

# IKONO THEKA

33



# IKONO THEKA

33



THE JOURNAL FOUNDED BY JAN BIAŁOSTOCKI (1921–1988)

EDITED BY

*Agata Jakubowska, Andrea Giunta*

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

*Zuzanna Sarnecka, Wojciech Szymański*

EDITORIAL BOARD

*David Crowley* (National College of Art and Design, Dublin),  
*Deborah Howard* (University of Cambridge), *Ryszard Kasperowicz* (University of Warsaw),  
*Sergiusz Michalski* (Universität Tübingen), *Gabriela Świtek* (University of Warsaw),  
*Antoni Ziemia* (University of Warsaw)

Institute of Art History of University of Warsaw  
00-927 Warszawa, Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28  
phone: +48 (22) 552 04 06, fax: +48 (22) 552 04 07  
e-mail: [ikonotheka@uw.edu.pl](mailto:ikonotheka@uw.edu.pl)  
[www.ikonotheka.ihs.uw.edu.pl](http://www.ikonotheka.ihs.uw.edu.pl)

COMMISSIONING EDITOR

*Dorota Dziedzic*

EDITING

*Agnieszka Kotula-Empringham*

It is the authors' responsibility to obtain appropriate permission  
for the reproduction of any copyrighted material, including images

Publication under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 PL (CC BY 3.0 PL) license  
(full text available at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/legalcode>)

Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego  
02-678 Warszawa, ul. Smyczkowa 5/7  
<http://www.wuw.pl>; e-mail: [wuw@uw.edu.pl](mailto:wuw@uw.edu.pl)  
Dział Handlowy WUW: phone: +48 22 55 31 333  
e-mail: [dz.handlowy@uw.edu.pl](mailto:dz.handlowy@uw.edu.pl)

ISSN 0860-5769  
e-ISSN 2657-6015

LAYOUT:

*Dariusz Górski*

PRINTED BY: *Totem.com.pl*

# Table of Contents

## FEMINIST ART HISTORIOGRAPHIES IN EASTERN EUROPE AND LATIN AMERICA

AGATA JAKUBOWSKA, ANDREA GIUNTA  
*Introduction* / 7

AGATA JAKUBOWSKA, MARIANNA PLACÁKOVÁ, VESNA VUKOVIĆ  
*Beyond the Paradigm of Post-1989 Feminist Art History. Researching  
All-women Exhibitions in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Croatia/Yugoslavia  
(1945–1989)* / 17

WIKTORIA SZCZUPACKA  
*1975 – International Women’s Year and the Exhibitions Organised  
on this Occasion in Warsaw: A Case Study on State Feminism  
and Art Through a Revisionist Lens* / 57

MARINA VINNIK  
*Feminist Museology Applied to the Leipzig Museum  
of Arts (The MdbK)* / 87

GEORGINA GLUZMAN  
*Latin American Women Artists: Subsidiary Human Beings?  
The “Latin American Women Artists 1915-1995” case* / 107

TALITA TRIZOLI  
*The Feminist Agenda and the Brazilian Art System between  
the 1960’s and the 1970’s* / 123

ANDREA GIUNTA  
*From the Rio de la Plata to the Extreme West:  
Feminist Historiographies of Art and Artistic Activism  
in Argentina and Chile* / 145

CECILIA NORIEGA, UNA PARDO IBARRA  
*Notes to Continue Thinking about Feminist Artivism in Mexico* / 163



VARIA

KRISTIAN HANDBERG

*Touring Feminist Realism in Actually Existing Socialism:  
The Exhibitions and Travels of Danish Artist Dea Trier Mørch across  
the Iron Curtain, 1962–1989 / 185*

CAMILLA LARSSON

*Entangled History between Semi-Peripheries. Magdalena Abakanowicz's  
Fiber Art on the Swedish Art Scene circa 1970 / 213*

MICHALINA SABLİK

*Between the Stage and the Art Gallery: "Artistic Actions"  
at the Lublin Theatre Spring in 1973 and 1974 / 243*

FEMINIST ART  
HISTORIOGRAPHIES  
IN EASTERN EUROPE  
AND LATIN AMERICA

*Agata Jakubowska*

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND

ORCID: 0000-0002-8345-5662

*Andrea Giunta*

CONICET / UNIVERSIDAD DE BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

## Introduction

The texts presented in this volume were written by the participants of a research seminar entitled “Narrating Art and Feminism(s): Eastern Europe and Latin America”. The seminar gathered scholars from both regions who met online to exchange interregional and trans-regional perspectives on how to undermine the dominant narrative regarding art and feminism and how to envision the construction of an alternative global discourse.<sup>1</sup>

By dominant narrative, we understand ideas originating from Western second-wave feminism. In Eastern Europe, the intensive process of incorporating them started only in the 1990s. Previously, they had circulated to various degrees in different countries, depending on their openness to what was happening outside the Bloc. They were often considered alien, inappropriate for the local context (with socialist, not capitalist economics), and sometimes even belated (e.g. concerning issues related to women’s labour or reproductive rights, most Eastern European countries had liberal anti-abortion laws introduced in the second half of the 1950s). In the era when second-wave feminism developed, Eastern Europe, immersed in Cold War politics, was separating itself from the capitalist West. Latin America was experiencing economic and social expansion, particularly in Argentina and Brazil, with popular democratic regimes. Feminist authors from France and the US were introduced here and developed. This process was interrupted by dictatorships but resumed in the

---

1 The seminar ran from 2021 to 2023 and was co-led by Agata Jakubowska (University of Warsaw, project director) and Andrea Giunta (Universidad de Buenos Aires). It was made possible thanks to the support from the Getty Foundation through its Connecting Art Histories initiative.

1990s. Yet, after the dictatorships, the word “feminism” lost its relevance in the academic field, where it was replaced by “gender”. Just after 2015, feminism returned as a dominant term.

The second-wave feminist ideas that were less or more present in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the second half of the 20th century did not, however, resonate in art history until the 1990s. Few copies of the catalogues of feminist art exhibitions could be found in the hands of the artists who participated in these exhibitions or in the libraries of some art historians who travelled.<sup>2</sup> In Latin America, these narratives – with authors like Linda Nochlin or Judy Chicago – had some impact in the 1970s in México. In the context of the International Women’s Year in 1975, with the conferences and exhibitions organised in Mexico City, their ideas spread.<sup>3</sup> Exhibitions by women artists were also organised at that time in other countries in both regions. Yet, they did not reflect ideas of Western second-wave feminism (see Wiktoria Szczupacka’s text in this volume on exhibitions in 1975 in Poland).

Systematic efforts to build a historiography of female artists began in Latin America and Eastern Europe after the 1990s. The feminist scholarship that started to develop slowly and to manifest itself in exhibitions and publications was informed mainly by the US feminist theory and practice. In Eastern Europe, this was due to the extensive import of US-produced or translated knowledge in the form of book donations, scholarly visits, joint programs, and transfer of know-how (e.g. in archival and documentary projects) that happened in this period. Before 1989, second-wave feminist theories had not been widely known or applied to academic research, but the political transformation taking place in the region brought a boom. Latin America did not see this kind of expansion, and the development of feminist art history inspired by second-wave feminism had a different dynamic. It started to develop more intensively in the 2000s, which can be marked, for example, by the first anthology on feminist art history in Spanish in 2007, edited by Karen Cordero Reiman and Inda Sáenz.<sup>4</sup>

The recent decade brought new impetus to the development of feminist scholarship, including in art history. In Latin America, 2015 and 2016 involved a shift in feminist activism that expanded legislation on sexual identity politics and reproductive rights. This process led to the legalisation of abortion in Argentina (2020), Colombia (2022) and Mexico (2023). In this volume, Cecilia Noriega and Una Pardo Ibarra demonstrate how it influences discussions

2 For an example from Poland see A. Jakubowska, “The Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland”, in: *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, eds. B. Hock, A. Allas, New York–London, 2018, pp. 135–148.

3 A. Giunta, “Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art, 1975 – 1987”, *Artelogie*, 2013, 5, <https://journals.openedition.org/artelogie/5103> [accessed 25 January 2024].

4 K. Cordero, I. Sáenz, eds., *Crítica feminista en la teoría e historia del arte*, Mexico City, 2007.

on art and feminist activism in Mexico. In Eastern Europe, recent feminist activism, also rapidly developing, results from the growing significance of right-wing politics and its attempts to restrict women's rights. In both regions, the impact of feminism in the field of art is radical. Not only is it visible in new artworks and the visibility of protests, but also in calls for equity by introducing parity regulations in awards, exhibitions and collections. There has also been intense development in feminist historiography, where women artists, their art and their histories are recovered, and the significance of art as a field of symbolic emancipation is discussed.

This latest period also brought extensive development of de-colonial thought in art history, impacting feminist art history, and, above all, the critical reassessment of the impact of second-wave feminism on narratives on feminist art created in our regions. In Eastern Europe, this early phase of feminist art history, the 1990s/2000s, met with a mixed reception. While, undoubtedly, feminist scholarship (criticism, curatorship) developed in this period, its status was alternative to the feminism developed in the West, marked by backwardness—many years of “catching up” made scholars in this region frustrated. Not only by the constant feeling of “lagging behind” but also by growing awareness that the dominant discourse we want to be part of is ignorant of our experiences and, more generally speaking, misses the point in its attempts to be global. The relationship with the United States has always been ambivalent in Latin America. Resistance to what is considered knowledge of the “empire” is strong.

The texts that appear in this volume attempt to grasp the dynamics of the above-mentioned processes both in Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Previous years saw an increased number of projects that offered a comparison of art created in Eastern Europe and Latin America, such as *Subversive Practices: Art under Conditions of Political Repression: 60s–80s / South America / Europe* (Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, Ostfildern 2010), *Artists' Networks in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (ARTMargins, 2012, 1, nos 2–3, 2012, eds. Klara Kemp-Welch, Cristina Freire), *Transmissions: Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America, 1960–1980* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2016), or *The Other Trans-Atlantic. Kinetic and Op Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America 1950s – 1970s* (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2017), to name just a few. Many of them deal with art that reacted to dictatorships/totalitarianism and their diverse forms of action in society, such as censorship, violence, and rights restrictions. They concentrate on avant-garde art from the second half of the 20th century and analyse networks built by artists from both regions around joint ideas, be they artistic or political. Our seminar contributed by discussing feminist art that, so far, has almost been ignored. But it also proposed a different perspective – instead of analysing transfers of artists and ideas, we focused on a comparative analysis of the development of feminist practice in art and art history. We wanted to contribute to a better understanding of feminist art created in Eastern Europe and Latin America,

but also of how feminist art is written about in our regions, and it is the latter that is presented in this volume.

As correctly stated Antje Kempe, Beáta Hock, Marina Dmitrieva – the editors of the newly published volume *Universal – International – Global. Art Historiographies of Socialist Eastern Europe* – “While we can note a comprehensive discussion about the artistic production of Socialist Europe and its framing in narratives, art historiography was until recently only partly visible in this discourse”. Both in Eastern Europe and Latin America, we can observe the development of the history of art history in the recent decade. Our volume can be perceived as a further contribution to our regional historiographies of art history that adds an analysis of the feminist perspective in art historical writing. In both regions, some effort has already been made to historicise the relationship between art and feminism, usually in each country separately, without focusing on the specific concepts that would help differentiate the historiography of the regions. *Radical Women. Latin American Art, 1960–1985* was the first historical overview of the development in fifteen countries of Latin America, providing materials for a comparative study on how artistic and historiographic production occurred in each of these countries.<sup>5</sup> In Eastern Europe, such a comparative project on feminist art historiography has yet to be initiated. Our volume, which seeks to develop inter-regional discussions, is simultaneously a contribution to the global historiography of feminist art history that – as it seems – is yet to be written.

