

## 15 Artistic collaborations of performing women in the GDR

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West German scholars' myths and projections on the subcultural scenes of fine artists and writers belonging to the second public sphere,<sup>1</sup> particularly the ones of the Prenzlauer Berg in East Berlin, underwent a crucial break shortly after 1989 when it became publicly known that central figures of the scenes had been closely co-operating with the state security for years. It then was in question whether the second public sphere, alternatively named "subculture", "counter-culture" or "underground", was as autonomous as it represented itself and had been perceived up to that point.<sup>2</sup> Since then, research on the East German<sup>3</sup> second public sphere has mainly focused on the analysis of its demarcation strategies from the culture of the first public sphere and from normative life concepts, but also on traditions of reaching back to the historic avant-garde (Muschter and Thomas 1992; Eckart 1993; Kaiser 2016). There are further studies on the particularities of methods, techniques and formal aesthetics of an art production like filmmaking with Super-8 film (Löser 2011) that was generated under completely different political and societal conditions than artistic articulation in the subcultural scenes of West Germany (Blume et al. 2002; Barron and Eckmann 2009). Most of these publications on the GDR's second public sphere show a remarkably asymmetrical proportion of represented female and male artists. Both the GDR's first and second public spheres in the socialist period are canonized as male, with only a few female protagonists posing as exceptional figures. This is not only a phenomenon of East Germany's art historiography but is characteristic of the records of East European art in general. The almost missing discourses on gender, identity, and sexuality within these projects can be perceived as directly related to this imbalance.<sup>4</sup>

The reception, including international publications of the last 25 years, also ensured that the male-dominated history of action and performance art in the GDR was predominantly passed on, whereby the actions by the artist groups Auto-perforationsartisten (Self-Perforation-Artists) and Clara Mosch have been the primary subjects (Blume 1996; Badovinac 1998; Rehberg 2004; Piotrowski 2009). The performative practice of women artists, however, was almost neglected. In the last years, feminist-inspired art scholars and curators realized projects that in a global gender-critical frame, counter-read the history of art reception in Eastern Europe and the GDR. They raised awareness of unknown female artists, gender relations in the arts, and the interdependence of art historiography and gender to further

question the mechanisms of art historical canonisation. The aim was to generate new narratives on women's position and their artistic practice to introduce their oeuvre to a broader public (Pejic 2009; Richter 2014; Hock 2013; Knaup and Stammer 2014; Bryzgel 2017).

My text aims to follow these discussions and will examine some examples of the body-based and social practice of women artists at the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s to underline their contribution to processual and performance art in the GDR. The outline will be set against the backdrop of the characteristic features of the East German second public sphere in relation to its role as well as relevance in action and performance art. My undertakings will extend the present discourses, and question whether the female performers have maintained close interconnections with each other that could have enabled them to experiment in the field of body and performance art and to find new forms of self-expression within male-dominated scenes. In what follows I will try to outline two main characteristics of art practices in the second public sphere: they were *intermedial* and *process-oriented*. These two qualities of event-based art practices inspired a lot of women artists and enabled them – with no regard to their primary expertise in photography, painting, or drawing – to collaborate and to develop together new artistic practices and aesthetics. I will focus on intermedia and process in order to generate an analytical perspective, which will help me to map some of the main scenes of female performance artists and their connections in the GDR.

### **Intermedia and process**

The unifying moment of the protagonists of the Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig, Halle, Erfurt or Chemnitz (formerly Karl-Marx-Stadt) scenes was a common understanding of how to live and work in a self-created sphere of freedom outside artistic norms and lifestyles, though still situated within the system of state socialism and as part of its cultural order (Eckart 1993; Grunenberg 1993). The different groups/communities, including artists, authors, dancers, musicians and filmmakers, were not committed to one special artistic program. On the contrary, their common ground was the pluralism of artistic approaches and methods.

The name of the festival *Intermedia I: Sound images – Colour sound (Intermedia I: Klangbild – Farbklang, 1985)*, that included an exhibition, a series of performances, a program of experimental films, and concerts by punk bands, was (in the words of their initiators Christoph Tannert and Michael Kapinos) not programmatic, but reflected the artistic practice of the second public sphere, which showed crossovers of production forms, genres, styles and programs. The artistic methods and working procedures were intermedial: Painters, for instance, were collaborating with musicians and were themselves playing music while founding artists' bands. The fusion of corporeal movement, music and film, but also the intersection with punk, found numerous similar trends and parallels at that time in the Western part of Germany and West Berlin, such as the experimental artist group and punk band Deadly Doris (Die Tödliche Doris) or the punk band Collapsing New Buildings (Einstürzende Neubauten), of which East German protagonists were well-informed.

