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**Sexing the Border through the Body: Katarzyna Kosmala (ed.), *Sexing the Border. Gender, Art and New Media in Central and Eastern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014; 275 pp, ISBN-13: 978-1-4438-6048-2; ISBN-10: 1-4438-6048-4**

Katarzyna Kosmala's volume contributes to the small literature of ongoing research on the intersection of gender and arts with a geographical focus on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). More specifically, the volume connects the dots between gender, sexuality, media arts and video art in particular, propagating that there is something especially telling about their intersections. The individual chapters are devoted to the importance seen there, and unfold multiple research subjects that are themselves often bordering – and sometimes almost not – with the very notions of sex and gender. To what extent this non/bordering is problematic remains to be seen by the proliferating network of scholars working the field of gendered arts as they relate to the focus on CEE.

The book both documents and works from within specific art histories that strongly relate to the cultural turn and the now somewhat bygone particular obsession with gender performativity, and how these unfolded respectively around and after 1989. It is difficult to underestimate the temporal synchronicity between the fall of the Berlin Wall, the zenith of the cultural turn and theories of gender and performativity/performance in the early 90s and those specific art histories and practices represented in the book, even as the editor declares that 1989 is not the holistic axis of analysis. This culturalized narrative throughout the book – that “[g]ender is theorized here as a construction” (p. 3) – is always present, although the authors represent different generations. It is not by chance that Roland Barthes, as well as Judith Butler's seminal early work from *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, are abundantly quoted in at least three texts throughout the book. Given that such theorists are now

anthologized, the referential network and internal economy of this book already suggests that it produces a work whose temporality – as with much of the research done in gender and sexuality in/on CEE – is already somewhat belated, but understudied.

The entire first Section of the book (“Crossing the Border: Histories and Frameworks”) counters such a state of belatedness. The Section transports us back to the prelapsarian dissidence of the pre-1989 period, but the editor warns us that it is not 1989, but the local-global divide that directs attempts at periodization (p. 2). Consequently, this Section intentionally provides analytical examples of how to conceive of and historicize gendered art practices before the political changes via anachronisms. This is not universally fruitful: Mark Gisborne’s chapter never discusses the very comparability between Komar and Melamid and Gilbert and George, for example, as opposed to Beata Hock, who compares Kele and Ostojić with convincing arguments despite the time lapse between them. The Section includes a highly problematic article by Josip Zanki on representations of heteronormative masculinities in “Western Balkans” arts (a term as problematic as “CEE”), with a focus on mostly male artists. This chapter is full of truisms and clichés from gender theory and social de/constructivism (“culturally constructed gender order”, p. 61; “deconstructing a myth of the masculine”) and Western-style orientalizing of CEE and the history of Yugoslavia (see pp. 55 and 58). Zanki’s historicization of a specific Balkan masculinity-meets-patriarchalism is similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy (pp. 59–61, and esp. pp. 75–76). It is symptomatic that the chapter devoted to masculinity is the one that victimizes the most of its own subject of inquiry through “traditions”, leaving the impression that Balkan traditions were written by today’s right-wing pundits and evacuating any sense of subversion from traditions alone. And while many artists have experimented with traditions and/or paganism (Boryana Rossa, one of the contributors, included, but see also Darina Alster) to subvert gender norms, it is unacceptable to excavate patriarchy from local traditions as “culture” since deconstruction does not substantialize origins; nor does tradition need avant-garde deconstruction of masculinity *per se* in order to be subversive. All of these concerns raise the question if this volume is the best placeholder for such work.

Overall, the first Section does not do justice to the volume’s rather well-focused research ambit. Sections 2 and 3 (“Sexing the Border: Artistic Practice” and “Curating the Border: Putting Politics of Gender on the Agenda in Post-Socialist Europe”) flesh out much of what is promised in the Preface by Katy Deepwell (p. xiv) and the Introduction by Katarzyna Kosmala (p. 1): engagement with practices marginal, yet geopolitically relevant to diverse set of historical and political shifts *and* feminist politics. Section 1 simply does not discuss “marginal artists” or practices, except for Zanki’s examples of artistic male self-representations (but the chapter ends up with the rather well-known Abramović). However, Sections 2 and 3 take a head-on approach with the editor’s program: in both of these Sections, one can justify the promise to “prompt reconsideration of the borders of State and new media” by seeing how the contributors blur the lines between artist and curator, curator and theorist, theorist and artist. This

is obviously connected with the editorial concern that “writers and curators [...] often live and work both at home and abroad” (p. 4).