Eastern Europe and Latin America occupy different positions in colonial/imperial and postcolonial/post-imperial histories and power relations in the knowledge field resulting from them.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in the past decades, both regions have experienced epistemological dominance of the discourse born in centres of knowledge production, including those on feminist art. Art history scholars, as art curators, face their epistemic authority and the institutional power behind them. The hegemony of Western discourse is conditioned by regional specificities of knowledge production determined by local and global requirements (e.g. current, dynamic political and economic situations in various places, but also the demands of globalised neoliberal art and academic worlds). This results in both the over-visibility of “Western” ideas in local research and the under-visibility of local research in global feminist art history. As pointed out by Chilean cultural theorist Nelly Richard, the relationship between what is generated

5 C. Fajardo–Hill, A. Giunta, eds., *Radical Women. Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, Munich, 2017.

6 See for example W. Mignolo and M. Tlostanova, “Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2006, 9, no. 2, pp. 205–221; “Descolonizaciones inciertas I and II– Uncertain Decolonization I and II”, in: *ArteBA. Memoria semestral de arte contemporáneo*, 2016, 3, and 2017, 4, eds. Dorota Biczal, Andrea Giunta and Luis Santiago Vargas, *Descolonizaciones\_inciertas\_Uncertain\_Decolonizations\_I\_2016.pdf* (monoskop.org); *Descolonizaciones\_inciertas\_Uncertain\_Decolonizations\_II\_2017.pdf* (monoskop.org) [accessed 25 January 2024].

in Latin America (e.g., literature, works of art) and Latin Americanism (discourses on Latin America) is mediated by Northern American universities which, from the departments of Romance languages, administer what she calls the “centre-function”. From this perspective, Latin America produces objects, while the North American academy produces concepts, or, in colonial terms, Latin America offers the “raw material” and the centre of its “industrialisation”, that is to say, the power to process art, visual culture, literature, the original works.<sup>7</sup> To these limitations should be added those that originate from the national art histories, where not only women were underrepresented. In Latin America, this refers obviously to the indigenous people and African descendants whose presence has only recently started to be introduced in the art world and art historical narratives.

Richard’s observations can also refer to Eastern European art and its conceptualisation in global art history. Yet, it refers mainly to Soviet Russian culture, which has always attracted more attention than the culture of other Eastern European countries.<sup>8</sup> Much has been written on the disproportion in visibility and significance of scholarship produced in different parts of the world in the global knowledge economy. Colonial power relations have produced it, but also, which is crucial for Eastern Europe, imperial relations that resulted in hierarchisation within Europe.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, in relation to feminist art historiography, we could talk about the low international visibility of major locally organised exhibitions and publications (due to the language in which they are written or poor distribution).

Both regions struggle to have the findings of research conducted locally recognised in the global academic and art worlds. Latin American and Eastern European feminist artists get visibility more easily than feminist art historians, thanks to the art market’s eagerness to incorporate new regions and new names. But it is not rare that these are art historians based in the US or Western Europe who write about them in globally oriented publications. Although feminist art history developed in both regions, today it is still the case that local specialists are ignored, but it refers to a greater extent to Eastern European than Latin American scholars. For example, in the *Global Feminisms* exhibition catalogue, Charlotta Kotik, a Prague-born, US-based scholar,

---

7 N. Richard, “Intersecting Latin America with Latin Americanism: Academic Knowledge, Theoretical Practice, and Cultural Criticism”, in: *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, eds. A. Del Sarto, A. Ríos, A. Trigo, Durham, 2004.

8 See for example texts by Éva Forgács on the concept of East European art: É. Forgács, “How the New Left Invented East European Art”, *Centropa*, May 2003, 3, no. 2, pp. 93–104 or É. Forgács, “1956 in Hungary and the Concept of East European Art”, *Third Text*, 2016, 20, no. 2, p. 177–187.

9 Mignolo, Tlostanova, op. cit. and publications by Manuela Boatcă, e.g. “The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 2006, 79, no. 3, pp. 463–482 and *Global Inequalities Beyond Occidentalism*, Farnham, 2015.

wrote the text on Eastern European artists. In the *Iconic Works of Art by Feminists and Gender Activists*, a text on Natalia LL was written by a Warsaw-born US-based Joanna Inglot, and a text on Tanja Ostojić by a UK scholar Hilary Robinson. It indicates that Eastern European scholarship attracts much less attention in the global art and academic world than artists from these regions. The case of Latin America is different. Georgina Gluzman writes in the text included in this volume about an influential exhibition *Latin American Women Artists 1915–1995*, touring through the U.S. that was curated by Geraldine Pollack Biller, who lacked competence in this field. But gradually, the situation started to change. For example, in *Global Feminisms*, a chapter dedicated to Central America was written by Virginia Pérez-Rattón from Costa Rica (the rest of Latin America did not have a specific chapter in this catalogue), and the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Wack. Art and the Feminist Revolution* had a chapter dedicated to artistic feminism in Chile written by Nelly Richard. In the *Iconic Works of Art and Feminism*, the chapter on Ilse Fuskova was written by Argentine feminist researcher María Laura Rosa. The link between Latin American and North American researchers is active in art history. Probably, the early collecting of Latin American art in the United States or the presence of research centres dedicated to Latin American art influenced the representation of curators and researchers based in Latin America in publishing or curatorial projects in the United States. This has not been the case with Eastern European scholars, which may result from the dominance mentioned above of interest in Soviet art over art from other Eastern European countries. Another issue we discuss in this volume is to what extent local knowledge production reflects local intellectual traditions and social contexts and to what extent it replicates hegemonic narratives.

This dossier consists of texts written by scholars who were educated and are based in Eastern Europe or Latin America. Being at various stages of our academic careers, we differ in terms of scholarly experience. Yet, we all face several similar problems. Some of them are quite easy to define: for example, English is the first language for none of us. Others are subtler and relate to how we are perceived and how we perceive ourselves in the global field of art historical research, struggling with persistent inferiorisation. In the case of Eastern Europe, it is because it is still not perceived as Western-European enough. In the Latin American case, the sub-alternising vision embodied in “peripheral” or “derivative” concepts is also persistent. Even though the condition of the periphery was critically elaborated in both regions as privileged to undermine seemingly universal narratives, the truth is that such a condition has affected the insertion of Latin American and Eastern European art and art research in terms of market and museum collections.

Our two-year seminar can be considered an alliance of feminist art historians from Eastern Europe and Latin America who face similar problems vis-a-vis dominant discourses. It also incorporated a comparative perspective to analyse correspondence in art historical processes and our strategies.



At the end of this project, after many meetings and discussions, we know that feminist art histories in Eastern Europe and Latin America are not the same, although they do bear some similarities. This is in no way a failure but rather a confirmation of what had been our presumption from the beginning – that a multiplicity of traditions, histories, and experiences must inevitably lead to a multiplicity of art historian voices. As much as the universal claims of Western knowledge have been challenged, we also understand that coalitions of “peripheral” bodies of knowledge reveal as many similarities as differences, also in their aims and strategies. Our alliance, the results of which are presented in this volume, respects this diversity.

There is, for example, a significant difference between the two regions discussed here concerning the inner circulation of knowledge. Latin American scholars are connected by the history of colonial institutions established by colonial empires that lasted for more than four centuries. It is a continent divided into two language spheres and colonial traditions, Spanish and Portuguese. Recently, one can observe the existence of a Spanish-Portuguese mixed language, which occurs particularly in the academic field. The countries that form what is called Eastern Europe also have a complicated colonial history. Today, we perceive them primarily as united by the post-World War II experience of dependence on the Soviet Union. Yet, earlier, they constituted parts of the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires, and this legacy is still visible. This colonial history did not result in adopting one or three (considering three empires) languages. Eastern European scholars speak different national languages, sometimes known to quite a small number of people, and use sources created in them. Today, they use English (previously French) to communicate. The process of communication between them is, thus, to some extent, parallel to the communication with the global art/academic world. Only “to some extent”, as although discussions during the academic events taking place in the region are in English, they do not necessarily attract much attention from the world outside the region.<sup>10</sup> The situation in Latin America is different. The common use of Spanish for academic production brought scholars active in the region together, but isolated them and their publications from the academic world outside the region. As previously explained, this has changed recently, propelled by the exchange of scholars, and by the agenda that globalisation imposes on the academic world, introducing English as a *lingua franca* for global exchanges.

Latin America and Eastern Europe are by no means homogeneous regions, and differences between countries have resulted in various developments

---

10 E.g., *Not Yet Written Stories. Women Artists in Central and Eastern Europe* in: “The Conference: Not Yet Written Stories. Women Artists in Central and Eastern”, September 2021, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/events/fundacja-arton/the-conference-not-yet-written-stories-women-artists-in-central-and-eastern-euro/396156615442011/> [accessed 25 January 2024].

in feminist art and feminist art historiography. Examples of these differences are discussed in, for example, Andrea Giunta's text in which she compares the development of feminist historiographies of art and artistic activism in Argentina and Chile, or in a text written by Agata Jakubowska, Marianna Placáková and Vesna Vuković in which they offer parallel narratives on feminist art history in post-socialist Poland, Czechia and Croatia. The comparisons can also be read between texts. Giunta's text corresponds in this regard with the one written by Talita Trizoli in which the reception of second-wave feminism in Brazil is discussed. The contribution by Jakubowska, Placáková and Vuković can then be read together with Marina Vinnik's essay that talks about the development of feminist perspective in German art history based on the example of Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig (situated in former East Germany).

It should be underlined that writing about the development of feminist art history (criticism and curatorship) in particular countries in no way implies our wish to contribute to reinforcing national discourses. Instead, it results from the conviction that local circumstances – internal and external politics of particular states or legal regulations in power – have contributed significantly, and on many levels, to how discourses on women and art developed.

As is clear from the remarks above, only several countries from both regions are discussed in the texts presented in this volume. We point out some interesting aspects of feminist art historiography as it developed in our regions and study some cases that only represent the tip of the iceberg. In a general sense, our objective is to contribute to the visibility of an emerging area of study, which aspires to provide an inclusive map generated from situated perspectives instead of those proposed from generalisations.

## References

- Biczel, D., Giunta, A., Santiago Vargas L., eds., "Descolonizaciones inciertas I and II – Uncertain Decolonization I and II", *ArteBA. Memoria semestral de arte contemporáneo*, 2016, 3 and 2017, 4.
- Boatcă, M., "The Specter of Orientalism in Europe: From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother", *Anthropological Quarterly*, 2006, 79, no. 3, pp. 463–482.
- Boatcă, M., *Global Inequalities Beyond Occidentalism*, Farnham, 2015.
- Cordero, K., Sáenz, I., *Crítica feminista en la teoría e historia del arte*, Mexico City, 2007.
- Fajardo-Hill, C., Giunta, A., eds., *Radical Women. Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, Munich, 2017.
- Forgács, É., "How the New Left Invented East European Art", *Centropa*, May 2003, 3, no. 2, pp. 93–104.
- Forgács, É., "1956 in Hungary and the Concept of East European Art", *Third Text*, 2016, 20, no. 2, pp. 177–187.
- Giunta, A., "Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art, 1975 – 1987", *Artelogie*, 2013, 5, <https://journals.openedition.org/artelogie/5103>.

- Jakubowska, A., "The Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland", in: *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, eds. B. Hock, A. Allas, New York-London, 2018, pp. 135–148.
- Mignolo, W., Tlostanova, M., "Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2006, 9, no. 2, pp. 205–221.
- Richard, N., "Intersecting Latin America with Latin Americanism: Academic Knowledge, Theoretical Practice, and Cultural Criticism", in: *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, eds. A. Del Sarto, A. Ríos, A. Trigo, Durham, 2004.