This artistic practice shows an analogy to the idea of intermedia, which was introduced by Dick Higgins in the Fluxus movement of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> Intermedia back then was understood not so much as a term for a movement but rather as an artistic attitude, a specific access to different materials including daily life objects (Büscher 1998). Alongside the non-hierarchical use of all available materials and techniques, the transgression of institutional and normative borders is another substantial component of intermedia. Against this background, I would put forward the hypothesis that non-conformist women artists from Eastern Germany, alongside their male colleagues, gave rise to performative art practices in bringing conventional art genres into a dialogue with each other and displaying the process of art-making in contrast to producing artefacts. In the absence of an art market and within the second public sphere, they could afford to focus on an experimental form of artistic presentations, beyond aesthetic genres and expectations.

I do fully agree with the statement that performances and body art expressed the artists' mistrust in stylistic norms, but I disagree with the idea that these actions questioned the images in general, panel painting in particular (Rehberg 2004). Most of the artists in the field of performance art continued to work as painters or graphic artists, and even more often included the production of images into their actions – only if it was for documentation purposes, they used image/movement recording devices. Nevertheless, the discovery and the accentuation of process itself is one essential feature of the artistic practice in the East German second public sphere. The body as a spontaneous medium of expression and as artistic territory was widely used. Process- and body-based artistic articulation was not entirely controllable, since it triggered unpredictable actions. As an ephemeral artistic form, an open-ended performance deprived the audience of a final reading. It could spontaneously be staged everywhere and disappear if needed. Action and performance art refused to correspond with the artistic conception of primarily (mis-)using art as an educational instrument carrying a political message. But they did also (involuntarily) imply a political meaning: carried out as liberating acts targeting artistic conventions, they showed strategies of irony, persiflage, masquerade and a critique of mimetic representation that had highly subversive potential.

Action and performance art was used by women and likewise by male artists, since these artistic territories allowed a broad experimental scope. Sometimes it was the only medium artists could work with when they were subject to an exhibition ban or when their primary medium of expression was prohibited, as in the case of painter Cornelia Schleime or filmmaker Lutz Dammbeck.

Attempts to enter into the first public sphere with performance art were continuously prevented or subsequently punished by executors of cultural politics right up until the mid-1980s. Only during the GDR's last year of existence did the Association of Fine Artists of the GDR develop a more tolerant way of dealing with transgressive forms of performance and action art. The first representative event that exhibited performance art – also as an equal art form alongside painting and sculpture – was authorized in 1989 under the title *Permanente Kunstkonferenz* (Permanent Art Conference) on the occasion of the so-called *Bezirkskunstaussstellung* (Regional Art Exhibition) in Berlin.

## **Social and gender patterns in the second public sphere**

The second public sphere has been described as an “emergency association” (“Notgemeinschaft”, Kaiser and Petzold 1997), within which alliances were based on the chronic shortages in social freedom rather than on the principle of solidarity. The art historian Paul Kaiser pointed out that one of the significant characteristics of the second public sphere were the individualisation efforts of its protagonists, ending up in numerous loose collectives and circles of friends – guaranteeing enough involvement and detachment simultaneously – though only into a few steady-working artist groups with collaborating members over several years (2016). Without the reconnection to these communities and their backup, Kaiser emphasizes, artists would not have been able to pursue their self-ruled artistic practice and life.

In addition, the art scenes were described as patriarchal and male-dominated, marginalising alternative subject positions related not only to gender identity but also race and ethnicity and excluding women artists and writers when it came to their presence and visibility within the “institutions” of the second public sphere (Brandler 1991; Dahlke 1997; Ebert 2003; Richter 2017). Did women, for the development of an independent artistic language, need and create their own network structures and locations, as the art historian Susanne Altmann suggests (2009), and if so, what were their key features? The key features of performative expression and networking were, for instance, the direct use of one’s own (naked) body, and addressing gender issues. In performances the body reveals the political dimension of privacy and subverts traditional representations of “femininity”. Performance, as a processual art practice, introduces the body, gender and identity as performative and fluid, instead of fixed and universal entities. It allows women artists to present themselves as active and acting subjects.