This concern with artistic topography is central: it can be seen as the eye-catching characteristic of Section 2 which runs through figures of private space – such as the artist’s apartment – an ongoing topos of arts one would expect to have evaporated in socialist “censorship”, but which has re-surfaced under the yoke of the market and the responsabilization of the artist. The private/public distinction that allows us to analyze/historicize the genesis of performance and media art in CEE has not disappeared but transformed into a deregulated space for performative survival. The major post-socialist prerogative beyond this space seems to be migration, and it looms large in this Section. More precisely, I mean migration as shorthand for something of a direct-access perception. Agata Rogos’ contribution goes well beyond the private topos to claim that in the work of Andrzej Karmasz there is a certain play of de/privileging between a CEE identity and an Asian one, obscuring the boundaries of what is a post-colonial subject precisely by the artist’s (self-styled) geographical self-displacement. A sense of displacement is at the heart of Igna Fonar Cocos’ chapter too, which deals with her art practice involving histories of trauma and her own Polish homecoming. Cocos’ chapter is beautifully written, but problematic as it has so much to do with historical recollection and artistic migration but almost nothing to do with gender or “feminist politics” (unlike Zanki, who meets this criterion). Even though it is perhaps the most carefully written, detail-seeking and somewhat mesmerizing text in this collection, one fails to see what Cocos’ artistic practice and self-reflection have to do with something more than her identity displacement. Her text begs for a gendered analysis of the interviewees involved in her artistic practice, but this never happens. Instead, where the narrative can lend itself to gender issues, it gets submerged by historical mythologies and methodological concerns whose importance can neither be underestimated, nor properly inscribed in the volume. Beyond “migration” and “mobility” it is difficult to connect this chapter with the Section’s two other contributors, such as Boryana Rossa’s, which is a commentary on performance documentation or what can be termed a participatory historiography of performance art. By de-mythologizing Schwarzkogler’s “mythical” self-castration and the involved quasi-documentation, Rossa highlights the importance of documentation in the age of the Internet as a way to both avoid artistic manipulation and to de-heroicize mainstream arts. As with many contributors in the volume, she does this by commenting on her own work (pp. 98, 109).

Before we move on to Section 3 a remark on artistic self-commentary seems appropriate. Notwithstanding the interdisciplinary self-awareness of these writers and artists, there is something depressing in seeing how much self-analysis is involved here: take for example the chapters by Boryana Rossa and Inga Fonar Cocos in Section 2 or Iliyana Nedkova’s in Section 3. The more general problem is not that an artist and/or curator could and should write about her own work. The problem is that often these cultural agents are forced to do so given that books like Kosmala’s are a dip in

an ocean yet to be conquered. This is never explicitly stated by neither the authors nor the editor, but is abundantly suggested. I emphasize it only because analytical self-awareness can often look like theoretical and conceptual self-promotion that is driven by the art market's coercion into success and what Robert Storr calls the "McGuggenheim Effect" (quoted by Zanki, p. 82). But I emphasize this also because artists should be wary of their implicit committal to gender issues that might never surface. In this context if "[t]he intention of the volume is also to critique a dominant art discourse that is tied predominantly to English-language area framings" (p. 2), then a reflection on artistic and curatorial self-reflection should be also in place. There is an entire "genre" of artistic self-archiving and self-historicizing that is well too present also in academia, and the precarity behind it should be carefully studied, because it concerns the production of "non-McGuggenheim" art histories that will be vital for future scholars. Kosmala's volume is a refreshing indication that this is a legitimate subject to be studied, simply because self-archiving is tied to geopolitical marginality which no longer divides in East/West.

Section 3 involves much artistic and curatorial self-reflection, but it is not the artists' being coerced to produce their own historicization that is theorized, it is their institutional self-demiurgy that gets explained. What ties new media and video arts, gender and performance in CEE is today is quite obvious. On the one hand, performance was a feminist battleground that once started in California's 1970s: performance and feminist activism evolved together. Gržinić and Stojnić quote Eleanor Antin, stating that "practically, it was the women of Southern California who invented performance" (p. 234). And while in the US this process happened in and through university life and self-formed institutions, in transitional CEE spaces gender, activism and arts were brought together through the institutional liberal platforms provided by the third sector. The Section's contributions by Paweł Leszkowicz and Katarzyna Kosmala further flesh out this situatedness. In Kosmala's case, by looking closely at the Wyspa Institute in Poznan, what she calls "zeugmatic spaces" (p. 205) is precisely a meta-institutional life that allows a critical distance from institutions, producing the "epistemology of a third value". Opposed to this is the "individualization of artistic dissemination" where the balance between power and production is always in flux. What we see here are two modes of precarity. But the zeugmatic one lends power to also criticize the platforms that carried out the dissemination of gendered arts, such as *Gender Check* (as both exhibition and subsequent publication), which did little to critically address the zone of proximity between neo-conservatism and liberalism (p. 208)<sup>1</sup> – the ideology which, in turn, offered space and funding for what this volume