*Agata Jakubowska*

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND

ORCID: 0000-0002-8345-5662

*Marianna Placáková*

CHARLES UNIVERSITY, CZECH REPUBLIC

ORCID: 0000-0002-5944-1690

*Vesna Vuković*

INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER, CROATIA

ORCID: 0000-0003-4040-730X

## Beyond the Paradigm of Post-1989 Feminist Art History: Researching All-women Exhibitions in Czechoslovakia, Poland and Croatia/Yugoslavia (1945–1989)

### Abstract

There have been some attempts in recent years to construct a global history of all-women art initiatives, including those undertaken in Eastern Europe. These have succeeded in – slowly – redrawing a map of all-women art activities, and yet have revealed numerous limitations of revisionist attempts. In this text, we demonstrate how art historiography has developed in Eastern Europe after the political transformation in 1989 and how its anti-communist bias has contributed to the erasure of all-women art activities related to the socialist states' politics from social memory and feminist art history. In the second part of the text, we develop parallel narratives – on Polish, Czech and Croatian/Yugoslav art scenes, respectively – about how this tendency is to be seen in the research on all-women exhibitions. These observations are a starting point for our histories of all-women exhibitions that include the activities of women artists and women's organisations so far neglected in post-socialist feminist art historiography.

**Keywords:** all-women exhibitions, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Croatia, anti-communism, feminist art history

There have been some attempts in recent years to construct a global history of all-women art initiatives, including those undertaken in Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> Their objective is to challenge hegemonic art historical narratives that canonise events organised in places perceived as centres of art production and distribution. They have succeeded in – slowly – redrawing the map of all-women art activities, demonstrating that these were organised in numerous spaces worldwide, and yet have revealed numerous limitations of revisionist attempts. These limitations arise from the fact that it has been feminism developed in the United States and Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s that is uncritically and a-historically accepted as the main reference point in considering what is worth incorporating into narratives on art and feminism. Therefore, in the following text, we shall point to how this has affected art historical narratives produced in Eastern Europe and thus made it impossible to incorporate state socialist emancipatory activities undertaken in this region into the history of 20th-century feminist art.<sup>2</sup> We shall demonstrate that art historiography has developed in Eastern Europe after the political transformation in 1989, and in particular that its anti-communist bias has contributed to the erasure of all-women art activities related to socialist states' politics from social memory and feminist art history.<sup>3</sup> Instead, attention was given to those exhibitions and artists that corresponded with the ideas of second-wave feminism, even if the application of Western<sup>4</sup> concepts have always been considered inadequate. Writing about the development of history of feminism in Eastern Europe, literary scholars Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik claim that:

“After the stage of establishing the ties – of spiritual daughterhood or sisterhood – with the so-called ‘second wave’ of Western feminism, [...] the contemporary women’s movements in this part of the world began to anchor themselves deeper in the national traditions of the countries in which they respectively function. [...] These genealogies welcome the advocates for women’s rights from before state socialism, [...], as well as

---

1 For example, in: G. Mark, ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (exh. cat.), Los Angeles, 2007; C. Morineau, ed., *elles@centrepompidou* (exh. cat.), Paris, 2009; “List of exhibition catalogues of feminist art and contemporary women artists (post-1970)”, <https://www.ktpress.co.uk/feminist-art-exhibitions.asp> [accessed 10 June 2023].

2 We discuss several texts arguing this in Part One of our article.

3 This is additionally reinforced by the global tendency to equate feminism with avant-garde and to dismiss the emancipatory potential of more traditional tendencies. See the comparative analysis of the negative reception of the post-war activities of all-women art associations in Austria, France and Poland in A. Jakubowska, “Exhibiting Women’s Art in Post-War Europe”, *Art@s Bulletin*, 2019, 8, no. 1, Article 16. The research into art and state-socialist project of emancipation of women could, in our opinion, change this tendency.

4 We use the term “Western concepts” although we are aware that it obscures differences between countries constituting “West” (see M. Arnoux, “About the West”, in: *Horizontal Art History And Beyond. Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, eds. A. Jakubowska, M. Radomska, London, 2022, pp. 51–60). In our text, this refers to feminist concepts developed mainly in the United States and some countries of Western Europe.

anti-communist activists and participants of national protests such as “women of Solidarity” (*kobiety Solidarności*) in Poland or the Czech “women in dissent” (*ženy v disentu*). But at the same time, women’s organisations from the period of state socialism, radically leftist activists, and women politicians of communist parties are excluded from the history of the women’s movements in the region”.<sup>5</sup>

In this text we demonstrate that a similar process can be observed in the feminist art history written in Eastern Europe. Yet, there have been significant differences in respect to particular countries, equally in how all-women activities developed, and in how they have been written about. These differences resulted from variations in state politics (both, state politics toward the woman question and cultural politics) and in how women activists and artists performed in particular circumstances. The fact that similar phenomena occurred in state socialist Europe, yet they developed in a different way, will be presented by a parallel analysis of all-women exhibitions in three countries: Poland, Czechoslovakia and Croatia/Yugoslavia.

Our text consists of two parts. In the first part, we discuss the evolution of feminist discourse in post-socialist countries, as its reconstruction is crucial for understanding how feminist art history has developed in this region. We show tensions between different feminist positions and how, in the period of transition to liberal democracy, they were strongly affected by rejection of the socialist project of women emancipation on the one hand and the ambiguous attitudes towards Western feminism on the other. As is visible today, the anti-communist perspective has gained discursive dominance, determining how the post-war history of women’s art has been written. In the second part, we develop parallel narratives – on Polish, Czech and Croatian/Yugoslav art scenes respectively – about how this tendency has manifested itself in the research on all-women exhibitions. These observations are a starting point for writing a history that includes the activities of women artists and women’s organisations that have been neglected in post-socialist feminist art historiography.

## Part one

### Feminist positions and post/socialist politics

In 2020, a book by Ann Snitow, an American academic, writer and feminist activist engaged in the creation of the Network of East-West Women in the 1990s, an organisation whose aim has been to support the growth of grass-roots women’s movements in Eastern Europe, was published by New Village

---

5 A. Artwińska, A. Mroziak, “Generational and Gender Memory of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe. Methodological Perspectives and Political Challenges”, in: *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, eds. A. Artwińska, A. Mroziak, London, 2021, pp. 9–28, here 20–21.

Press under the title *Visitors. An American Feminist in East Central Europe*.<sup>6</sup> The book tells the story of the development of feminism in this region during the turbulent transition to liberal democracy, as seen by one of Western participants in the process.<sup>7</sup> An important aspect is a clash between a leftist New York-based intellectual and her Eastern European counterparts, who seemed to reject the socialist project and eagerly turned toward capitalism. She recalled: “When American feminists did insist on bringing up class and the excesses of Western consumer culture, feminists from the East were often worried that this meant communism all over again”.<sup>8</sup>

Snitow’s book is a memoir, not an academic analysis; nevertheless, it offers insightful remarks on the fact that feminists she met at that time in Eastern Europe were preoccupied with the change of the political system taking place in the region. After many discussions with them, she understood that although communism had given women equal civil rights, in the “totalitarian regime”,<sup>9</sup> this had lost its significance as these rights were violated both in relation to women and men. In this context, she mentions Milada Horáková, a Czech socialist and influential figure in the interwar and post-1945 feminist movement, who was executed in the political trials of 1950.<sup>10</sup> But she also writes about Slavenka Drakulić’s talk at the Socialist Scholars Conference organised in New York in 1990, during which this Croatian writer presented a sanitary napkin, explaining that the unavailability of this and other everyday products, which was humiliating and irritating, was the reason for which the state socialism was supported by few and did not survive.<sup>11</sup> For Snitow and other leftist feminists, the strong opposition of Eastern feminists toward the socialist project was a challenge, as it required a rethinking of global leftist politics. It did not, however, shatter their conviction that it is feminist ideas developed in the Western world, transferred through book grants and summer schools, that should be used to develop feminism in the post-socialist world. “Western

6 On the history of NEWW, see: I. Cîrstocea, “Challenges and Pitfalls of Feminist Sisterhood in the Aftermath of the Cold War”, *Aspasia*, 2020, 14, no. 1, pp. 1–19.

7 This particular account on the meetings of American feminists with their Eastern European colleagues is particularly interesting for us, as Snitow visited the three countries we discuss in this text and made friends with women active in them.

8 A. Snitow, *Visitors. An American Feminist in East Central Europe*, New York, 2020, p. 49.

9 Snitow calls socialist states “totalitarian regimes”, as it became a commonplace due to the anti-communism of the Cold-war era and after. For its more polysemic readings, as well as critique of historical revisionism see: D. Losurdo, *Il revisionismo storico. Problemi e miti*, Laterza, 1996. On its more contemporary (mis)use see: K. Ghodsee, “Tale of ‘Two Totalitarianisms’: The Crisis of Capitalism and the Historical Memory of Communism”, *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, 2014, 4, no. 2, pp. 115–142.

10 Ibid, p. 108. In this text we use a term “state-socialist” to mean the political system that existed in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, but sometimes we leave the terms used by the authors we refer to, as here “communism” applied by Snitow in sentences saying “communism had given them...”

11 Ibid, p. 22.

feminists have seen their role as developing enlightened activism in Eastern Europe by challenging local assumptions and values”,<sup>12</sup> recalled the sociologist and co-founder of the first gender studies department in the Czech Republic, Hana Havelková.

This type of memoir often gives the impression that there were two homogeneous groups of women living in the East and the West, whose political beliefs, opinions, cultural patterns, and behaviour could be easily described. Nothing could be further from reality. The societies of the socialist states were not socially monolithic and the individual attitudes of Eastern European women towards feminism and the state-socialist project of women’s emancipation depended on many factors. These were shaped by generational experiences, ethnicity, class dynamics (education, occupational and social status) and also by pre-1989 and still prevailing power dynamics related to their position in the former ruling system (women active in dissent, women sympathetic to dissent and operating in the “grey zone”,<sup>13</sup> women in power, the general public). In 2002, Sanja Iveković, a prominent figure in Croatian/Yugoslav art, made a documentary on women’s memories of life during socialism, *Pine and Fir Trees*, presenting five women, quite different in terms of their profession, family background, class position and attitudes toward socialism. What they all shared, no matter their different political stance, was a positive account of the socialist achievements in gender equality, in politics, workplace, health and other social services. What Sanja Iveković, who was born in 1949, the same year as Slavenka Drakulić, and who belonged to the same circles of feminists in the 1970s, demonstrates in this work is a nuanced and a more complex picture of women’s experiences in a socialist state and its gender politics.

Gender conflicts and tensions arising from the different feminist positions of the individual actors were played out not only on the assumed East-West axis but also in local contexts. Already in the 1990s, some scholars drew attention to the problem of the direct application of Western feminist theory to describe post-socialist reality, which missed the mark in terms of grasping local specific experiences. The above-mentioned Havelková criticised “the universalising tone of Western theories that continuously talk of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ without situating them in particular social contexts”.<sup>14</sup>

---

12 H. Havelková, “Abstract Citizenship? Women and Power in the Czech Republic”, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 1996, 3, no. 2–3, pp. 243–260.

13 The “grey zone” is a term introduced by the Czech sociologist Jiřina Šiklová in September 1989 to describe people, mostly intellectuals, middle-class professionals working in structures, who were not members of the Communist Party and who disagreed with the socialist regime, but at the same time were not directly active in dissent. See J. Šiklová, “The ‘Grey Zone’ and the Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia”, *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 1990, 57, no. 2, pp. 347–364.

14 H. Havelková, “Abstract Citizenship? Women and Power in the Czech Republic”, *Social Politics*, 1996, 3, no. 2–3, pp. 244–260.



Gradually, it became noticeable that the feminist discourse on local experiences had also been strongly influenced by local political controversies, most significantly between “communists” and “anti-communists”. In the post-socialist era, the most visible narratives were those created by women who held anti-communist positions. They distanced themselves from the state socialist gender equality politics (its activists, projects and achievements) as belonging to the reality of the “totalitarian regime”. In this, they met with Western feminists who also ignored the state socialist feminist legacy, assuming the Western path of feminism to be the only “correct” one.