## **Her space**

One of the major venues for women artists’ independent art making was the farm of Erika Stürmer-Alex in the village of Lietzen, nearby Frankfurt/Oder, where at the beginning of the 1980s the artist was able to buy a derelict house. Stürmer-Alex studied painting and graphics at the art academy in Berlin-Weißensee in the late 1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s. She soon extended her work into collective actions. These, together with the formation of networks and after 1989 with the foundation of an association of women artists, are an essential part of her artistic practice. Stürmer-Alex was a teacher figure and role model for many women artists due to her non-conformist work and life. Primarily women artists of different generations, cultural producers, art historians and autodidacts of the second but also of the first public sphere visited her over the years and collaborated on collective and intermedia projects. Together they initiated plein-air, land-art-actions, performances, painting weeks, summer schools, spontaneous theatre, concerts, lectures, play readings and parties. Sculpture, painting and collages were the media in which Stürmer-Alex primarily worked to capture and transform movement, music, literary texts. Like that of many other artists, her practice of the early 1970s was open

to experiments with small actions reminiscent of theatre plays and costuming based on the East Berlin theatre scene's influence. Photographs on the action *Field Walking* (*Feldbegehung*, 1985) show her in a white mask and costume with a black, abstract pattern. She walks through a field, passing some temporarily constructed geometrical white sculptures. The action reflects the idea of moving structures from *arte informel* and questions the sculptural and spatial relations between the human figure and the medium of sculpture in terms of size and volume. It clearly is an artistic intervention in the landscape and refers to actions of land art as well.

In terms of the "expanded definition of art" (*erweiterterter Kunstbegriff*) her social practice can be understood as "social sculpture" (*soziale Plastik*). The term, introduced by Joseph Beuys, stands for an infrastructure, an open and yet sheltered space – here one used by women artists and their non-conformist experiments. Although the farm was not an exclusive place for women only, it meant a rural refuge for female artists, who were normally exposed to the male hegemony of art scenes in cities like Berlin. Although Stürmer-Alex was a member of the Association of Fine Artists, she was under permanent surveillance by the state security who suspected that she intended to establish a center for "illegal" exhibitions (Müller-Stosch 2008). It demanded courage and fortitude to build up the farm, allowing artists such as Karla Woisnitza or the Artist-Group from Erfurt (*Erfurter Künstlerinnengruppe*) to live, work and perform at her place and to return regularly. When taking a broader look at the cultural landscape, Erika Stürmer-Alex's location is one of the very few production spaces owned and established by woman artists in the GDR's second public sphere, where performance art became an attractive form of expression and communication due to its process-based and intermedia qualities.

### Collective images

Based on Stürmer-Alex's model of close female friendship, the artist Karla Woisnitza, a regular visitor in Lietzen and a former pupil of Erika Stürmer-Alex, brought together women artists and founded loose networks during her studies of set design at the art academy in Dresden. Woisnitza studied there from 1973 to 1979, and in her core curriculum with Günter Hornig, who was an inspiration to numerous performing artists like Erhard Monden, the *Autoperforationsartisten*, and Yana Milev. Woisnitza introduced her fellow students – and upcoming artists who later worked also in the field of performance – such as Christine Schlegel and Cornelia Schleime to Stürmer-Alex and her circles. Together with them she realized several collective events, such as the play reading of Carson McCuller's *Ballad of the Sad Café* (1976). Her *Face Painting Action* (*Gesichtsmalaktion*, 1978–79) was most probably inspired by the world of theatre Woisnitza worked in during her studies, and by the numerous artists' festivals of the second public sphere in the 1970s. Additionally, the legendary carnival parties of the art academy in Dresden offered many opportunities for wearing costumes and disguise, to invent new identities and characters. Within the frame of a performance, so to speak, Woisnitza was able to point to the performativity of gender and the processes of identity construction, which undermined the fiction of an essentially given persona. In

