Rethinking the (Post-)Socialist Body (Florence, 28–30 Sep 23)

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz - Max-Planck-Institut, Florence, Sep 28–30, 2023
Deadline: May 31, 2023

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Rethinking the (Post-)Socialist Body. Art, Theory & Politics.
Transdisciplinary workshop at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, organised by Hana Gründler (KHI-MPI) and Magdalena Nieslony (Universität Wien) .

28-30 September 2023

The importance of body politics is once again undeniable: the idealization or vilification of bodies on ideological grounds, restrictions on abortion rights, and the continued exploitation of migrant bodies and labor are global phenomena. These are present not only in autocratic regimes but increasingly in democratic forms of government as well. This becomes abundantly clear in East--Central European post-socialist countries, where in recent years we have seen among others the explicit body politics of the Polish government as well as the return of the heroic body in the media iconography of the Ukrainian war. In most of these examples, control over bodies – economic, political or otherwise – is not only carried out within the framework of jurisprudence or citizenship but, importantly, also through means of spatial construction and limitation as well as visual representation, negotiation and last but not least negation. The question of the visibility or the invisibility of bodies – and the many degrees in between, up to what could be called a hyper--visibility – thus remains of central aesthetic, ethical and political concern.

These current phenomena shed new light on the political meanings of the body and its representations in the former socialist countries of Europe – meanings which for some time now have been questioned. An example here would be the criticism on the so-called Critical Art of the 1990s and 2000s, a Polish artistic current largely devoted to reflecting on the social and cultural construction of the body. Critical Art has been condemned lately for not being politically relevant because it allegedly did not reflect on the own neo-liberal conditions and the economic hardships of the then freshly introduced turbo-capitalism. Contrary to this view, the assertion of the political and ethical significance of the body as a motif, material and agent of art is reinforced not only by the above mentioned current developments, but also by the fact that the preoccupation with the body has a very long history in East-Central Europe. In the 1970s, to give one example, body and performance art flourished in the ČSSR under the restrictive policy of normalization, where the body quite obviously functioned as a medium of resistance. To put it short: The body could be defined as the common denominator for the art of the region, as was claimed in the seminal exhibition “Body and the East. From the 1960s to the Present” (Ljubljana 1998, curated by Zdenka Badovinac).

Given how rich and complex the relationship between the body and art in East-Central Europe is, we need to flesh out a novel reflection of body in its temporal, phenomenological, aesthetic, philosophical and political multiplicity, and embed it in a global context. Thus, this conference aims to revisit the (post-)socialist body in East-Central European art after 1945, discuss its relation to and transformation of well-established artistic and theoretical discourses and international networks as well as shed light on reflections and notions of the body in other disciplines – including, but not limited to, philosophy, literature, technology and politics. We are interested in concrete historically grounded case studies and broader systematic-methodological approaches that help us expand and re-vise the already well-known and received interpretations that have largely drawn on Western interpretative frames, especially on Michel Foucault's theory of body politics. Next to the much researched body art and performances of the 1970s as well as the transformation period, we are interested in theorizing the “Eastern European” body in a variety of different media that has found less critical attention (painting, sculpture and architecture, for example). We particularly welcome submissions across periods and geographical locations and remain committed to inquiries that go beyond the well-established temporalities and narratives (e.g. 1950s, 2000-today).

In terms of contemporary theorization, we might ask: What transformation has the idea of the body undergone? What were and are the productive concepts across different disciplinary fields that can help us perceive and theorize the body? Can we expand the relation of the body and “politics” (the apolitical, antipolitics…) beyond well-known accounts? What are the political pre-conditions for constructing the body as “Eastern European”? And, in terms of conceptual precision, what, furthermore, is the critical purchase of “post-Soviet” in the times of transnationalism and neoliberalism? Or, more critically, how do the aforementioned frames overlap in the more recent conceptualizations and representations of the body?

Contributors are invited to present a short talk of about 25 min (followed by a discussion). Please send an abstract of max. 2000 characters and a short CV (summarised in a pdf) in English by e-mail to Fridolin Göbel:

fridolin.goebel@khi.fi.it

We kindly request that the abstract be submitted by 31 May 2023.

Feedback on workshop participation as well as information on lodging and travel reimbursement will be provided by 18 June 2023.

Reference:

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