

Title

Who's Afraid of Performance? Modernist Essentialism versus Postmodernist Intermediality in Perspectives on Polish Performance Art

Modernistyczny esencjalizm versus postmodernistyczna intermedialność w podejściu do polskiego performansu

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Source

MIEJSCE 5/2019

DOI

<https://www.doi.org/10.48285/8kaenzco3p>

URL

<http://miejsce.asp.waw.pl/en/kto-sie-boi-performansu/>

Abstract

My article concerns the dispute about the understanding of performance art in the Polish humanities. This dispute stems from the genre transformations of performance art and the growing popularity of performance studies. The article therefore refers to the definition of performance art formulated by Marvin Carlson, a New York critic and teatrologist. Carlson's arguments are confronted with the postulates of the Polish critic and art historian Łukasz Guzek, whose article "Performatyzacja sztuki" (2013) describes performance art through a highly modernist logic. I seek to situate Guzek's theses against a broader theoretical background, evoking the arguments of such theoreticians as Helen Spackman, Philip Auslander, Amy Bryzgel, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Claire Bishop. Finally, I confront Guzek's existentialist definition with the critical postulates of Tomasz Plata, a teatrologist and curator, who advocates a postmodern model of performance, closer to Carlson's definition. This article aims to explain the arguments of individual researchers and to analyze the strengths and shortcomings of their theories.

The recent years in Polish art have witnessed a great many events organized around performance art, provoking debates about the definition of the genre. The interest in this question intensified after Polish academic discourse absorbed new tendencies in the humanities in the form of performance studies, which developed in Anglo-Saxon scholarship since the 1980s in the writings of such authors as Richard Schechner and Jon McKenzie, and was introduced to Poland by Ewa Domańska.¹ Another reason was the institutional turn that compelled Polish art institutions to change their understanding and ways of presenting performance art. An ambition to capture that change informed the exhibition *Other Dances. Performance Turn in Polish Art of Twenty-First*

Century at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw (April–September 2018). The curator of the show, Agnieszka Sosnowska, explained that the selected artists were all able to reject the strict division between the performative and the visual arts.² Founded on such a concept, the exhibition, shown at an institution with a significant role in the history of Polish performance art, became a powerful voice calling for the expansion of the understanding of the genre. Its structure was founded on opposition to selected theatrical traditions or on seeking dialogue with them, namely the theater of Tadeusz Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski, and the classic performance artists' circle that was, Sosnowska argued, prone to isolationism.³ I have already discussed the division on the performance scene in Poland in the article "Ucieczka z twierdzy" (*Szum* no. 13, 2016). The objective behind the present text is a detailed analysis of its reasons, which essentially boil down to difficulties with defining performance art, coupled with the problem of autonomy and mutual relations between local artistic milieus oriented to performative work. Depending on the adopted perspective, these relations may be embraced as an opportunity for creative development or else seen as a threat. This is why the dispute merits closer examination, which I hope will help to dispel terminological doubts that still hamper the debate on Polish performative heritage.

As stated in the introduction, institutions played a major role in the discussion of performance art in Poland by lending legitimacy to certain artistic currents and tendencies. The problem of defining performance was nothing new, however, and had already been articulated by theorists in the field. Whilst performance as a discipline originated from the visual arts and could be analyzed through that tradition, expanding research in the field of performance studies set it in a new context within a broader cultural project that sees performativity as an inherent characteristic of postmodern civilization. That did not, of course, usher in a radical change in understanding performance art. In *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, first published in 2002, Richard Schechner defined it as follows: "Performance art evolved to some degree from painting [...]. Therefore, unlike theater, dance, and music, much performance art was and is the work of individual artists using their own selves – bodies, psyches, notebooks, experiences – as material."⁴ However, this perspective appears rather inconsistent with other passages in Schechner's book that trace the origins of performance art to the intersection of happenings, postmodern dance, and Pop Art.⁵ The significance of contemporary dance in the development of performance was also noted by Marvin Carlson in his *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (first published in 1996), where he observes that performance as a new means of expression by necessity grew out of opposition to a different artistic genre. That "other" genre was theater – a format where the storyline is conveyed to an audience by the actors cast in their roles. Carlson therefore believes that an exemplary piece of performance art, devised in contrast to a theatrical performance, involves the activity of one artist who works with their own body. They approach performative activity as a way of expressing their

cultural and life experience, and rely on relatively simple tools, far-removed from the elaborate setting of traditional theater.⁶ For Carlson – as a theatrologist and attentive observer of the New York theater scene – that definition was obviously just a starting point in his reflections on the development of contemporary performative arts with theater as a key reference. Analyzing the structure of performance, he also noted that the medium could not deny all ties with theater; association with it is invited even by the simple presence of an audience, and despite the emphasis on the genre's autonomy placed as early as the 1970s, many performers manifested a clearly theatrical approach.⁷ Carlson distinguishes another significant feature of performance in its potential for spectacularity, which links it to the practices of popular-cultural entertainers such as clowns, manipulators of physical objects, monologists, and stand-up comedians.⁸ The tradition of the visual arts is therefore not the only perspective from which to approach performance; others include new phenomena in experimental theater and entertainment.