*Face Painting Action* Woisnitza got together with artists Marie-Luise Bauerschmidt, Sabine Gumnitz, Monika Hanske, Christine Schlegel, Cornelia Schleime, and Angela Schumann. Each artist individually applied paint to her face. The women photographically documented the process of painting as well as its final result. In her two-part photo collage Woisnitza later brings a selection of individual portraits together, showing the moment of the “before” and that of the “after”. The women’s mask-like face paintings consisting of abstract, geometrical shapes and stylised eyes modifying their facial features expressing threat, unpleasantness, laughter, and melancholia hint at the representation of culturally different images of women anchored in collective visual memory of the Occident. Expressionism, especially wooden sculptures, paintings, and prints representing non-European cultures created by the expressionist group Bridge (Brücke, 1905–1913), has a long tradition in the city of Dresden. The artists of *Face Painting Action* do not reproduce traditional images of an alleged “original” and “authentic” femininity. They instead create a multitude of rather disturbing images of women while reaching back to Expressionism and breaking with patriarchal visualizations of women. The two-faced photographs created by Woisnitza emphasize the processual dimension of the work: the production process in real time and the representation of women. Both the portraits of the individual artists arranged on the photo print suggest unsettling images of women, and refer to the collective and dialogic character of one of the first (recorded) women-only actions in East German art history. Both collaboration and a communicative attitude serve as proof for the creative and critical character of performing in the second public sphere.

Although these and further collaborative projects could have served as a ground for establishing a female artist group, the loose collective split up in the early 1980s. Their collaborations in their early professional years meant the first encounter with the body as an artistic material, and built the foundation of individual actions and performances in the following years. Woisnitza herself continued with solo performances like the *Mirror-Story* (*Spiegelgeschichte*, 1982) and with *Woman Is the Nigger* [sic] *of the World* (1986) that addressed issues such as gender difference and (again) the visual representation of the cultural “other”. The critical articulation of such issues was almost only possible within the semi-visible art scenes of a second public sphere. One of the main results of these performances lay in the dynamization of rigid images of the “self” (and the “other”), which we can retroactively identify as a prominent strategy of performance art in the GDR. This became especially obvious in the artistic experiments of performed pictures.

## **Performed pictures**

Although Christine Schlegel primarily worked and works as a painter, having studied at the art academy in Dresden from 1973 to 1978, her oeuvre shows a strong influence of experimental theatre, music, dance and film – emphasizing the relevance of intermedia in event-based art production. Through her friend, the poet Michael Rom, Schlegel encountered and later joined one of the very few independent and experimental theatre groups in the GDR, the so-called



Figure 15.1a and b Karla Woisnitza, *Face Painting Action*, 1978–79, 2 Photo Collages, 40 x 30 cm (with Marie-Luise Bauerschmidt, Sabine Gumnitz, Monika Hanske, Christine Schlegel, Cornelia Schleime, Angela Schumann, Karla Woisnitza), private archive: Karla Woisnitza.

Courtesy: Karla Woisnitza.



*Figure 15.1a and b* (Continued)

SUM-Theater (1982–1984) at Helge Leiberg's studio in Dresden. A painter, musician and experimental artist himself, Leiberg worked with Super-8 film and with dancers, inviting the theatre's improvisation sessions to his large studio space. Schlegel attended the rehearsals and sketched the actor's absurd play and movements on paper while observing the scenery. She, in general, had no ambition to act on the stage and in front of a potential audience except for her first performance *Pergamotten* (1983) where she erected huge paper walls in the studio space and lit them up when acting from *behind* the semi-transparent sheets. This way, Schlegel generated a shadow play with her own body, but more importantly, she captured her dance movements and those of her partner, Angela Leiberg, simultaneously with a brush on the suspended paper sheets. At the end the painter and dancer tore up the paper sheets, before rolling it up and throwing it out of the window. The performance opens up the tension between the visibility and invisibility of the female body and underscores the processes of painting and movement. It does not allow any fixation on a still image, and for that reason even the film documentation of the performance shows in its last scene the fragmentation and floating of the



painted images in the air. From this point on in her actions Schlegel exchanged painting on canvas for the flux of moving film images projected onto the wall that also served as a background to the performers' movements. This turn towards the process as well as to intermedia is also deeply entangled with the second public sphere's features. The experiences with the SUM-Theater were her "most radical" (Schlegel). They can be seen as the source for the expansion of her painting into other media, leading her to an individual artistic language and setting the foundation for artistic collaboration that she once experienced with her female colleagues during her studies.