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<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, as the book and some of its chapters testify, studying CEE gendered arts is neither unprofitable nor disarticulated – references to projects such as *Gender Check* and *Former West* prove that. But it is the dominant networks of power framing arts in CEE that, on the other hand, have recently made invisible the fact that studies of gender and art in CEE are far from reigning, as "work from the region has come to rely on institutional mediation for its presentation" (p. 3). This is why here, with the exception of Marina Gržinić's critique of both of these projects elsewhere (cf. Stanimir Panayotov, "Neoneconomicon," translated by Marina Gržinić, *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, Issue No. 8, 2015, 108, 114), it is a rare occasion to see the particular

historicizes. Such criticisms can also work as producing their own explanatory framework without restraint, as in Zanki's case. But in this Section Leszkowicz takes on the same subject reminding that what today is actively called "gender propaganda" was politically suppressed by nationalist and religious values in CEE's early liberal projects (p. 163). This is a way to say that the liberal intelligentsia was not innocent in what subsequently "Polish feminists called the new system 'democracy with a male face'" (p. 164). Undoubtedly for many readers coming from different countries around the CEE region (but also beyond CEE, e.g., the Baltic states), this sounds like a familiar political trope. It is not surprising to have people of varying artistic/academic walks and from allegedly different post-Soviet national contexts nodding at the conclusion that "art practice has provided the most radical critique of unjust power and gender relations, established in the new democracies across the region" (p. 164). More specifically, under these conditions it was the islands of the third sector that proved central for the visibility of gender issues and feminism, video art in particular resonating mostly as an "alternative political tool, introducing new vistas of visibility" (p. 173). The odd continuity of anti-feminist sentiment from state socialism to neoliberalism appears to be dissolved mostly in new media art; and a further dissolution of Western art mythologies is taking place too (e.g. Schwarzkogler's performance, see Rossa's chapter), as they could have not been automatically translated in the institutional islands of CEE's new media art.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in this Section Gržinić and Stojnić discuss in terms of arts production the transition from what was essentially the Butler-Fraser debate, or the reorganization of queerness from sexual to political positionality as "practice located at the margin" (p. 231). Significantly, this chapter represents a promise for the future of doing and situating the kind of artistic practices and research Kosmala's volume is implicitly historicizing. It does so by regarding performance arts as "places of production of new subjectivities" *via* decolonial studies and what they call "epistemic delinking" (p. 234) from Western-centered art historiographies. Thus the chapter forcefully radicalizes the editorial intentions of Kosmala, also because it declares the post-socialist East vs West debate in arts as contributing to the very creation of ideological borders within arts. Thus where the thesis of Leszkowicz and Bryzgel left us off with the political infrastructure of liberal NGO-ization of arts, Gržinić and Stojnić unempathically see this infrastructure as a means to depoliticize not the geographical, but the geopolitical influence of CEE video, new media and performance arts: and they see some inherent resistance inside the transition to political queerness in the East.

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articulation of the wrong-doings wrought by such institutionally powerful projects and their curatorial might, and against their intentions beyond good and evil.

<sup>2</sup> This thesis concerning the dissemination of gendered performance and new media art has been articulated also by Amy Bryzgel who, concentrating again on the Polish context, claims that the work of Katarzyna Kozyra serves as an epitome that demonstrates "the manner in which this discourse – on gender, sexuality and the body – entered into the public sphere: not, as in Western culture, through academic discourse or activism, but through the third sector or cultural domain." (Amy Bryzgel, "Performing Gender in Eastern Europe," in: Stefka Tsaneva (ed.), *Sofia Queer Forum 2014: Manifestations of the Personal*, Sofia, KOI Books, 2014, 33; see also Amy Bryzgel, *Performing the East: Performance Art in Russia, Latvia and Poland since 1980*, London, IB Tauris, 2010, footnote 10).

By way of conclusion, I would like to underscore the irony that the title *Sexing the Border* immediately evokes a work never mentioned in this volume – Anne Fausto-Sterling’s *Sexing the Body*. This is ironic not because there is a default theoretical allegiance at hand, but because it is the bio-cultural underpinnings in Fausto-Sterling’s work that hinted at today’s neomaterialist feminisms. Kosmala’s volume does not invest itself in fleshing out the ongoing tendency of meeting the biological and the cultural, despite all odds: it does the work of offering modes of historicizing CEE arts, a region where the burden of disenchanting the depoliticized artistic institutions has overtaken the burden of artists’ political enchantment with resistance, and where thusly sexing the body is becoming more and more an issue of survival, not of transcendence. For readers who have little knowledge and are just beginning to familiarize themselves with the subject matters of this volume, it will present a vast array of references both old and new, studied and understudied. Those immersed in the problematic will find themselves uneasy with some all-too-easy or simply provocative conclusions and methodological frameworks and borders. And people who have given up the allure of the kind of arts Kosmala is interested in will find themselves re-encharmed by the multiple ways of criticizing and analyzing the status quo of both the present and the future. *Sexing the Border* proves that to sex the border, one has to sex – or queer – the body it wants to either disrupt or be part of it. Kosmala’s volume does just that to the bodies of the artist, the curator, and the literature. Some of her editorial decisions will no doubt stir controversy in the as of yet small circles of scholars interested in CEE gendered arts, but this is a small price to be paid when what is at stake is to “critique a dominant art discourse that is tied predominantly to English-language area framings” (p. 2) and transcend the borderlines of this discourse’s depoliticizing fury.