Carlson's book received a lukewarm response from the Polish performance art milieu. Although the history of Polish performance art sometimes witnessed intersections between the traditions of the visual arts and theater (e.g. in the work of Tadeusz Kantor, the avant-garde theater of Jerzy Grotowski, and actions by the Academy of Movement [Akademia Ruchu]), Carlson's theatrological approach came to be seen by some as an attack on the discipline. The fears raised by the invasive discourse of performance studies were articulated perhaps most emphatically by Łukasz Guzek – a scholar, critic, and attentive observer of the performance scene in Poland. Guzek also founded one of the first websites devoted to Polish art: spam.art.pl, where he published reports and reviews from festivals and events in the performance art field. Those texts are collected in the volume *Performatyzacja sztuki. Sztuka performance i czynnik akcji w polskiej krytyce sztuki* (2013), complete with an author's preface that situates the discussed events in the context of the developing discipline of performance studies. Analyzing Guzek's argumentation, we see that it is based on a perspective on performance that opposes Carlson's ideas – what matters for the Polish scholar is not the expansion of the genre, but emphasis of its essence and autonomy. According to Guzek, performance art developed in Poland mainly from the tradition of the late conceptualism of the 1970s. Manifested in that era, the "performance-conscious" attitude showed the artist-performers a way to distinguish themselves from other phenomena in the arts, primarily theater and a variety of para-theatrical forms.⁹ Interestingly, such artistic consciousness was denied, for instance, to artists who created happenings, which anticipated performance, as, in Guzek's opinion, the example of Tadeusz Kantor's "happening theater" demonstrates.¹⁰ We may get the impression that this term carries an aspect of evaluative judgement (distinguishing between art that is more and art that is less self-conscious), which allows for a certain selectivity in the discussion of the tradition of performance art in Poland. After all, Kantor's happenings, influenced by the artist's meeting with Allan Kaprow, can be framed as pioneering initiatives that symbolically

initiated action art in Poland – as Amy Bryzgel argues in her book *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*¹¹ – but they can also be marginalized due to their “para-theatrical” character. By comparison, Guzek offered more attention and recognition to activities pursued in opposition to theater. An action that seems to offer a model example is *Virus [Wirus]* by the duo Sędzia Główny at the Teatr Rozmaitości in Warsaw in 2006 during the spectacle *Magnetism of the Heart [Magnetyzm serca]*, dir. Grzegorz Jarzyna]. The piece largely consisted of disturbing the spectacle, which led to conflict between the performers and the actors on stage. Guzek’s *Performatyzacja sztuki* includes the author’s conversation with the duo concerning the action, preceded by a telling preface: “Performance art has been allowed into the theater! The result is an immensely creative debunking, which (finally!) helps to define the difference between theater and performance (and, respectively, the actor and the performer) on the basis of the examined evidence.”¹²

Given such an approach, it is hardly surprising that Carlson’s proposed inclusion of performance art in the field of performance studies – which offers room for a variety of performative acts and puts them all on an equal footing – was opposed by the Polish scholar, who accused Carlson of attempting to exclude performance from the discourse of art history and treat it instrumentally in the field of his research.¹³ Guzek obviously could not easily reject the complex nature of performance altogether, in which one can observe “ethno-theatrical” elements and which is difficult to discuss solely in the art-historical context. Yet, as the author explains, “[...] in practice, intermedia dialectical syntheses always occur between disciplines. It is therefore necessary to remember the difference: the specific and the historical. The orders of the visual arts and theater are separate, and this needs to be emphasized, but they mutually tap into results of research in various disciplines.”¹⁴

