to take a stance in the heated debates taking place internationally at the turn of the 1960s and '70s. Judy Chicago said that "[p]erformance can be fuelled by rage in a way that painting and sculpture cannot." (Roth, 1980: 466) Nevertheless, Philip Auslander (1994: 31) observed, in his *Presence and Resistance*, that the transition from resistance to engagement produces the necessity of balancing between co-operation and critique.

For the purpose of this paper it is very important to try to define the term "performance art." An interesting point of view was presented by Stephen Melville, who wrote that: "Performance is not [yet] art in itself, but a way in which various arts may find themselves outside themselves. It is not clear to me what it would take for performance to establish itself as art – what, that is, its 'proper' medium is" (Kester, 2013: 59). A similar view was independently developed by Władysław Kaźmierczak, who claims (2011) that performance art is not a medium in art but an "undefined zone of art" and that "every performance is a definition of performance art." Performance challenges the division between where art ends and the rest of the world begins. From constructivism, through situationism and minimalism – this boundary remains ambiguous. And in performance art, the audience, the milieu, the environment, etc. play their role. Philipp Kleinmichel, in his discussion of whether certain forms of activism are art or politics (2015: 16), draws attention to the problem of intention – and therefore employs Donald Judd's definition "if someone says his work is art, it's art" (After: de Duve, 1990: 272). In this understanding, performance art activism, which I abbreviate as perfo-activism, I see as a visual art performance presented in public space, whose idea is to initiate social change, yet that change does not need to be defined or achieved like in political

activism. It employs performance art strategies to manifest its stance and engage the public. In this paper, I focus on this kind of performances as artworks of alternative visibility in the artworld.

One of the most interesting cases of early examples of performance activism was certainly *Three Weeks in May* – a series of workshops, lectures and manifestations against sexual violence in Los Angeles – organised by Suzanne Lacy in 1977¹. Over the course of three weeks, Suzanne Lacy received police reports about sexual violence and, using a red stamp, on the map of LA placed in a shopping centre, marked spots where women were raped or abused. Next to it, there was a map with stamps in places where women can seek help. Various workshops, therapeutic sessions and performances were organised as part of this project. What was characteristic was that it was not about one particular performance art action for the audience. Art-activism of this sort is process-oriented. Sometimes actions that last a couple of weeks require a year of work (like in case of Suzanne Lacy) – as they include workshops, filmmaking, documenting, etc. Gregory Sholette, asked if he considered his activist work in terms of art (2015), gave the following answer: “After all, what substantial difference is there between the production of a work of art, researching and writing an essay, teaching or organizing collective actions? When all is said and done for me ‘art’ is simply how I think my thoughts in a more tangible, plastic form that reside alongside, rather than above or below, writing, teaching and organizing.” Suzanne Lacy kept working in the same manner, seemingly influenced by Allan Kaprow with whom she studied at Cal Arts in Los Angeles. Jeff Kelley wrote (1995: 226): “What Lacy learned from Kaprow was that performance could take place outside the dramatic boundaries of theatre and even avant-garde performance art, and that the body, heretofore a medium of acting, or at least acting out, could be extended through the participation of others into a social setting without dissipating its physicality and, ultimately, its capacity for emphatic connection.” In case of Lacy’s *Three Weeks in May* – an artwork emerged in the context of everyday life and its main purpose was not so much to give visibility to performances that took place, but rather to drag attention to rape as a social problem. A later example of her work is *The Roof is on Fire* (1993–1994), completed with Annice Jacoby and Chris Johnson as part of the *Oakland Projects*, in which she gathered teenagers of Colour and placed them in cars on a roof top garage in Oakland. They were given topics to discuss with one another, while ca. 1000 White community members were there only to listen (Kester, 2013: 4–5 and Thompson 2017: 178–179).

Another non-visible performance was Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s *Touch Sanitation*, which she performed for almost a year (1979–1980). Ukeles shook hands with 8500 workers of the NY City Department of Sanitation saying: “thank you for keeping NYC alive.” The performance lasted for 11 months and occurred between the sanitation workers and the artist. The action, now known as *Handshake Ritual*

¹ <http://www.suzannelacy.com/three-weeks-in-may/>

(Phillips: 180–185) was documented, but the artwork itself remained hidden from the artworld. Some unknown but important actions took place in the Woman's Building (founded in 1973), such as performances by three groups: The Waitresses (1977–1985), who organised guerrilla actions in restaurants², the Mother Art (1973–1986) who performed in laundromats³, and the Sisters of Survival (1981–1985), whose work oscillated around the topic of the Cold War, incited by Reagan administration, and attempted to uncover its absurdities. They performed in public places, in front of public buildings and monuments. After a few actions in the US they started a European tour during which they joined female activists in the UK, for instance, who were camping for nine years in protest against a missile base in the Stonehenge area⁴.