During the 1989 Velvet Revolution protests, the Czech Women’s Union was targeted in one of the parades as a symbol of the still ruling but soon outgoing government, and the organisation continued to bear this label. Its director, Zdeňka Hajná, complained in her memoirs that in the 1990s the organisation was attacked by feminists from the former anti-establishment circles and lost its greater influence in society, although, after its transformation into a non-profit organisation, it continued to focus its activities on the general population, smaller towns and rural areas.<sup>15</sup> The political mainstream included one of the institutions financially supported by the Network of East-West Women mentioned above: the non-profit organisation Gender Studies, which had been operating in Prague since 1991. The same happened to the Polish Women’s League, which were regarded as operating without women’s legitimization and as such detrimental to the development of feminism under state socialism. Such an opinion appeared, for example, in a book written by Sławomira Walczewska in 1999 entitled *Ladies, Knights, and Feminists*.<sup>16</sup> The book was published by the Women’s Foundation (eFKa) operating in Cracow, one of the feminist nongovernmental organisations that had developed alongside gender studies groups and dominated the discourse on feminism.

Although Yugoslavia has been regularly seen as exceptional,<sup>17</sup> due to its position in the Cold War division, its historical experiment in self-management socialism and its violent dissolution as well, there seem to be substantial similarities with the Eastern bloc when it comes to feminist positioning in the 1990s. A “totalitarian approach”<sup>18</sup> won absolute hegemony over feminism. Feminism

15 Z. Hajná, *Ženy v sametu. Český svaz žen v časech změn*, Prague, 2001, p. 40.

16 S. Walczewska, *Damy, rycerze, feministki. Kobiety dyskurs emancypacyjny w Polsce*, Cracow, 1999.

17 This position is held by Adrijana Zaharijević. See: “The Strange Case of Yugoslav Feminism: Feminism and Socialism in the ‘East’”, *Montenegrin Journal for Social Sciences*, 2017, 1, no. 2, pp. 135–156. Or: “Fusnota u globalnoj istoriji. Kako se može čitati istorija jugoslovenskog feminizma?”, *Sociologija*, 2015, 58, no. 1, pp. 72–89.

18 The totalitarian approach in historiography understands societies in state socialist regimes as monolithic and clearly controlled by political party elites through a repressive apparatus. The revisionist approach, on the other hand, argues that interest groups existed in this system and that the citizens had their own agency. In the case of historiography focusing on women’s activism and feminist issues, the debate over different

is seen as oppositional to the socialist state and its politics on “woman question”, and the emancipatory achievements in socialism, as well as the emancipatory agenda of women socialists active in state structures as of no feminist importance. Together with the violent disintegration of the state, former women’s organisations were dissolved. The 1990s were marked by the establishment of feminist NGOs, first as humanitarian organisations due to the ongoing war and as continuation of feminists self-organising for women victims of male violence from the mid-1980s. In the mid-1990s, they developed from activism to education and research, such as the Zagreb based Center for Women Studies and Women’s Infotheque and the Belgrade-based Center for Women Studies. These non-institutional formations fundamentally relied on Western theory in their educational curricula, translations, and publications. What differentiates the Yugoslav case is that feminism is said to have existed since the late 1970s, while both in Poland and Czechoslovakia the dominant narrative says that there was no feminism during state socialism. However, Yugoslav feminism has so far been dominantly interpreted as autonomous and strictly oppositional to the state. This narrative presents a straight developmental line from the 1970s throughout the 1990s, and thus implies parallelism with development in the West, even if it is belated in catching up with the *waves*. However, *neofeminists* (as Yugoslav feminists called themselves in the 1970s) were not dissidents, but part of the state structures (universities, institutes, professional associations, cultural institutions, media) they criticised. Zsófia Lóránd, in her recent comprehensive study,<sup>19</sup> shed a different light on them, positioning them somewhere in between their autonomous approach and their efforts to negotiate with the socialist state, and characterising their feminist interventions generally as a critical (dissent), and not a dissident discourse.

### Development of revisionist research

In the mid-1990s, a major international oral history project, Women’s Memory, was launched, focusing on the lives of women born between 1920 and 1960 in state-socialist countries.<sup>20</sup> The original idea arose spontaneously during

---

approaches to the evaluation of state socialism heated up after the publication of an article by Nanette Funk, who criticised some authors (Francisca de Haan, Magdalena Grabowska, Krassimira Daskalova and others) for revisionist approaches that, in her view, evaluated these regimes too positively in terms of their gender policies. See: N. Funk, “A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women’s Organisations, Women’s Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 2014, 21, no. 4, pp. 344–360; F. de Haan, ed., “Ten Years After, Communism and Feminism Revisited”, *Aspasia*, 2016, 10, no. 1, pp. 102–168.

19 Z. Lóránd, *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia*, London, 2018.

20 P. Frýdlová, “Women’s Memory: Searching for Identity under Socialism”, in: *Czech Feminisms. Perspectives on Gender in East Central Europe*, eds. I. Jusová, J. Šiklová, Bloomington–Indianapolis, 2016, pp. 95–110.

discussions on the Czech feminist delegation's trip to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, which reflected the new distribution of political power after 1989.<sup>21</sup> The aim of the project initiated by Gender Studies in Prague and gradually joined by other NGOs from Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Ukraine and Germany, was to problematize the claims of a "unified Eastern Bloc" and to show different forms of the concrete realisation of women's emancipation in these countries. This was driven by the idealistic idea that by naming similarities and differences in individual life practices and mutual recognition of cultures, this project would enable a better understanding of the ongoing integration processes in Europe.<sup>22</sup> Yet, the strong anti-communist sentiment that prevailed among feminist activists and scholars meant that they left out the question of women's agency within state socialist structures.

This attitude is also visible in other research projects on women's activities in state socialist countries of Eastern Europe that were conducted after 1989. Only recently have the attitude started to change and new approaches to evaluating state socialism, rooted in an analytical approach rather than an anti-communist narrative typical for the 1990s memory politics, have emerged in the historiographies of post-socialist states over the past decade. As Francisca de Haan has noted, "this shift has been based partly on an understanding of the harsh realities of neoliberal policies and partly on new, in-depth research, particularly on the role of state-socialist women's organisations".<sup>23</sup>

In 2022, Agnieszka Mrozik published a book *Female Architects of the Polish People's Republic* devoted to Polish leftist intellectuals, politicians and activists who, as the author claims, "after the Second World War, co-created the project of socialist modernisation of the country and the emancipation of women". A couple of years earlier, Magdalena Grabowska had written *Broken Genealogy. Women's Social and Political Activity after 1945 and the Contemporary Women's Movement* in which she demonstrated the mechanism of repression by the feminist movement that was part of the democratic opposition of women's

21 The previous UN's World Conferences on Women were organised in 1975 in Mexico City, in 1980 in Copenhagen, and in 1984 in Nairobi. As Magdalena Grabowska convincingly demonstrated, while at the first conference women from Eastern European countries played crucial roles, they gradually started to be marginalised and in 1995 in Beijing "the feeling that they had already 'missed the boat' of transnational feminism was overwhelming" among Eastern European feminists. M. Grabowska, "Bringing the Second World", in: *Conservative Revolution(s), Socialist Legacies, and Transnational Silences in the Trajectories of Polish Feminism, Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2012, 37, no. 2, p. 401.

22 Z. Kiczková, ed., *Pamät žien. O skúsenosti sebauvárana v biografických rozhovoroch*, Bratislava, 2006, p. 11, 12; English version: Z. Kiczková, ed., *Women's Memory. The Experience of Self-shaping in Biographical Interviews*, Bratislava, 2006.

23 F. de Haan, "Introduction", in: F. de Haan, ed., "Ten Years After. Communism and Feminism Revisited", *Aspasia*, 2016, 10, no. 1, p. 103.

activities undertaken in cooperation with the party ruling in the People's Republic of Poland.<sup>24</sup> Mrozik and Grabowska belong to the growing number of scholars who confront anti-communist resentment in research on women's activism but also in studies on various aspects of emancipatory politics of state socialist countries. In Poland in recent years, the number of publications that present the results of such studies has increased. They do not so much complete the picture of Polish feminism as radically change it by putting local discourse on gender equality at the centre. The texts by Małgorzata Fidelis, most notably her book *Women, Communism and Industrialization in Post-War Poland*, published in 2010, were pioneering publications in this field.<sup>25</sup> She argues that "the understanding of gender differences was not a marginal element in the construction of the communist system, but rather served as the foundation of the newly established political and social order".<sup>26</sup>

A summary of the research conducted in recent years is the work of four authors: Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, Piotr Perkowski, Małgorzata Fidelis and Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, entitled *Women in Poland 1945–1989: Modernity, Equality, Communism*, published in 2020.<sup>27</sup> In it, the authors present the results of their research, but also cite a number of studies by other authors, for example, Agnieszka Kościańska, Agata Ignaciuk, Anna Dobrowolska, Natalia Jarska, Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz. What these publications have in common is that they see the emancipation of women in the socialist state as a complex, ambiguous process, the dynamics of which changed under the influence of many factors. What is crucial, women living in the People's Republic are not considered by these authors as mere addressees of propaganda activities and passive objects of policies of the state, but also, above all, as active participants in political, social and cultural life who co-created emancipatory discourses and practices.

In the Czech case, the interdisciplinary project *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism. An Expropriated Voice*, led by sociologist Hana Havelková and literary scholar Libora Oates-Indruchová, was particularly important. Although it was not primarily concerned with defining women's agency under state socialism, its careful examination of state socialist gender policies, expertise and art discourses was ground-breaking and continues to inspire today.<sup>28</sup> In the last decade, a growing number of sociologists and historians (Michaela Appeltová, Radka Dudová, Adéla Gjuríčová, Hana Hašková, Kateřina Kolářová, Denisa Nečasová, Petr Roubal, Věra Sokolová, Zuzana Uhde) have

---

24 M. Grabowska, *Zerwana genealogia. Działalność społeczna i polityczna kobiet po 1945 roku a współczesny ruch kobiecy*, Warsaw, 2018.

25 M. Fidelis, *Women, Communism and Industrialization in Post-War Poland*, Chicago, 2010.

26 Ibid. 19.

27 K. Stańczak-Wiślicz, P. Perkowski, M. Fidelis, B. Klich-Kluczevska, *Kobiety w Polsce. 1945–1989. Nowoczesność, równouprawnienie, komunizm*, Cracow, 2020.

28 H. Havelková, L. Oates-Indruchová, eds., *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism. An Expropriated Voice*, New York-London 2014.

also begun to publish research on family and parental policies, gender in law, sexuality, body politics, women's political representation, and other gender issues, examining them as complex phenomena rooted in socialist conditions.<sup>29</sup> What is still lacking are new research projects and approaches which interpret women's activism, performed not only by women active in state women's organisations but also outside them by left-wing intellectuals, journalists, artists and other activists.<sup>30</sup> Exploring these complex power dynamics more fully and comprehensively would lead to a better understanding of contemporary gender relations beyond the established optics of activism from above (state feminism) and below (feminist collectives and civic movements).

Anti-communism has been the dominant perspective in the historiography of (socialist) Yugoslavia as well. Most scholars of a rather small body of research on women's history have embraced the totalitarian paradigm focusing on the pre-war period, making connections between pre-WWII Yugoslavia and its post-Yugoslav national histories, and ignoring the socialist period. One of the most prominent researchers and critics of socialist politics towards women, or "Party antifeminism" as she calls it, has been Renata Jambrešić Kirin. Focusing her research on the critique of memory politics in socialist Yugoslavia, women intellectuals and especially women political prisoners in state socialism,<sup>31</sup> Jambrešić Kirin denies any feminist agency in the framework of the socialist state and sees every attempt at autonomous action as having been severely punished by the Party.