Guzek also points to the language of Carlson’s book. In the Polish translation of Richard Schechner’s *Performance Studies [Performatyka]*, trans. Tomasz Kubikowski], published a year previously, the terminology was partly Polonised. Instead of “performance” or “performance” art, the translator proposed “performans” and “sztuka performans” respectively. The problem of Polonising specialist genre names emerged not only in that book, but also in other publications devoted to performance studies. Kubikowski’s explanation for his choice was that the term “performans” had already been sufficiently absorbed in Polish and followed its Latin etymology and derivatives (*formo, formare*).¹⁵ However, guided by the need to underscore the divergence of the disciplines, Guzek retained the English terminology (“performance art”) as a way of symbolically emphasizing that performance art formed part of art history. Furthermore, in *Performatyzacja sztuki*, the scholar stresses that the similarities between theatrical practices and performance art suggested by Carlson are merely illusionary, as the latter is always connected with the figure of the performer, and the presence of an audience is not its necessary condition.¹⁶

One could essentially agree with Guzek's arguments if not for one problem: the changing specificity of performance itself. All the genre definitions above refer to its classic understanding, while the discipline itself evolves quickly, absorbing other forms. This phenomenon did not escape Guzek's attention, who defined it as the "performatization of art," in connection with and as a result of the "postmodernization of art" that the scholar observed. The second major change highlighted by Guzek was the increasingly academic dimension of performance after 2000. The author hails the "transfer from the margins to the mainstream" as a historical victory of the avant-garde.¹⁷ In a similar way, the very idea of the "performatization of art" actually appears to imply the domination of performance over other artistic disciplines; hence the impression that Guzek's main goal was to showcase its significance. Yet, what fails to follow is a reflection on the changes in the way performance functions. That problem was obviously tackled by the Anglo-Saxon humanities. Discussing postmodernist performance, Carlson evokes the decision of the British Arts Council in 1994 to establish a new art genre, "live art," which was recognized by performance studies scholars (such as Helen Spackman, to whom Carlson refers) as a symbolic moment of passage from the modernist-essentialist paradigm (where the classic definition of performance sits) to the postmodern discourse, dominated by more-complex forms based on technologically innovative solutions.¹⁸ It is also of note that the notion of presence, of key importance for classic performance, has gained a completely different meaning in today's media reality. According to such scholars as Philip Auslander, the transformations of technology have led to the virtual disappearance of the category of "liveness," seminal for performance. This argument appears quite radical – Carlson disagrees with it, remarking that modern-day mediatization goes hand in hand with an escalating obsession with the body.¹⁹ It was perhaps also not a coincidence that art in the 1990s witnessed a widening interest in the category of the encounter, which laid the foundations for participatory activities and inspired Nicolas Bourriaud to formulate his theory of relational aesthetics. This was later criticized by Claire Bishop, who called for participatory projects to have an antagonizing aspect²⁰ (which she discerned, for instance, in Santiago Sierra's delegated performances and projects by Artur Żmijewski).

That change in the paradigm of presence can be approached not only from the perspective of the media, but also politics, which seems crucial for the understanding of performance art in Central and Eastern Europe. In the popular view, the ephemeral nature of performance in the 1970s and 1980s was a response to the repressive politics of the apparatus of power in the USSR and its satellite states. In this light, the use of one's own body became a political gesture, although the type of that politicality has obviously remained subject to debate until today. In her seminal book *Performance: Live Art, from 1909 to the Present* (or more precisely, its subsequent editions), RoseLee Goldberg discusses Central European performance in the categories of acts of resistance and political opposition to the authorities.²¹ That argument invited a polemical response

from Amy Bryzgel in her recently published book *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960*, where performance art emerging from “behind the Iron Curtain” is understood primarily as a gesture of artistic freedom.²² Clearly influenced by the critical analyses of Piotr Piotrowski, Bryzgel reviews the canon of Central European performance art, for instance by recognizing such contributions to Polish heritage as the work of the KwieKulik duo.²³ She therefore shifts her focus from art that insisted on its own autonomy to contextual activities that directly addressed the political situation of the era.