In the 1980s, we had performers such as Anna Halprin, who travelled around the US and performed her choreographic pieces with people with AIDS (such as *Circle the Earth [Dancing with Life on the Line]*, 1989, 1991⁵). Adrian Piper organised her *Funk Lessons* (1983–1985) teaching white people in her semi-academic, semi-colloquial lectures how to dance funk – a “typically black” dance⁶. In 1985, John Malpede founded LAPD – the acronym was an allusion to the Los Angeles Police Department, but it actually meant: LA Poverty Department. Between 1988 and 1990 Malpede's group did a series of performances, *LAPD Inspects America*, in which they first did a series of workshops with local homeless people or those who got out of homelessness to have a final show with them after a few weeks (Kimball, 2014). In 1985 Guerrilla Girls initiated their group. Their activity is an example of an alternative visibility in the art world. As Elizabeth Hess wrote: “[...] the Girls are much more interested in their own *real*, careers as artists, than pushing the group in the direction of the art world. In their view their mission is purely political and far from accomplished, which is why they have been attempting to ‘institutionalize’ and survive” (Hess 1995: 329). In her performances *The Others*, Rachel Rosenthal asked owners of various pet animals – from dogs to cows and snakes – to participate in a show with them on stage⁷. Another classic example of perfo-activism is, of course, the well-known activity of the Yes Men or Yomango – a Spanish group who, for instance, stole a dress from a Bershka store and later organized a guerrilla fashion show of it. Then the dress was returned to a Zara store (Anderson and Herr 2007: 1502).

² https://ospace.otis.edu/jerriallyn/The_Waitresses

³ <https://motherart.org/>

⁴ <https://thesistersofsurvival.wordpress.com/>

⁵ <https://www.annahalprin.org/performances>

⁶ <https://www.artforum.com/film/lauren-o-neill-butler-on-adrian-piper-s-funk-lessons-24753>

⁷ <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-rachel-rosenthal-13200#transcript>

Boris Groys wrote (2014):

A certain intellectual tradition rooted in the writings of Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord states that the aestheticization and spectacularization of politics, including political protest, are bad things because they divert attention away from the practical goals of political protest and towards its aesthetic form. And this means that art cannot be used as a medium of a genuine political protest – because the use of art for political action necessarily aestheticizes this action, turns this action into a spectacle and, thus, neutralizes the practical effect of this action.

But the question is – is it always a spectacle? Examples discussed here did not focus on visibility; neither did they make it to the mainstream of art. Stephen Wright, in his famous *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (2013), suggests that participation and usership are a remedy for spectacularisation. This, in turn, raises a question of how art activism can be useful. Boris Groys's criticism follows the logic: if you want to change the world, you should become a politician not an artist and further (with which I would actually agree) – that art activism is useless when it is later to be shown and sold in galleries and museums. He wrote (2014): "Art activists do want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place, but at the same time, they do not want to cease being artists. And this is the point where theoretical, political, and even purely practical problems arise." In some cases, however, artists can influence political decisions. In 2011, Cecylia Malik and Modraszek Kolektyw (the Alcon Blue Collective) mobilised hundreds of people who, dressed in blue butterfly wings, protested against developers who intended to build another estate in the last green enclave of Krakow, where a rare butterfly (the Alcon blue) resides. The protests were successful⁸.

But we should not only measure the usefulness of art with political impact meant as influencing the decisions of those in power. As Lucy Lippard wrote (2015: 72): "art may not be the best didactic tool available, but it can be a powerful partner to the didactic statement, speaking its own language (and, incidentally, sneaking subversively into interstices where didacticism and rhetoric can't pass)." The Center for Artistic Activism has published a folder, *Assessing the Impact of Artistic Activism* (2018), in which various aspects of it were analysed and measured taking into account various concepts of the role of art and artists in society as well as the definition of social change. More recent examples of such works – which can be defined as performance art and art activism can be listed. In 2000, C.U.K.T group travelled around Polish clubs and alternative spaces with a presidential campaign for a virtual candidate Victoria Cukt, whose main slogan was "politicians are redundant." The public were asked to enrol into the political party Victoria CUKT, to sign a petition to the Parliament to make her become an official candidate (in Poland one needs to collect 100 000 signatures in order to register) and to write down their postulates, which would then automatically become a part of her

⁸ <https://culture.pl/en/artist/cecylia-malik>

political programme⁹. Nowadays, which is 18 years later, the scandal of Cambridge Analytica proved that real politicians do use Victoria's method. In 2011, Paweł Hajncel joined a Corpus Christi procession as a "Butterfly Man" for the first time to comment on the appropriation of public space by the Catholic Church in Poland, for which act he was later prosecuted. He has repeated the action every year in various costumes since 2011 and was arrested last time on May 31st, 2018¹⁰. Another interesting case of alternative visibility includes Milan Kohout – a Czech-American artist who was expelled from Czechoslovakia as a Charter '77 signatory – and Yasmin Mjalli – a Palestinian artist and activist. Milan Kohout never "performs" in a classical understanding of the word at performance art festivals. One of his actions took place in the City Hall of Ostrava, where he went during the session of the City Council to ask the Mayor to privatise his body. On another occasion, he went to a bank in Ostrava with an intention to deposit a bucket of coal, as it is called the "Ostravian gold." Documentation of his work is usually shown during festivals that he attends (like the above mentioned at the Malamut Festival in Ostrava), but the performances themselves do not happen in the art context. Just recently (2017), a Palestinian performance artist Yasmin Mjalli made a series of street performances *I'm not your habibti* [I'm not your sweetheart] in which she typewrote stories of women molested in Palestine. The only trace after the performance is low quality documentation and the stories of women.