The collaboration and friendship of Christine Schlegel with the independent experimental dancer and pantomime Fine Kwiatkowski was a highly productive, if partly irregular, co-operation during the existence of the second public sphere and after. From 1984 to the 2000s Schlegel and Kwiatkowski worked together in several performances and films. In the experimental film *Hothouse* (*Treibhaus*, 1985) Schlegel focuses on the movements of Kwiatkowski only, shown in closed spaces and in nature. Schlegel presented her film at the above-mentioned Intermedia I festival with an interesting added feature: the film was projected with a live performance of Kwiatkowski in front of the projection, doubling her own image. For further performances Schlegel edited and processed film images to get scratched, painted over, alienated and destroyed, in the end looking like abstract forms and colours. With their joint performances, Schlegel and Kwiatkowski managed to fuse painting, film, dance, and often music, into an exceptional and independent art form. They defined each part of the joint intermedia productions as equal, opposing traditional gender patterns and hierarchies that were virulent in the artistic scenes of the second public sphere. Her multimedial performances were an attempt to dissolve the hierarchical relationship between *the* (male) painter and *the* (female) model, as was the case in the actions conducted by her male colleagues who were, within this traditional constellation of art production, reproducing stereotypical patterns of gender difference. My interpretation of Schlegel's and Kwiatkowski's performance-screening goes even further, detecting in them a counter-project to the myth of the male painter as a genius, as it was produced in photos and film documents of Jackson Pollock working on his drip paintings. Kwiatkowski as an androgynous apparition with shaved head wearing a white tricot and as an abstracted fictional rather non-feminine character, acted and created images within and against the backdrop of Schlegel's painted films. The dancer converted her body into moving paintings, while she carried out a transformation into image and performing figure simultaneously. Kwiatkowski was fragmented, swallowed, covered and highlighted by the film images. She also served as "surface" for the projection – and rejected visibility at the same time. Through the setting of the image and the stage the dancer's performances were a break from conventional scenery. This case also shows how artistically produced intermedia crossovers challenged the first public sphere's cultural norms. With her movement concept that she also practiced in other artistic collaborations, Kwiatkowski stayed outside the institutional dance culture of the GDR. She nowadays appears to be a pioneer of postmodern dance (Giersdorf 2014).<sup>6</sup>

## Body experiences

The story of intermedia and process interwoven with the second public sphere continues with a strong connection that existed between the female protagonists of the Dresden and Erfurt art scenes. An example represents the collaboration of the painter Cornelia Schleime and the gallerist – later photographer, filmmaker and writer – Gabriele Stötzer from Erfurt. They shared several productive encounters, and were mutually inspiring, more so than we realize today. After Stötzer invited Schleime to Erfurt, between 1980 and 1982 both participated in Thuringia-based artists' plein-air, at an open-air workshop in Hüpstedt. Despite the fact that in 1981 the plein-air was prohibited by state security, both artists decided to stay. With this sanction the contrast between the first and the second public sphere becomes clear again, as does which position female artists took on in the constellation of opposing public spheres. Schleime performed a body-painting-action in Hüpstedt. Returning to the motif of the 1978 eye from the *Face Painting Action*, she now applied this to her entire body, and wrapped herself into textile, wire, and rope. All materials referred to the autocratic ties limiting artistic freedom of intermedia and process, as well as to the fixed representations of the female body as the object of the male gaze. In the first place Schleime's self-presentations expressed frustration directed towards the repressions of the authorities that she experienced anew through the ban of the plein-air.

Most of the photos of this action were taken by Stötzer. She further documented wrapping performances of Schleime like *Mouth Up, Eyes Shut* (*Mund auf, Augen zu*, 1982), which again accentuated physical and psychological restrictions. This emphasis was later intensified in her most successful Super-8 film *Under White Cloth* (*Unter weißen Tüchern*, 1983). The archaic images of wrapping, masking and mummification found in Schleime's oeuvre are also present in Gabriele Stötzer's, Heike Stephan's, or Else Gabriel's work, as well as in feminist interventions of women artists from Western Europe like Fina Miralles, Françoise Janicot, or Annegret Soltau. All can symbolize ideas of hiding and cocooning. But these symbols mostly stand for immobility, imprisonment and isolation of the female subject. All of them show subversive subjectivities that could only be performed in the second public sphere. In showing herself exposed in a violent manner, Schleime both addressed the vulnerable subjection to the governmental and male gaze and visualized moments of resistance.