Bryzgel's is obviously not the only attempt to redefine the canon of performance art in Poland and Europe. An interesting change in the Polish discourse was proposed by the curator and theatrologist Tomasz Plata,²⁴ who restores the position of the Academy of Movement, hitherto marginalized in the history of Polish theater. As Plata notes, the Academy of Movement is usually evoked in the context of the group's street actions, while their work was above all theatrical.²⁵ Moreover, Polish theater studies simply situate the Academy of Movement among alternative theaters (alongside the 77 Theater [Teatr 77] or the Theater of the Eighth Day [Teatr Ósmego Dnia]). Plata, in turn, sees the group as an alternative to the three grand traditions of Polish theater established respectively by Leon Schiller, Tadeusz Kantor, and Jerzy Grotowski.²⁶ As for the politically engaged spectacles of the Academy of Movement, the scholar locates them in the tradition of Polish constructivism (addressed symbolically in the abbreviation of the group's Polish name: A.R., which brings to mind the a.r. group founded towards the end of the 1930s by Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro), and responds to the group's separate position on the Polish theater scene by suggesting that its work should be considered in the international context set by Robert Wilson, Lucinda Childs, Anna Teresa De Keersmaeker, Laurie Anderson, and The Wooster Group.²⁷ Last but not least, Plata invested considerable – publicistic, but also curatorial – effort in turning the Academy of Movement into a context for a new generation of Polish theater practitioners, such as Wojciech Ziemilski, Anna Karasińska, Ania Nowak, Marta Górnicka, the Komuna/Warszawa team (formerly Komuna Otwock), and Marta Ziółek. In his publication *Post-teatr i jego sprzymierzeńcy* from 2018, Plata defined the artists in the field of his interests as representatives of the post-theatrical formation, characterized by their distrust of theater as a genre that constitutes a tacit relation of power between the actor/creator and the audience.²⁸ This distrust is said to manifest itself in working through theatrical conventions, although – importantly – this does not entail their rejection.²⁹ The arguments laid out by that publication were championed by the *Other Dances* exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, where the work of the Academy of Movement provided a starting point for reflection on contemporary phenomena at the intersection of the visual arts, theater, and dance.

It goes without saying that Tomasz Plata's “post-theatrical” concept sparked debates in the theater

milieu. His diagnosis was challenged, for instance, by Paweł Soszyński, a theater critic, director, and editor of *Dwutygodnik.com* magazine, in which he shared his doubts. Soszyński questioned the revolutionary character of the post-theatrical tendency by highlighting its attachment to theatrical mechanisms and the category of ritual, significant in Polish theater.³⁰ Plata himself deemed Soszyński's polemic interesting, but also symptomatic, and proof that categories typical of the counter-cultural era, such as ritual, transgression, breach, and source experience, were still valid in Polish theater criticism. However, in Plata's view, work created in the post-theatrical spirit is entirely secular,³¹ and therefore unable to produce any ritual whatsoever; if anything, it rather challenges ritual. Interestingly enough, according to Plata, the problematic aspect of the counter-cultural paradigm may also be explored through the example of its attachment to the purity of the medium:

It began with Grotowski, who announced his search for theater in a state of purity and expected to find it in poor theater, devoid of any external elements. Among other consequences, this led him later to explore a variety of performative ritual forms – with the hope of discovering the primary and the intact, and therefore something that may be recognized as a pure source of theatricality. From today's perspective, that ambition may be deemed strictly modernist [...].³²

Plata recognized the persistence of modernist discourse not only in the language of theatrical but also artistic critique, which remains under the influence of the greats of Polish performance art such as Zbigniew Warpechowski. The scholar noticed the echoes of the counter-cultural paradigm, for instance in Łukasz Guzek's book *Rekonstrukcja sztuki akcji w Polsce* from 2017. Guzek embarked on the laborious task of describing neo-avant-garde practices from the borderland of conceptualism and new media art, yet, in methodological terms, he essentially remained faithful to the principles laid out in *Performatyzacja sztuki*³³ – founded, we should recall, on the belief of the distinctiveness of artistic disciplines. This belief, albeit not explicitly manifested in the selection of the discussed artists, offers itself in *Rekonstrukcja sztuki akcji* even at the level of terminology. Writing about performance, Guzek consistently uses the English term – *performance (art)* – which points to the position of this artistic genre in the order of the visual arts.³⁴ As Plata remarks, such an approach is obsolete in the context of modern-day performative practices, and therefore the history of action art should be rewritten from the perspective of its intermediality, as the *Other Dances* exhibition sought to do.³⁵ Significantly, however, he notes that the term “intermedia,” introduced by Dick Higgins, was absorbed by the Polish artistic milieu, and Polish art academies began to establish intermedia faculties and studios as units largely devoted to new media art. Performance, in turn, continued to be recognized as a visual arts genre and, as such, was far-removed from experimental theater and contemporary choreography.³⁶ This perspective reveals the problematic character of Guzek's argument in *Performatyzacja sztuki* concerning the triumph

of the avant-garde manifested in the academization of performance.