29 H. Hašková, Z. Uhde, eds., *Women and Social Citizenship in Czech Society: Continuity and Change*, Prague, 2009; R. Dudová, *Interrupce v České republice: zápas o ženská těla*, Prague, 2012; B. Havelková, *Gender Equality in Law: Uncovering the Legacies of Czech State Socialism*, Oxford, 2017; P. Roubal, *Spartakiads: the Politics of Physical Culture in Communist Czechoslovakia*, Prague, 2019; M. Appeltová, *Did the Body Have a Cold War? Gendered Bodies and Embodied Experiences in Late Socialist Czechoslovakia*, PhD thesis, Chicago, 2019; A. Gjuričová, "Standing for Women: Female Presence in Socialist Legislatures", in: *"Vorhang auf!" Frauen in Parlament und Politik*, eds. T. Kaiser, A. Schulz, Düsseldorf, 2022, pp. 489–499.

30 The most important research on state women's organisations in Czechoslovakia was carried out by the historian Denisa Nečasová, whose conclusions about women's agency within these organisations in the 1950s are rather sceptical. See D. Nečasová, *Buduj vlast – posilíš mír!: Ženské hnutí v českých zemích 1945–1955*, Brno, 2011; D. Nečasová, "Women's Organisations in the Czech Lands, 1948–89: an Historical Perspective", in: *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism. An Expropriated Voice*, eds. H. Havelková, L. Oates–Indruchová, New York–London, 2014, pp. 57–81. For the basic overview of gender research on state socialism in the Czech context see: L. Oates–Indruchová, "Blind Spots in Post-1989 Czech Historiography of State Socialism: Gender as a Category of Analysis", *East European Politics and Societies*, 2021, 36, no. 3, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08883254211012763#fn4-08883254211012763> [accessed 5 May 2023].

31 R. Jambrešić Kirin, "Yugoslav Women Intellectuals: From a Party Cell to a Prison Cell", in: *Disrupting Historicity, Reclaiming the Future*, eds. R. Jambrešić Kirin, S. Carotenuto, F. Gabrielli, Naples–Zagreb, 2019, pp. 179–198.

In the last ten years or so, some more feminist historians have turned to the period of socialism and its state women's organisations. Contrary to the earlier historicization based on totalitarian paradigm, underlying mythologisation of neofeminism and ignorance of any socialist achievements regarding the "woman question", this research paints a nuanced and more complex picture of socialist state women's politics. Their approach is more contextual, examining local conditions, but without losing sight of Cold War politics and divisions.

A recent work by Chiara Bonfiglioli on the women's internationalist connections within the Non-Aligned Movement has to be mentioned in this context, her focus on exchanges between women's organisations in socialist Yugoslavia and the Global South from the 1950s up until 1980s, and especially on Vida Tomšič, a prominent politician and the main figure behind women's internationalism in Yugoslavia,<sup>32</sup> as a contrast with the sole focus on autonomous action and single events, narratives developed from the 1990s. We have already mentioned that Lóránd's first comprehensive overview and political interpretation of the phenomenon of Yugoslav neofeminism has shed a more nuanced light.<sup>33</sup> Although not delving into complex Yugoslav geopolitical situatedness and political-economic organisation, it does dissolve the myth on neofeminists' absolute autonomy and especially on their dissidence, and thus open space for more situated and historicized interpretations.

A more conceptual break with hegemonic Western perspective, as well as intervention in the feminist debates around autonomous action,<sup>34</sup> has been brought by Lilijana Burcar's book *Restoration of Capitalism: Re-patriarchization of Society*.<sup>35</sup> Committed to regenerate Marxist apparatus and questioning the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy on the background of the socialist Yugoslavia in synchronic comparison with Western and Eastern Europe of the same period, Burcar focuses on socialist politics that strive for socialisation and collective responsibility of reproductive work. This conceptual change offers a new and much needed perspective on women's emancipation during state socialism and hopefully will encourage new research. Especially considering that

---

32 C. Bonfiglioli, "Women's Internationalism and Yugoslav-Indian Connections: From the Non-Aligned Movement to the UN Decade for Women", *Nationalities Papers*, 2020, 49, no. 3, pp. 1–16.

33 Z. Lóránd, *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia*, London, 2018.

34 Among feminist activists and scholars in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, the history of the Women's Antifascist Front (AFŽ), and especially its reorganisation after 1953, has been researched as a symptom of suppression of women's (autonomous) organising in the socialist state. See T. Okić, "From Revolutionary to Productive Subject: An Alternative History of the Women's Antifascist Front", in: *The Lost Revolution – Women's Antifascist Front Between Myth and Forgetting*, eds. A. Dugandžić, T. Okić, Sarajevo, 2018, pp. 156–199.

35 L. Burcar, *Restavracija kapitalizma: repatrijarhalizacija družbe*, Ljubljana, 2015. Translated into Croatian: *Restauracija kapitalizma: repatrijarhalizacija društva*, Zagreb, 2020.

we still lack research that will dismantle the totalitarian paradigm and take a more analytical approach on the socialist period, and especially ones that will take into account women's agency in socialism, and their different identity processes and different gender politics than those in the West, which have so far been regarded as a compass for emancipation.

It is our starting point that the reception of feminism in (post)socialist states, development of "global" feminism ignoring socialist women's organisation and socialist women's agency in general, has affected art history as well. This Western-centred, and fundamentally anti-communist view has led to the erasure of all-women activities related to the socialist states. However, our attention is not to create a parallel Eastern European art history from the national perspectives. In what follows, we shall develop a revisionist view on all-women exhibitions in our respective contexts that will bypass anti-communist narratives, take into consideration women's agency in socialist states and thus make a more analytical and historicized contribution to feminist art history.

## Part two

### All-women exhibitions from totalitarian and revisionist perspectives

#### Poland

In September 1991 at the National Museum in Warsaw, the exhibition titled *Polish Women Artists* was opened. This was the first comprehensive historical overview of art created by Polish women artists that featured works by more than 200 artists, from those born in the eighteenth century to the contemporary. The curator – Agnieszka Morawińska, an art historian working at the museum since 1976 – explained that the exhibition hoped to restore forgotten women artists in art historical narratives through extensive research and to initiate further studies on them.<sup>36</sup> Both the curatorial text, as well as an essay by Maria Poprzęcka (director of the Institute of Art History at the Warsaw University at that time), included numerous references to feminist art history developed in the United States, highlighting the show prepared by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin in 1976 in Los Angeles – *Women Artists: 1550–1950* – as the main reference. Thus, the theoretical and historical framework of the *Polish Women Artists* is indicative of the processes described above: the embeddedness of the activities devoted to women that were undertaken in this period in American second-wave feminism. The catalogue contained a great deal of historical material; beside the above-mentioned essays, there were biographical notes of each artist presented in the exhibition and two

---

36 A. Morawińska, "Artystki polskie", in: *Artystki polskie* (exh. cat.), Warsaw, 1991, p. 9.

lists: of all-women art schools and of all-women exhibitions organised before World War II. The author of the latter claimed that “The tradition of organising collective feminist exhibitions did not survive in post-war Poland”.<sup>37</sup>

A couple of months later in Poznań, another women-only exhibition opened that aimed at showing Polish women artists from a longer historical perspective: *Presence III* curated by Izabella Gustowska, a multimedia artist and the leader of the ON Gallery.<sup>38</sup> Her ambition was not to develop art historical research on women artists but to put together works created by women from different generations: one part of the show featured works from the collection of the National Museum sometimes created by artists already deceased. Nevertheless, the catalogue, much more modest than the one that accompanied the *Polish Women Artists*, included a chronology prepared by Grzegorz Dziamski entitled *Feminist Art. A Chronicle of Events*.<sup>39</sup> Dziamski, a cultural studies scholar and art critic, who in the previous decade had published a long text on feminist art history, listed mostly events (exhibitions and publications) that took place in the US, but he also mentioned several exhibitions organised in Western Europe and two in Poland: the show *Women’s Art* in 1978 in Wrocław, prepared by Natalia LL, that featured her works alongside pieces by Noemi Maiden, Suzy Lacy and Carolee Schneemann and another under the same title that took place in 1980 in Poznań. The latter was organised by Izabella Gustowska and Krystyna Piotrowska and showed works by these two artists and also Anna Kutera, Natalia LL, Ewa Partum, Maria Pinińska-Bereś.

In the first two decades after the political transformation, these two shows that were organised in 1978 and 1980 and additionally another one, *Three Women*, which took place in 1978 in Poznań, were present in art historical narratives on all-women exhibitions in state-socialist Poland. Art historians and critics who wrote about them challenged the observation from the *Polish Women Artists* exhibition catalogue that after World War II women-only shows were not organised in Poland. Yet, an image of this type of activity that derives from their writings is incomplete. This includes only shows associated with second-wave feminism. The organisers – Natalia LL, Izabella Gustowska and Krystyna Piotrowska – had an ambiguous attitude towards feminism, yet their shows clearly corresponded with second-wave feminist ideas and politics.

An opportunity to broaden our knowledge of women-only exhibitions organised in state socialist Poland occurred in 2014 when I started a research project on their history.<sup>40</sup> One of its objectives was to find information about all exhibitions of this type that were organised in Poland, from the beginning of the process of professionalization of women artists until today. Conducting

---

37 “Wystawy prezentujące twórczość plastyczną kobiet”, in: *Artystki polskie*, op. cit., p. 374.

38 *Obecność III* (exh. cat.), Poznań, 1992.

39 G. Dziamski, *Sztuka feministyczna – kronika wydarzeń*, in: *Ibid.*

40 The results are presented on the website: *Wystawy Sztuki Kobiet*, <http://wystawykobiet.amu.edu.pl/> [accessed 10 June 2023].



our studies, we soon realised that although all-women exhibitions were not a common form of presentation of women's art in the Polish People's Republic, there were periods and moments when they were considered adequate and beneficial.

One of those periods was in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1948, Polish women participated in the international exhibition *La femme, sa vie et ses espoirs*, organised by the Women's International Democratic Federation in Paris. This Federation was established in 1945 and aimed at organising women from around the world in a joint fight against gender and other (class, ethnic, race) inequalities.<sup>41</sup> This ambitious exhibition gathered participants from 43 countries, bringing together East, West and the Global South, and attracted more than a hundred thousand visitors. Each country prepared a national pavilion, in which folk art was presented alongside contemporary artworks. The Polish press mentioned a sculptural portrait of Maria Skłodowska-Curie, made by Ludwika Nitsch, who before World War II created her monument. There was also information on the situation of women shown in the form of photographs and diagrams.<sup>42</sup>

Also at the end of the 1940s, two all-women exhibitions were organised in Cracow by the Polish Union of Professional Women. As we can learn from the press reviews written by a Cracow-based art critic Helena Blum, as far as objectives are concerned, these exhibitions resembled those organised before World War II, with their emphasis on creating a possibility for women artists to sell their work and access the audience.<sup>43</sup> The Polish Union of Professional Women, an organisation established in the interwar period, resumed its activities shortly after the end of the war. In a review of the 1949 show, we can read that it functioned at the Women's League, which is indicative of the changes that were taking place at that time in the way organisations could function in state socialist Poland. The pre-war women's organisations were forced to cease their activities with the exception of one – the Women's League – that was subordinated to the ruling party and its politics, also the implementation of the socialist project of emancipation of women.

The Women's League was involved in the preparation of the most ambitious all-woman show that was organised in the post-war period – *Women Fighting for Peace* – which took place also in Cracow in 1952. Other, smaller shows were organised in this period in different cities by local branches of the Women's League and the Association of Polish Artists. Yet the Cracow

41 More on the WIDF see F. de Haan, "The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main Agenda, and Contributions, 1945–1991", in: *Women and Social Movements (WASI) Online Archive*, eds. T. Dublin, K. Kish Sklar, 2012, <https://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international-1840-present> [accessed 26 June 2023].