Inspired by filmmaker and author Gino Hahnemann, around that time Schleime and Stötzer started to produce Super-8 films which became a fundamental part of their individual art. Even though the films are not documents of actions, they need to be mentioned in the context of performance since they show numerous references to the artists' painterly as well as body-based work. In Schleime's first film *In the Hourglass* (*In der Sanduhr*, 1982), a surreal collage of overpainted postcards and scenes set in a backyard, Stötzer acts a part. Together with another woman she sits at a table and plays cards – initially unmasked, later in disguise. The film documents one of the rare moments of Stötzer appearing in front of the camera in a production of another artist, instead of photographing and directing herself. Their collaboration

was open to other media, too. Schleime often came to Erfurt to sew her own clothes and do other textile work. Several photographs show Schleime and Stötzer together at Heike Stephan's flat – that served as her studio space – working on the sewing machine. This demonstrates the importance of co-working and co-living as major characteristics of existing in the second public sphere. With the emigration of Schleime to West Berlin in 1984 their fruitful, four-year-long collaboration ended abruptly. Schleime again took up painting, which up to the present is accompanied by costuming and masquerade in performative photographic works.<sup>7</sup>

### *Women together*

As pointed out before, co-working as well as co-living were core elements of event-based, intermediated arts created by women artists. Gabriele Stötzer was one of the most radical and uncompromising women artists in the GDR. Accused of defamation of the state after collecting signatures for a letter of protest against the expatriation of the singer and songwriter Wolf Biermann,<sup>8</sup> in 1977 she was imprisoned in the worst women's jail in the GDR, in Hoheneck. In prison Stötzer thoroughly examined her identity as a woman. There she encountered femininity as radical mass, power and passion. These experiences built the essential foundation of her collaboration with women and women artists in the 1980s, after Stötzer had entered Erfurt's artistic second public sphere. This was the moment when she took over the private Gallery in the Corridor (Galerie im Flur) which was shut down by the state security only one year later, when she planned to show works of a painter being labeled a dissident by the state. Together with different formations of women artists and autodidacts, Stötzer produced all together seventeen films and various photo series. Her book *Women Together (Frauen miteinander, 1982–1983)*, consisting of thirteen photo series, depict two women, Birgit Bronner and Nora Seifert, in individual actions or in interaction with each other and with different objects: a transparent glass sheet, an egg, a feather boa, a cigarette, gauze bandage and paint. The photographs are an impressive testimonial to the exploration of female corporeality and sexuality as an aesthetic counter-discourse to the manifestations of women's estrangement and domestication in visual representation at the time, especially in the painting and sculpture of the first public sphere. The title of the book is programmatic for Stötzer's artistic expression in activating women's solidarity, as in the close encounter of women she develops a symbolic *and* real counter-strategy against the isolation and marginalisation of women in the (art) scenes of the second public sphere. Although Stötzer stood primarily behind the film and photo camera, she consistently produced body art and performance pieces herself. Unaware of Yves Klein's anthropometric actions and paintings from the 1960s, in 1982 Stötzer had her colleague Heike Stephan photograph her during the action *Execution (Abwicklung)*. Whereas Klein occasionally used his own body, but worked primarily with female models as "living brushes", Stötzer in her twelve-part series leaves the imprints of her painted body on large paper sheets that are suspended from the wall and introduces a painting and an active female subject. In the second to the last photograph, she lies underneath her body print; in the last picture Stötzer

has disappeared while the picture of her body is still visible. The interplay between presence and absence on and in front of the canvas is an indication of the fact that the status of women in pictures is at one and the same time affirmed and negated. The female persona in action, or in process, is interchanged with the representation of the passive female nude and her allegorical characterization in the art of most male artists – in both the first and second public sphere of the GDR. Active criticism of performing women artists is also true for the next case.

Stötzer had a close creative partnership with the photographer and action artist Heike Stephan. Their exchange was highly productive, occasionally symbiotic in terms of materials and the way they interacted. In 1982 Stephan participated in the actions of Schleime and Stötzer in Hüpstedt. In a series of photographs by Stötzer, that later became the basis of her artist book *Spoken Songs (Gesprochene Lieder, 1982)* and that are part of her *Kink Book (Mackenbuch, 1985)*, both Stephan and Schleime joyfully celebrated their femininity, sexuality and being together. While they were showing themselves in lingerie and erotically charged poses seemingly dedicated to each other, their exuberance and laughter – that contrasts with the sombre self-stagings of Schleime at the same time and site – are, in my view, subversive messages against state oppression and paternalistic structures. Stephan's studio in Erfurt became the venue of her and Stötzer's numerous experiments with body art. Sewing, weaving, dyeing were not only the sources of income for both women but also part of their artistic practices. Textile was the major material that (especially) Stephan worked with in her body actions and performances: being a subversive and creative reference to the boundaries women were traditionally tied to. Stephan not only sewed the dress for one of the series of Stötzer's *Women Together*, but wrapped herself in silk and foil, besides applying soil to her body or squeezing her painted body against a transparent glass plate. It was especially the contrasting and almost metaphorical materiality of silk fabric that Stephan was interested in: it has a soft and pleasant quality when dry, but suffocating effects in its wet state.