The postulate of working through the history of Polish performance art via the prism of intermediality appears interesting if only for two reasons. The first concerns the evaluation of the oeuvre of the historical avant-garde, which remains a problematic heritage for many a young artist, as I pointed out in the article “Ucieczka z twierdzy,” published in 2016 in the magazine *Szum*.³⁷ The other reason stems directly from the first and pertains to the possibility of a new generation of artists tapping into that heritage and initiating a dialogue between creative circles that currently eye each other either with curiosity or distrust, as indicated in the title of this article, where essentialists are contrasted with the postmodernist “lobby.” Such a possibility of overcoming these antagonisms – founded on working them through, and not on isolation – can be considered as a potential symptom of the strength of Polish performance art, and not as a threat, as researchers who hold onto essentialist definitions posit. However, Tomasz Plata’s proposed revision of the work of the Academy of Movement only seems to mark the beginning of the process, which might also embrace other creative personalities, for example the previously mentioned duos Sędzia Główny and KwieKulik. Yet, while underlining the legitimacy of going beyond the modernist paradigm in discussions of performance art, in the original Polish version of this article I nevertheless followed teatrologists in consistently using the Polish terms “performans” and “sztuka performansu,” hoping that the Polish language would not be detrimental to art.

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2. Agnieszka Sosnowska, "Other Dances, or the Performance Turn the Polish Way," in: *Other Dances. Performance Turn in Polish Art of Twenty-First Century*, ed. Agnieszka Sosnowska, exh. cat. (Warsaw: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski, 2019), 27. ↵
3. *Ibid.*, 33. ↵
4. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, media ed. Sara Brady (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 162. ↵
5. *Ibid.*, 164. ↵
6. Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 6. ↵
7. *Ibid.*, 105. ↵
8. *Ibid.*, 100. ↵
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10. *Ibid.* ↵
11. Amy Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester: Manchester

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12. Łukasz Guzek, "Sędzia główny (Karolina Wiktor, Ola Kubiak) w TR," in: Guzek, *Performatyzacja sztuki*, 136. ↵
 13. Guzek, *Performatyzacja sztuki*, 14. ↵
 14. Ibid. ↵
 15. Tomasz Kubikowski, "Posłowie tłumacza," in: Richard Schechner, *Performatyka: wstęp*, trans. Tomasz Kubikowski (Wrocław: Ośrodek Badań Twórczości Jerzego Grotowskiego i Poszukiwań Teatralno-Kulturowych, 2006), 392 [translator's afterword in the Polish translation of Schechner's *Performance Studies: An Introduction* – trans. note]. ↵
 16. Guzek, *Performatyzacja sztuki*, 14. ↵
 17. Ibid., 11. ↵
 18. Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 134. ↵
 19. Ibid., 141. ↵
 20. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 189. ↵
 21. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art, from 1909 to the Present* (3rd edition) (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 214. ↵
 22. Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe*, 7. ↵
 23. Ibid., 234–236. ↵
 24. Tomasz Plata is a curator of series of theatrical-performative activities: *Perform, Re// mix, We, the Bourgeoisie, Microtheater*. He also authored the books: *Post-teatr i jego sprzymierzeńcy* (2018); *Pośmiertne życie romantyzmu* (2017); *My, mieszczenie* (2015); *Re// mix* (with Dorota Sajewska, 2014); *Być i nie być. Kategoria obecności w teatrze i performansie ostatniego półwiecza* (2009); *Komuna Otwock. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej* (with Agnieszka Berlińska, 2009); *Strategie publiczne, strategie prywatne. Teatr polski 1990–2005* (2005); *Akademia Ruchu* (2003); *Andy Warhol w drodze do teatru* (2001). ↵
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 26. Ibid., 16. ↵
 27. Ibid., 17. ↵
 28. Tomasz Plata, "Post-teatr. Ucieczka z teatru. Ucieczka do teatru," in: *Post-teatr i jego sojusznicy*, ed. Tomasz Plata (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, Akademia Teatralna im. Aleksandra Zelwerowicza, 2018), 23. ↵
 29. Ibid., 17–19. ↵
 30. Paweł Soszyński, "Rytuały późnego antropocenu," *Dwutygodnik.com* no. 244 (2018), <https://>

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31. Tomasz Plata, "A Secular Performance," in: *Other Dances*, 199. ↵
32. Ibid., 200. ↵
33. Łukasz Guzek, *Rekonstrukcja sztuki akcji* (Warsaw–Toruń: Polski Instytut Studiów nad Sztuką Świata, Wydawnictwo Tako, 2017), 19. ↵
34. Guzek justified his choice of retaining the English spelling by referring to the same decision by Dariusz Kosiński, the translator of one of the editions of John McKenzie's *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*; see: Guzek, Ibid. ↵
35. Plata, "Świecki performans," 201. ↵
36. Ibid., 202. ↵
37. Karolina Plinta, "Ucieczka z twierdzy," *Szum* no. 13 (2016), 64–67. ↵

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ISSN 2450-1611