The issue of visibility in case of art activism also raises a question of authorship. Claire Bishop, in her *Artificial Hells* (2012: 8–9), underlines the need for a clearly defined authorship, stating that projects created by micro-societies are often a cover for exploitation and privatisation. Further on, she argues that activists often take over the tasks that should be the responsibility of the state and that "[t]hrough the discourse of creativity, the elitist activity of art is democratised, although today this leads to business rather than to Beuys"¹¹ – she writes (2012: 16). She sees the role of participation art in creating relational antagonisms (2004: 51–79) – hence she values artists such as Artur Żmijewski. Grant H. Kester – on the other hand – in both of his *The One and the Many* (2011) and *Conversational Pieces* (2013: 130–131) values "dialogical art," i.e. art created together with local societies. He does not trust the conformist "EU artists" – whose social sensitivity ends together with evaluation of another EU-sponsored project. He criticises the attachment to the idea of authorship and art autonomy, since capitalism as a whole is based on individualism – he argues.

Performance art and art activism became so popular that the largest art institutions try to embrace them. One of the best known art activists and performance artists is Tania Bruguera – who, in her practice, implements the idea of "Arte Útil"¹².

⁹ <http://www.peterstyle.eu/wiktoria-cukt.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.artysci-lodzkie.pl/en/artist/h/pawel-hajncel/>

¹¹ Here she means Joseph Beuys's idea that everyone can be an artist.

¹² The term was coined by artist Pino Poggi in his "Manifesto" from 1965.

The project functions as a website that collects initiatives which follow specific guidelines:

1. Propose new uses for art within society
2. Challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc.), responding to current urgencies
4. Can be implemented and function in real situations
5. Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users
6. Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users
7. Pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions
8. Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation¹³.

In 2013, in the Old Building of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Museum of Arte Útil was organised – it was divided into ten rooms (Live Projects, Room for Controversies, Room for Propaganda etc.), in which artists acted as initiators of a social dialogue rather than exhibited their works. This way the project evaded one very important problem. A display of relics of art activism seems to work in the same way as it does for performance art in general – it merely fetishises the object and replaces its ephemeral aspect with an icon-generating documentation. In its attempt to use the most standard means of visibility, the project did not, however, evade musealisation of art activism. Kleinmichel (2015: 17) wrote:

As with anything else that is musealized, be it an image, an object, or a stuffed animal, the musealization of any given object allows us to approach it from a distance, to reflect on its appearance and meaning, without being immediately affected. The dinosaurs, the Apollonian statues, the portraits of sacred martyrs have lost not only their function, but also their immediate power over us the moment they were musealized and the same holds true for the musealization of political activism. The musealization of political activism allows us to understand its methods, strategies, and historical contexts.

The Museum of Arte Útil certainly filled that need. But there is also another important problem – showing art activism in art institutions, which are often guilty of discrimination and doubtful employment policy, is simply immoral. An exhibition of art activism, *An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017*, has been recently organised in the Whitney Museum which is pretty ironic taking into account that the Whitney Biennale is notorious for the under-representation of women and artists of color. Tania Bruguera completed her *Francis Effect* performance in 2014 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Standing in front of the building for fifteen weeks, she collected signatures under a petition to the Pope Francis which requested the Vatican City citizenship for all undocumented immigrants. Earlier that year, the Guggenheim Museum was criticised for its employment policy at the construction of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. From this point of view, anti-institutionalism and alternative visibility seem to be the only option for activists.

¹³ <http://museumarteutil.net/about/>

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<http://museumarteutil.net/about/>

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Abstract

From the very beginning, performance art has been anti-institutional and counter-cultural. Because of that performance artists tended to look for other channels to achieve visibility, often intentionally avoiding it. Since the late 1960s performance art has been exhibited in independent art spaces, at festivals organised by other artists, as well as in public space as *guerrilla actions*. This paper discusses a subjective selection of the most interesting socially or politically-engaged performances, which at present have taken the form of perfoactivism, functioning outside the art market and popularly understood art institutions. This article is also a review of criticism around activism, focused on writers such as Gregory Sholette, Boris Groys, Grant Kester, and Claire Bishop.

Keywords: performance art, art activism

Słowa kluczowe: sztuka performance, aktywizm artystyczny

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