Working together was like a mutual support, like having a non-transmitted, direct, understanding public around with whom to share common experiences and feelings.

### *Avant femme*<sup>9</sup>

Stötzer became the major initiator and central figure of a collective of women artists and autodidacts. For the women of the Erfurter Künstlerinnengruppe (Erfurt's women artists group) self-organisation into a women's-only group primarily meant coming together and making art together, coping with the surrounding reality and "surviving intellectually" (Stötzer) in the semi-autonomous second public sphere. They made their lives the subject of their art, particularly because these women intended to oppose the regimentation and oppression of everyday life. They gathered to discover, to work with archetypical images of femininity, and to develop their individual visions. The women met weekly in their private houses, in cellars

and gardens, to talk, to produce collectively, to realize Super-8 films, to read and make music together. The collective allowed them to express their concerns about social reality that over the years turned into a variety of individual and collective self-expressions through the media of film and performance. How political and strictly counter-cultural their collective was, shows also the fact that some of the members in 1989 were the first to occupy a secret service headquarters in the GDR – the one in Erfurt. In their experimental actions, performances, and fashion shows, the Erfurter Künstlerinnengruppe discovered a body language that introduced radical counter-images to the predominant pattern of women's representation and emphasized the symbiotic interaction of female bodies. Spontaneous actions by the group were later replaced by roleplays and more staged performances and fashion shows questioning the idea of representation and collective performance. The clothes, costumes and objects for their actions and fashion shows were designed and created by the artists themselves. The women sounded out their dreams, different characters and identities; they also knew about the subversive power of humour, which is crystallized in their film *Humour-Comic (Komik-Komisch, 1988)*, in which they practice absurd movements and walks on the roofs of the city of Erfurt or in the streets of Berlin. They additionally highlighted their non-conformist appearance with fancy costumes.

Only in 1988 could the women's group leave its private studios for a venue outside of the second public sphere with an audience. It was invited to a church congress in Erfurt under the slogan *Women Interpret the Bible Differently (Frauen interpretieren die Bibel anders)*. The first time all of them acted in the "real" first public sphere was in 1989 at an exhibition of the two members Verena Kyselka and Monika Andres in Leipzig. After the fall of the wall the group continued its work until 1994, and founded its own infrastructure when they established an exhibition venue, the Art House Erfurt (Kunsthhaus Erfurt). Kyselka and Stötzer then had the chance to initiate an international women's performance festival in 1992 (Kyselka and Stötzer 1992).

## Conclusion

The investigation has shown a wide range of professional partnerships of performing women artists that also brought together protagonists of different artistic scenes in, for instance, Dresden, Berlin or Erfurt. The women's intellectual and artistic exchange was complementary, had formative influences on each other's performance practice, and for some is still alive today. Through the protected setting of trust and friendship these women discovered together the body as an artistic medium and a material at the beginning of their professional careers. Their collaborations provided a solid framework for self-experiences as well as self-expression, gave leeway for their social realities as artists, women, mothers and wives. It was especially in their loose group formations that women artists felt encouraged to experience and develop their intermedia, performative and body-based practice, which was an unknown territory for them then. The horizon of intermedia and

process opened up new possibilities of border-crossings that was an essential feature of (co-)working in the second public sphere.

Their early collaborative projects, such as *Face Painting Action* or the mutual body actions in Hüpstedt, were decisive for their individual process- and body-based artwork in the years to come.

With the state's growing integration efforts and the steady opening of the East German second public sphere towards the first public sphere, action and performance art could more often be given a home in institutions of the first public sphere from the mid-1980s onwards. Women artists, particularly the younger generation, could more radically articulate their artistic vision, and were able to perform "the female subject" in a public sphere that was seemingly no longer split up. Based on the achievements of Erika Stürmer-Alex, Karla Woisnitza, Christine Schlegel and Fine Kwiatkowski, Cornelia Schleime, Heike Stephan, Gabriele Stötzer, and the Erfurter Künstlerinnengruppe, female performers born at the beginning of the 1960s, like Else Gabriel and Yana Milev, had an easier start into their artistic practice, which did not seem to be any longer dependent on women artists' networks. But the legacy of the artistic collaboration of performing women in the GDR within a process-based and intermedia setting reaches to the present day, because some of the artists are still working together or are providing space for other women artists engaged with performance and gender issues.