42 M. Jaszczukowa, "Międzynarodowe wystawa kobiet w Paryżu", *Kobieta*, 33, July 1948, p. 8.

43 H. Blumówna, "Wystawy w Krakowie", *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 18, July 1948, p. 10.

show featured works by several dozen women artists from across the whole country. For a couple of years that passed after the exhibition mentioned above, the political situation and as a consequence the context for exhibiting art changed radically in Poland. The 1952 show was organised in the period when the doctrine of socialist realism was in force (in Poland in the years 1949–1954/5), that is when all cultural production was expected to fulfil the political tasks of the ruling party. This included the intensive involvement of women in the workforce and the propagation of the idea of gender equality achieved through work.

In the exhibition, women artists, but also the women depicted by them, were presented as involved in societal life. The majority of the artworks presented in the exhibition addressed the issue of women's labour.<sup>44</sup> There were presentations of women workers and tractor drivers, as well as teachers, postwomen, draughtswomen, women nurses, dentists, pharmacists, scientists (e.g. biologists or chemists), and artists (e.g. musicians, writers and painters). The works showed anonymous women and portraits of particular people, sometimes so-called first-rank workers, and at other times researchers or artists. The exhibition offered what could be called a group portrait of contemporary women presented from the point of view of their labour and engagement in society. They were not depicted in their traditional roles as wives, mothers and household workers.

In a totalitarian research mode, this exhibition would function – if anyone were interested to write about it – as nothing more than an element of the ruling party's propaganda. Scholars such as Nanette Funk argue that women's agency in state socialism was reactive, as it only responded to governments' policies. She underlines that “promoting women's employment if done only because of Party directives, makes one an instrument, not an agent or feminist”.<sup>45</sup>

Because of the scarcity of archival materials related to the 1952 show, it is very difficult to reconstruct to what extent its organisation and participation in it (including the creation of specific works) was an initiative of women sharing the party's vision of emancipation of women. The exhibition curator – Carlotta Bologna<sup>46</sup> – in her memoirs written in her nineties did not mention this exhibition nor her activities in the artists' association, although in one of the reviews she is indicated not only as the exhibition's organiser but also as its initiator.<sup>47</sup> This illustrates one of the problems that a historian working on this kind of exhibitions faces: many women artists, curators and

---

44 It was assumed that their commitment to peace also manifested itself, in addition to their participation in anti-war manifestations, in their involvement in (re-)building the country after the war.

45 Funk, op. cit., p. 349.

46 An Italian who came to Poland as a child and spent all her life here.

47 C. Bologna, *Błyski z życia*, Cracow, 2006. K.W., “Kobieta w walce o pokój”, *Dziennik Polski*, 16–17 March 1952.

critics involved in activities related to the party distanced themselves from it later. The anti-communist sentiments dominant in society and in the art world made these activities something that should be erased. This resulted, for example, in not including these shows in artists' biographies.

This is also the case with the Polish participation in the international all-women exhibition organised in 1960 in Budapest on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of International Women's Day: the International Exhibition of Women Artists in Múcsarnok.<sup>48</sup> International celebrations of the 50th anniversary were orchestrated by the Women's International Democratic Federation, and the exhibition itself was organised by the National Council of Hungarian Women associated with the WIDF. The selection of the participating countries reflected an international network created by left-wing women activists within the framework of the WIDF and included artists from both sides of the Iron Curtain, both from the Global North and South.<sup>49</sup> Polish representation was prepared by the Association of Polish Artists, more specifically by Teresa Kruszevska, who was the head of its design section. The exhibition was poorly covered by the Polish press, both art and women's journals, despite the fact that the Polish participation, with 42 artists showing together 102 artworks, was significant. And it is not present in any art historical narrations, nor in individual artists' biographies (Teresa Kruszevska included, although at least it is mentioned in a list of exhibitions she participated in).

The Budapest International Exhibition of Women Artists was organised in the post-Stalinist period, during which the art world in several state socialist countries, Poland included, distanced itself from the doctrine of socialist realism, which probably resulted in the absence of this exhibition, which clearly served not only women but also the ruling parties' politics, in the public discourse (but interestingly did not stop women artists from participating in it). It also influenced the type of works exhibited. The 1952 show concentrated on women's labour, but it also included a small group of portraits of women activists from various countries, like Eugénie Cotton, who was the president of the Women's International Democratic Federation, and Pak-Den-Ai, the chairperson of the Korean Democratic Women's League. It clearly attests to the significance of the international dimension of socialist women's activism that was also behind the 1960 Budapest exhibition but did not find its representation at the latter. This exhibition was not arranged around any specific topics, neither those crucial from the point of view of the socialist project of the emancipation of women, nor important for the second-wave feminists.

This attitude – most probably the result of the post-Stalinist reluctance towards art subjected to politics (after the period of socialist realism) – is also visible in the exhibitions organised in 1975 on the occasion of the Interna-

---

48 *Képzőművésznők Nemzetközi Kiállítása* (exh. cat.), Budapest, 1960.

49 Yugoslav women artists did not participate, as Yugoslavia was not a member of the WIDF after 1948. More in the subchapter Croatia/Yugoslavia.

tional Women's Year proclaimed by the United Nations. Poland, like other members of the UN, organised numerous activities related to women, in the field of art. Among these, there were two exhibitions organised at national museums: at the National Museum in Poznań, a presentation of artists from the Museum collection; at the National Museum in Gdańsk, works by contemporary local women artists were shown. In the case of both exhibitions, it was underlined that women artists had always formed an important part of the cultural life of Poland and that these exhibitions are "a tribute to the accomplishments of women". The catalogue of the Gdańsk show included some remarks on women's art that reflect traditional views on women, but there is no indication of their involvement in the reflection on the position of women in society and the art world.

1975 was a crucial moment in the development of emancipatory/feminist discourses and activities in many countries. This is when the clash of two visions of women's politics was clearly visible. On the one hand, politics associated with the parties and – in the case of Eastern Europe – the governmental politics (that could be also called "from above"), on the other, the politics of those who were dissatisfied with the parties/governments' gender politics that was perceived as not meeting the real needs and interests of women. The two exhibitions organised in Poland in 1978, the above-mentioned shows titled *Women's Art* and *Three Women*, and the festival *Women's Art* from 1980, represented the latter. These took place within the official art structures, but were independent of the women's organisation and any party initiatives. They also clearly marked the difference in artists' interests who had turned their attention toward their corporeal and emotional sensations being described as elements of their feminine identity. These exhibitions were perceived by the Polish critics in relation to second-wave feminism and resonated with similar shows being organised in other countries, where second-wave feminist ideas had developed.

## Czechoslovakia

In the first years after 1989, the Czech art scene witnessed several inter-related phenomena concerning gender. First, there was the gradual introduction of Western feminism and the production of all-women exhibitions in new post-1989 perspectives that came to terms with the newly introduced feminism "from abroad".<sup>50</sup> Second, the transition to liberal democracy had a significant impact on the dominant gender roles in society, including the

---

50 Exhibitions with feminist backgrounds such as *Kolumbovo vejce* (Prague, 1992), *Ženské domovy* (Prague, 1992), *Náhubeč* (Prague, 1994) took place in the early 1990s. See Z. Štefková, "The East Side Story of (Gendered) Art: Framing Gender in Czech and Slovak Contemporary Art", in: *Czech Feminisms. Perspectives on Gender in East Central Europe*, eds. I. Jusová, J. Šiklová, Bloomington, 2016, pp. 247–269.

functioning of the art scene and the conditions under which artistic production took place.<sup>51</sup> Third, the history of state-socialist exhibition projects and their main political protagonists had begun to be left out of the art scene and art historical canon. In 1992, on the occasion of International Women's Day, the exhibition *For Our Women* was held at the Galerie mladých. This was a small gallery in the centre of Prague intended for the presentation of the youngest generation of artists. In this exhibition, five men in their twenties and thirties showed works that mocked the state socialist emancipation of women and objectified parts of the female body. The exploitation of the female body was not uncommon in the art of the 1990s, but what is striking is the tone of the catalogue, in which the curator Jiří Kotalík, later dean of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague (1996–2002), not only refers to women in general in a derogatory way, but in his reminiscences, he cannot even “remember” whether there were exhibitions celebrating International Women's Day under state socialism and claims that this is the first exhibition of its kind.<sup>52</sup>

So far, no similar exhibition project has been organised in the Czech Republic, such as the aforementioned *Polish Women Artists* (National Museum in Warsaw, 1991). This may be due to the smaller size of the Czech art scene and/or to the specific political development of Czechoslovakia after 1968, in which Czech and Slovak woman artists had seldom come into contact with Western feminists and feminism (compared to Natalia LL, for example). As a result, their position was less informed than some of their Polish women generational colleagues by references to second-wave feminism, which most Czech art historians interpreted as the absence of feminism on the local scene before 1989.<sup>53</sup> This is also the reason why, in recent years, Czech feminist art historians have concentrated their research mainly on the interwar period and the period after 1989.<sup>54</sup> They saw no possibility of interpreting women's agency on the art scene under socialist conditions.<sup>55</sup>

51 See J. True, *Gender, Globalization, and Post-Socialism: The Czech Republic After Communism*, New York, 2003.

52 J. Kotalík, *Našim ženám* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1992.

53 The only two exceptions in the Czechoslovak art canon are the Slovak artist Jana Želibská and the Czech artist Zorka Ságlová, whose “style” of artistic production most closely “resembles” second-wave feminist art and is therefore interpreted in exhibition projects with references to the Western context. See V. Büngerová, L. Gregorová, *Jana Želibská. No Touching* (exh. cat.), Bratislava, 2012.

54 The most important figures in Czech feminist art history are the art historian Martina Pachmanová, who has done extensive research on interwar feminist art practices, Zuzana Štefková, who focuses on the period of the 1990s and works mainly as a curator of contemporary feminist art, and Hana Janečková, also a curator, who has introduced contemporary feminist theory to the Czech environment in recent years.

55 The absence of a feminist consciousness among Czech and Slovak women artists during the state socialist period can be found in texts by Martina Pachmanová or Charlotte Kotík. See Ch. Kotík, “Post-Totalitarian Art: Eastern and Central Europe”, in: *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (exh. cat.), eds. M. Reilly, L. Nochlin, New York,

The exhibition project *In a Skirt – Sometimes*, organised by art historian Pavlína Morganová, which in 2014, for the first time, historicized the generation of Czech women artists of the 1990s, was based on the same premise. This show interpreted the period of the 1990s as a time of regained freedom when the true emancipation of women artists would take place and women artists would experience gender equality on the art scene for the first time in their history.<sup>56</sup> In addition to this idealised picture of the 1990s, in reality full of growing sexism and social insecurity, art historian Martina Pachmanová, in her text for the exhibition catalogue, drew up a genealogy of Czech women artists in the modern era – from the end of the 18th century to the present day – leaving out all the all-woman shows organised by women’s organisations during state socialism and women artists who are still ignored as part of the “official” post-war art scene.<sup>57</sup> The only exhibitions worth mentioning were, as in the Polish case, those that came closest to the Western model of second-wave feminism. These were two exhibitions organised in the early 1980s in small Czech regional galleries on the initiative of several women artists who had formed an informal association and wanted to organise a women’s exhibition together (Adéla Matasová, Věra Janoušková, Magdalena Jetelová and others). Because this was a circle of women artists associated with the “unofficial” scene, the narrative of the catalogue was not constructed around the central theme of women’s emancipation, as in the case of exhibitions organised by official women’s organisations, but around the promotion of the quality of their work. Nevertheless, these exhibitions took place within the framework of state-run galleries, and even though the socialist women’s

---

2007, p. 153; M. Pachmanová, “In? Out? In Between? Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory”, in: *Gender Check: A Reader. Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. B. Pejić, Cologne, 2010, p. 48. My texts, on the other hand, are an attempt to describe women artists’ feminist consciousness as emerging from local conditions: M. Placáková, “Československá zkušenost jako východisko. Feministické umění v období státního socialismu”, *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, 2019, 13, no. 27, pp. 26–63; M. Placáková, “Emancipation Despite Circumstances: The Prague Spring, (Dis)engagement on the Art Scene and the Emergence of Feminist Consciousness among Women Artists”, *Umění*, 2022, 70, no. 4, pp. 383–405.