## Notes

- 1 The notion of the "second public sphere" originated in state socialism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and was applied to the "counter-culture" of Hungary, the Czech Republic or Yugoslavia (Knoll 1999; Cseh-Varga 2018). The term "subculture" is more common in the East German art historical context. For my text I prefer "second public sphere" in order to avoid categorizations like "official" and "unofficial" culture. With this term, I describe the activities of cultural producers rather than the political, i.e. the peace, human rights and women's movement.
- 2 Apart from the extensive infiltration of the second public sphere by state security, it would not correspond with reality to talk about a clear demarcation between the first and the second public sphere. Each individual artist's biography shows different dynamics of resistance and assimilation. Many of the artists active in the second public sphere had studied at an art academy and were members of the Association of Fine Artists of the GDR (Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR). They legalized their status to not get stigmatized as underground artists.
- 3 East Germany and German Democratic Republic (GDR) are used synonymously, as well as West Germany and Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).
- 4 Only more recent retrospective exhibitions and their publications on regional scenes like *Zwischen Ausstieg und Aktion. Die Erfurter Subkultur der 1960er, 1970er und 1980er Jahre* at Kunsthalle Erfurt (Büchner and Knorr 2014) showed a more balanced focus on male as well as women artists or addressed gender issues like the catalogue *Gegenstimmen. Kunst in der DDR 1975–1989* (Blume and Tannert 2016).
- 5 Barbara Büscher opened up this analogy between intermedia art in East Germany and "Intermedia" in the 1960s in her article about the Intermedia I festival: [www.performap.de/map2/geschichte/intermedia-ddr](http://www.performap.de/map2/geschichte/intermedia-ddr) (Accessed June 29, 2017). One year before his festival, Christoph Tannert already dedicated a text with title *Intermedia. Efforts of a collective cultural production (Intermedia. Versuche kollektiver Kunstproduktion)* to the process-based

- artistic practice of the second public sphere (Tannert 1984), but without linking it to Fluxus.
- 6 Christine Schlegel left the GDR in 1986. After the fall of the Berlin Wall both women artists could take up again their artistic dialogue. Among several other undertakings their ambitious performance and film project *Burned Earth with a whiff of liquid* (Rodarquillar. *Verbrannte Erde mit einem Hauch von Flüssigkeit*, 1994), which on 35mm film shows Kwiatkowski performing in a derelict gold mine of dictator Franco in Spain.
  - 7 The most renowned work out of this artistic corpus is her photographic series *On further good collaboration* (*Bis auf weitere gute Zusammenarbeit*, 1993), revealing not only the operational characteristics and fears of the secret service in the GDR, but furthermore the construction of the enemy as well as how images of women are produced by male regimes of gaze.
  - 8 After a concert tour through West Germany, Wolf Biermann, being banned from performances in the GDR, was refused return to the GRD and was then expatriated by the government. Since Biermann was a prominent personality and a role model for different generations in the second but also first public sphere, writers, poets, singers, actors, directors, fine artists, etc., articulated their protest in an open letter. Many artists from the second public sphere joined with their signature. Many of the signatories were then banned from their profession, persecuted by the state security, and were, like Gabriele Stötzer, imprisoned. The expatriation of Biermann is perceived as a political and cultural turning point: it led to extensive repression in the cultural field, especially of the protagonists of the second public sphere, which made many of them leave the country, but also inspired the politicisation of artists and cultural workers in the GDR (Blume and Tannert 2016).
  - 9 This was one of the names the Erfurter Künstlerinnengruppe gave itself during the 1980s (Norman 2008). The group is also known under the name Exterra XX. Women belonging to the close circle of the group were: Monika Andres, Tely Büchner, Elke Carl, Monique Förster, Gabriele Göbel, Ina Heyner, Verena Kyselka, Bettina Neumann, Ingrid Plöttner, Gabriele Stötzer and Harriet Wollert.

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# **Performance Art in the Second Public Sphere**

Event-based Art in Late Socialist Europe

**Edited by Katalin Cseh-Varga  
and Adam Czirak**

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