56 P. Morganová, ed., *Někdy v sukni. Umění 90. let* (exh. cat.), Brno, 2014, p. 5.

57 M. Pachmanová, “Po mateřské linii: Pokus o diagram”, in: *Někdy v sukni. Umění 90. let*, ed. P. Morganová, Brno, 2014, pp. 77–84. The division of artists into “official” and “unofficial” is to a greater extent a result of the post-1989 art historical narrative; in fact, the mechanisms of how artists functioned in the art scene before 1989 were much more complex and ambiguous. Although art historians have begun to dismantle this “labelling” in recent years, there are still no art historical texts dealing with, for example, the work of Czech women artists who were considered “official” under state socialism.

emancipation was not their central issue, the texts in their catalogues clearly supported its ideas and results.<sup>58</sup>

Recent art-historical assessments have therefore tended to distinguish between “unofficial” artists who produced “good quality” art outside the framework of political engagement during state socialism, and the “official” artists, whose politically engaged art was supposed to be of poor quality and unworthy of recognition.<sup>59</sup> In 2022, for example, the centenary of the birth of the twins Květa and Jitka Vállová, two of the most important Czech post-war artists, was marked by a major retrospective that interpreted their work and their political stance as strongly anti-communist and in complete opposition to the socialist regime.<sup>60</sup> Their work, which depicted smelters at work in the ironworks in their industrial hometown of Kladno in the 1950s, had a strong political context, and they themselves exhibited in exhibitions promoting women’s emancipation before 1989.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, interpreting the political positions of individual women artists today is undoubtedly difficult, not only because their individual political positions have changed over time, but also because they have been overlaid by the experiences of the late 1970s and 1980s and especially the post-1989 period, when an increasingly apolitical or anti-communist attitude prevailed in Czech society. From the research material available today, it is certainly possible to reconstruct the basic background of the all-woman shows promoting women’s emancipation that were organised by official institutions during state socialism, and there were quite a few of them.

After 1948, in socialist Czechoslovakia, small associations with different interests and priorities were gradually banned or merged with newly emerging mass organisations. The organisation *Circle of Women Artists*, founded in 1917, that brought together women artists and promoted their work to the public in the interwar period,<sup>62</sup> held its last exhibition *We Are Building Socialist Prague* in 1951.<sup>63</sup> From then on, the main organiser of large women-only exhibitions was the mass women’s organisation, whose name, structure, and

58 *9 žen* (exh. cat.), Mělník, 1981; *15* (exh. cat.), Dobříš, 1982. See A. Matasová, “Female Encounters”, in: *Grey Gold. Czech and Slovak Female Artists over 65*, eds. V. Fremlová, T. Petišková, A. Vartecká, Brno, 2014, pp. 76–78.

59 A comprehensive publication on the post-war history of exhibitions in Czechoslovakia was published in 2020. It did not include all-women exhibitions held before 1989. See: P. Morganová, T. Někvindová, D. Svatošová, *Výstava jako médium. České umění 1957–1999*, Prague, 2020.

60 R. Drury, ed., *Květa and Jitka Vállová. A Path Destined by Fate*, Kutná Hora, 2022.

61 H. Volavková, *Československé výtvarnice k padesátému výročí Mezinárodního dne žen* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1960.

62 See M. Pachmanová, ed., *Z Prahy až do Buenos Aires. “Ženské umění” a mezinárodní reprezentace meziválečného Československa* (exh. cat.), Prague, 2014; D. Chaloupka, *Kruh výtvarných umělekýň v dokumentech a datech 1920–2020* (exh. cat.), Náchod, 2020.

63 *Budujeme socialistickou Prahu* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1951.

powers changed several times during the socialist period, and whose magazine *Vlasta* was also the main platform for publishing reviews of these exhibitions.<sup>64</sup>

Czech-Slovak relations played an important role in the question of power dynamics, and one of the largest women's exhibitions in the 1950s was held on the occasion of the celebration of International Women's Day and the merger of the Czech and Slovak women's organisations into one.<sup>65</sup> As we can see from the catalogues, Slovak women artists were only included in the larger representative exhibitions (the Slovak and Czech art scenes functioned rather separately), and usually not in large numbers, which was explained by the smaller size of Slovakia but also by the "shorter" history of women artists, who began to appear there only in the 1920s, in contrast to the tradition of Czech women artists dating back to the first half of the 19th century.<sup>66</sup>

In the post-war years, the main context of women's exhibitions was the building of a new democratic and socialist society and a new gender order (the peak of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia was between 1949 and 1953). In the pages of the magazine *Vlasta*, three exhibitions organised by the Czechoslovak Women's Council (from 1948 the Women's Council), whose main concepts were conceived by the left-wing interwar architect Augusta Müllerová are mentioned as the most important. Although the first exhibition, entitled *Women in Fight, Work and Creation*, was held in Prague in 1946, it differed politically from the post-1948 exhibitions only in details – for example, it still presented American women and their involvement in the war work in a positive light.<sup>67</sup> As with other works of art from this period, the main aim of these exhibitions was to demonstrate the active role of women in building a new society. In addition to works of art such as sculptures and paintings, the exhibitions were full of statistics showing the representation of women in various fields of work, and other photographic and documentary material to educate.

Originally held in Prague in 1949, the exhibition *By Building Socialism Towards Peace* toured the regions and was accompanied by debates and other awareness-raising events that addressed the new status of women in society, the improvement of their working and living conditions, and the new possibilities of collective organisation (e.g. cooperatives). The report "What Do I Want To Be?" on one of these debates, printed in the magazine *Vlasta*, shows that the formats were attended by a wide range of women – from MPs, representatives of the Ministry of Education and the Women's Council, to directors

---

64 It is worth noting that not all women's journals published by women's organisations in state socialist countries covered art events intensively. While *Vlasta* included many texts devoted to visual arts, women's journals that we studied in Poland and Yugoslavia were scarce on this type of material.

65 J. Vydrová, *České a slovenské výtvarné umělkyně vystavují u příležitosti slučovacího sjezdu Rady žen s Živenou* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1950.

66 H. Hrdinová, "České a slovenské umělkyně vystavují", *Vlasta*, 1950, 4, no. 15, p. 3.

67 O. Starý, "Žena v boji, práci a tvorbě!", *Architektura ČSR*, 1947, 6, no. 1, p. 31; *Ibid.*, *Architektura ČSR*, 1948, 7, no. 3, p. 110.



of girls' boarding schools from the regions – and addressed issues such as better access for women to higher education, the gender pay gap, and the need for more kindergartens.<sup>68</sup> Another common feature of these exhibitions was the accentuation of Czech and Slovak national identity, which took place not only through the presentation of state symbols in the exhibition spaces but also through the construction of national history in a Marxist interpretation and the highlighting of the role of women in this narrative in the artworks shown.

The third of these shows was the Czechoslovak participation in the exhibition *La femme, sa vie et ses espoirs*, already mentioned above. In addition to works of art addressing contemporary social realities, the Czech pavilion included six large panels painted for the entrance hall by Milada Marešová and Běla Kašparová–Riegrová. These depicted women as the main protagonists of important moments in Czech history – from the Slavic myths of Princess Libuše and the Maiden's War (the local version of the myth of the Amazon women warriors) to the militant Hussite women during the national and social revolutions of the 15th century. The national revival was represented by the Czech writer Božena Němcová and the Slovak writer Elena Maróthy–Šoltéssová, founders of modern women's emancipation in the 19th century.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, the exhibition *Women in Fight, Work and Creation* presented some of the most important women figures in Czech history, whose silhouettes were reproduced on glass panels originally drawn by the surrealist painter Toyen. The team of women authors led by Augusta Müllerová, therefore, conceived these exhibitions not only as political statements and educational projects about post-war reality but also as a grand ideological concept of Czech and Slovak history and the role of women in its revolutionary moments, combining communism and nationalism, the political foundations of the post-war state socialist regime.

In 1960, the exhibition *Czechoslovak Women Artists on the 50th Anniversary of International Women's Day* was organised, which was so different in format and ideology that it is surprising that there was only a ten-year gap between them.<sup>70</sup> This exhibition celebrated both the International Women's Day as well as the 15th anniversary of the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army in 1945, which was highlighted in the catalogue text written by the Czechoslovak Women's Committee. Although the narrative of the catalogue still proclaimed the same values of building a new society and the newly established role of women in it, the exhibition itself lacked a clear ideological and educational dimension and turned more towards the presentation of art

68 K.M., "Dar žen republice k IX. sjezdu", *Vlasta*, 1949, 3, no. 19, p. 12; M. Grimmichová, "Beseda na výstavě", *Vlasta*, 1949, 3, no. 24, p. 13; Hana, "Čím bych chtěla být? Debata na výstavě Rady žen Budováním k míru", *Vlasta*, 1949, 3, no. 25, p. 13; V. Urbanová, "Setkání města s venkovem", *Vlasta*, 1949, 3, no. 26, p. 2.

69 "Výstava v Paříži", *Vlasta*, 1948, 2, no. 16, p. 15; V. Urbanová, "Výstava ženské práce v Paříži", *Vlasta*, 1948, 2, no. 23, p. 15; J. Prokopová, "Výstava Mezinárodní demokratické federace žen", *Vlasta*, 1948, 2, no. 32, p. 2.

70 Volavková, op. cit.

itself. Not only did the contemporary press report that there were no debates and awareness-raising events organised on the occasion of this exhibition, as there had been in the post-war years, but the show itself looked very different from its predecessors. The magazine photographs of the exhibition were designed without a women's audience; they showed rooms without people, full of decorative fabrics, crockery, houseplants, window curtains and carpets laid out on the floor, which seemed to promote a new modern socialist style of living rather than women's emancipation.<sup>71</sup> The lack of a clear political vision of the exhibition was also criticised in the magazine *Vlasta*, which cited the example of an exhibition of Slovak women artists held on the same occasion in Bratislava, where the committee selected many more works with political and anti-war themes.<sup>72</sup> For the Prague exhibition, the selection committee consisted of 19 women, art historians, artists, and architects, who selected works by around 200 women artists, making the show a truly massive project. It seems that the criticism in *Vlasta* probably stemmed from the tension between women activists working for the women's organisation, for whom political work was still paramount (they valued individual women artists, for example, for how often they exhibited outside the art world – in factories and in the countryside), and the art world itself, which, in the process of destalinization, was increasingly putting artistic production first.

The 1960 IWD exhibition was also exciting because it was the first to bring together on a large scale generations of women artists born between the 1880s and the early 20th century, whose main careers flourished in the interwar period, and the emerging, now best known, post-war generation, born in the 1920s and 1930s, who came on the scene mainly in the 1960s. Artists such as Adriena Šimotová, Věra Janoušková, Olga Karlíková and the aforementioned Květa and Jitka Válová, who are now regarded as “unofficial”,<sup>73</sup> took part in this exhibition. Their works ranged from applied arts (Karlíková exhibited decorative fabrics) to works of art with a political context (e.g. Šimotová's mosaic *The Mother*, 1958, and Květa Válová's oil painting *Women Doing Laundry*, 1958). Although we have no material to tell us what these artists thought of the 1960 exhibition, we can assume, based on the political paradigm of the time, that their motive for participating was to be part of a project that promoted women's emancipation in the first place. In the case of the all-women exhibitions organised about ten years later, in the period of normalisation (the 1970s and 1980s), the motives of the individual participants are no longer so clear to describe.

The International Women's Year in 1975, for example, was celebrated with numerous exhibitions throughout the country.<sup>74</sup> In addition to traditional

---

71 *Výtvarné umění*, 1960, 10, no. 5, pp. 233, 235.

72 “Z výstav našich umělkyně”, *Vlasta*, 1960, 14, no. 13, p. 4.

73 Olga Karlíková belongs to few visual artists who signed the Charter 77, the main political document of the dissent movement before 1989.

74 E.g. *Žena vo výtvarnom umení*, Košice, 1975; *Žena v tvorbě mladých výtvarníků*, Prague, 1975; *Žena a květina*, Olomouc, 1975.

organisers such as women's organisations, the Ministry of Culture and art unions were involved, preparing the most important shows for the National Gallery in Prague and the Slovak National Gallery.<sup>75</sup> Dozens of exhibitions, music and literary projects were produced, funded by a series of grants, prizes and awards for artists. For example, 450 Czech artists took part in a competition to celebrate the IWY, with 1,500 commissioned works on the theme of "women in contemporary society".<sup>76</sup> Given the growing crisis of ideology after 1968, the financial rewards may have been one of the motivations for some artists to participate. This was probably also perceived as problematic by the organisers, as the art historian Ľudmila Peterajová had to point out in the catalogue text for the women-only exhibition in Bratislava that some artists took part without wanting a stipend.

What was new about these exhibitions was that they were based on a gender discourse that essentialized femininity much more, and although symbols of political struggle such as Clara Zetkin, Angela Davis and Hortensia Allende still appeared in them, socialist everyday life and the role of women as mothers and caregivers were emphasised. This was criticised by some journalists, who said that the authors had taken the task too literally and simplistically.<sup>77</sup> In conclusion, despite the fact that these late socialist exhibitions took place at an important point in the history of the international feminist movement, they were criticised by their contemporaries (women activists, journalists, artists) for their lack of progressive attitudes in terms of politics or the forms of art. The 1975 IWY exhibitions were the last major representative projects that took place to promote women's emancipation in socialist Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s. What continued were small projects at the regional level, often involving untrained artists and, according to *Vlasta's* articles, more relevant to local communities than to the art world itself.

## Croatia/Yugoslavia

Historical overviews of women's art in exhibition format, as well as art historical interest in all-women exhibitions as a phenomenon, is only just emerging in the post-socialist Croatia.<sup>78</sup> The violent collapse of socialist Yugoslavia and the 1990s wars broke Yugoslavian exceptionalist development; change of the social system, the so-called transition to liberal democracy, brought with it

75 J. Podzemská, *Žena, rodina a dítě. K Mezinárodnímu roku ženy* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1975; Ľ. Peterajová, *Žena vo svete dneška a zajtrajška* (exh. cat.), Bratislava, 1975.

76 Z. Kostka, *Žena v súčasnej tvorbe. Výsledky výtvarnej súťaže k Mezinárodnímu roku ženy* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1976.

77 Some of these projects also involved male artists and had male curators. See R. Roubíčk-ová, "Žena v súčasnej tvorbe", *Mladá fronta*, 30 March 1976, p. 4.

78 So far it is concentrated solely on the interwar period. See D. Alujević, D. Nekić, "Women's Art Club and Women's Group Exhibitions in Zagreb from 1928 until 1940", *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2019, 8, no. 1, pp. 166–182.

(and especially due to civil war) a repatriarchalisation of society: patriarchal culture as a long-lasting structure criticised by Yugoslav feminists and de-institutionalised by the socialist state<sup>79</sup> was now officially proclaimed and re-institutionalised. It was not until 2020 that the first historical overview of art created by women artists was opened in the Art Pavilion in Zagreb. Under the title *Zagreb, City of Female Artists / Works of Croatian Women Artists from the End of the 19th to the 21st Century*,<sup>80</sup> it featured works by 54 women artists, from the late nineteenth century to contemporary ones. Although locally marked as presenting artists who “left an indelible mark in the history of the art of Zagreb”, it was rather national in scope having in mind that Zagreb had been the artistic and cultural centre of Croatia, as well as one of three urban/cultural centres in socialist Yugoslavia. Although a relatively wide historical span of the exhibition was structured in 3 parts (1. from the late 19th till up to WWII; 2. post-WWII and the following decades; 3. from the early seventies till today), art history-related texts in the exhibition catalogue did not follow this logic: they almost all referred to the first half of the 20th century, to the first all-women exhibition (in the same institution) in 1916,<sup>81</sup> to the first professional association of women artists,<sup>82</sup> or the first public debates on art produced by women. It is the interwar period that was researched and interpreted as important for feminist interventions in the local art scene, and we were left with the conclusion that after it up until the 1990s there were no exhibitions or phenomena that would be of feminist importance. On the other hand, the socialist period was seen as highly problematic, due to the absence of autonomous women artists groups or initiatives, the lack of women artists even in neo-avant-garde groups and and “either in those forms of collective activity that at that time were marked by the need to democratise art”.<sup>83</sup>

The art historian and one of the exhibition curators, Ivana Mance, stated in her text that “the cultural setting in which these artists were formed was determined primarily by two ideological paradigms – modernism in art and socialism in politics, neither of which in the articulation of their values and objectives took into account the gender difference”.<sup>84</sup>

---

79 Burcar, op. cit.

80 Not uninteresting concerning the Western hegemony over feminism, it is this exhibition that was specially occasioned to mark the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

81 *Intimna izložba Proljećnog salona*, the first ever all-women-exhibition in Zagreb.

82 *Klub likovnih umjetnica* (Women Artists' Club), founded in 1927 as the first professional association of women artists in Yugoslavia, and modelled after Women's International Art Club. Until 1940 the Club had organised 11 exhibitions throughout Croatia, including the Käthe Kollwitz exhibition in Zagreb in 1936.

83 I.R. Janković, “Women's Art. Practice, New and Contemporary”, in: *Zagreb, Grad umjetnica* (exh. cat.), Zagreb, 2020, p. 93.

84 I. Mance, “Female Artists and Modernism”, in: *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Even though the exhibition did not present research and interpretation of women's art in Zagreb/Croatia as a collective and social phenomenon and showed single artworks created by women artists of different periods based on their purely aesthetic value, an implicit anti-communist bias could be detected in catalogue texts and accents. Focusing on the interwar period as the key one for feminist art history, as well as linking it to the post-1989 period, thus avoiding the socialist period, the exhibition placed itself into a totalitarian paradigm.

Although not uncommon as a format, politicising exhibitions that would praise the role of women in the socialist project were rarely organised by state socialist women's organisations in Yugoslavia.<sup>85</sup> One was organised by the Women's Antifascist Front in 1949 in Belgrade, under the title *Women of Yugoslavia in Building of Socialism*,<sup>86</sup> and the Union of Women's Societies was involved in the preparation of a series of exhibitions *Family and the Household* from 1957 to 1960 in Zagreb. The latter has been well interpreted from the standpoint of urban development, design and housing culture in socialist Yugoslavia,<sup>87</sup> although not from a feminist perspective, and the first is completely ignored. As some rare research shows, the cultural activities of state socialist women's organisations took place at the municipal and workplace levels, and in that sense continued the politics of the Women's Antifascist Front, hand in hand with the expansion of the self-management system from 1953.<sup>88</sup> The self-management alternative to the Soviet type of socialism, a Yugoslav experiment, certainly brings in an important aspect to the comparative perspective proposed in this text. The Soviet-Yugoslav split in 1948 severely affected the state women's organisation and its international activities. In 1949, Yugoslavia was expelled from the Women's International Democratic Federation, and from that moment on, the Yugoslav women's organisation started its own international connections, particularly with women's organisations in the Global South. As Soviet-Yugoslav relations warmed again in the mid-1950s, and

85 The first women's organisation in the socialist Yugoslavia was the Women's Antifascist Front (Antifašistički front žena or AFŽ, 1942–1953). Successor organisations were the Union of Women's Societies (Savez ženskih društava or SŽD, 1953–1961), and the Conference for the Social Activity of Women (Konferencija za društvenu aktivnost žena or KDAŽ, 1961–1991).

86 The exhibition was open on the International Women's Day, so should be seen in the context of Women's Day exhibitions.

87 J. Galjer, I. Ceraj, "Uloga dizajna u svakodnevnom životu na izložbama 'Porodica i domaćinstvo' 1957–1960 godine", *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti*, 2011, 35, pp. 277–296; T. Jukić, F. Vukić, "Utjecaj didaktičkih izložbi 'Porodica i domaćinstvo' na promoviranje modela stambenih zajednica", in: *Modeli revitalizacije i unaprjeđenja kulturnog naslijeđa. Multidisciplinarni dijalog*, ed. M. Obad Šćitaroci, Zagreb, 2017, p. 99.

88 See C. Bonfiglioli, S. Žerić, "Working Class Women's Activism in Socialist Yugoslavia: An Exploration of Archives from Varaždin, Croatia", *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 2022, 70, no. 1, pp. 80–102.

consequently with the whole socialist bloc, Yugoslavia was again invited to the WIDE, but the delegates decided to keep the status of “external observers”.

Yugoslavia, through AFŽ, participated in only one of the exhibitions organised by the WIDE, the above mentioned *La femme, sa vie et ses espoirs* at Porte de Versailles in Paris in 1948. It is worth noticing that local art history does not mention this exhibition at all, and that the description of Yugoslavian participation was found in Bonfiglioli’s work on the women’s network in the Cold War.<sup>89</sup> There, we read that Yugoslav pavilion of 165 square metres was displaying artworks (as far as we have found out, a portrait by Zora Petrović),<sup>90</sup> folk art and data on Yugoslav development from an agricultural to industrial society, with special emphasis on achievements in women’s social, economic and political equality, and a building of institutional infrastructure and legal framework for the socialisation of domestic work.

“One of the central panels described women’s life in Yugoslavia and the rights achieved under socialism (social, economic and political equality, welfare services for children and mothers, equality in marriage). A special emphasis was placed on maternity leave regulations and on health provisions for mothers. Pictures portrayed women working the land, driving tractors, studying, teaching and doing sport”.<sup>91</sup>

Initially a huge success, after the publication of the Cominform Resolution, Yugoslav pavilion became a site for “accusation of betrayal to the imperialist camp.”

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of International Women’s Day, in 1960, another international all-women exhibition was organised by the WIDE, in Budapest, but - as has already been said – Yugoslav artists did not participate. However, exhibitions celebrating International Women’s Day took place regularly in Yugoslavia from the early 1960 onwards, although a shift from the first, *Women of Yugoslavia in Building of Socialism*, is significant: namely, they left the activist format in propagating socialist ideas and moved toward presenting women’s activities in the art field. However, art historians did not take these exhibitions into consideration, and those who even mentioned them, regarded this phenomenon as marginal on the art scene, “less ambitious”, “as evident in the exhibition venues, as well as in the fact that several of them were open on the same day”.<sup>92</sup>

Ana Šeparović, as the first to mention them at all, focused on the analysis of their reception in newspapers and magazines, where she found critical

---

89 C. Bonfiglioli, *Revolutionary Networks. Women’s Political and Social Activism in Cold War Italy and Yugoslavia (1945–1957)*, PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 2012, <http://www.uu.nl/faculty/humanities/EN/Current/agenda/Pages/20120914-promotie-bonfiglioli.aspx> [accessed 14 June 2023].

90 Prokopová, op. cit., p. 2.

91 Bonfiglioli, op. cit., p. 157.

92 A. Šeparović, “Feministički iskazi u kritičkoj recepciji skupnih izložbi hrvatskih umjetnica”, *Ars Adriatica*, 2018, no. 8, p. 206.

voices concerning the gender division of labour and unequal position of women artists, and locating this gender asymmetry in art in its social and historical context.<sup>93</sup> Although all-women exhibitions were not a common form of presentation of women's art in the socialist Yugoslavia, those celebrating Women's Day took place regularly for at least 30 years in many diverse spaces, from art institutions to small communal spaces, throughout the country. They are a phenomenon that needs to be further investigated, and not just dismissed as pure propaganda, driven "from above", and therefore of no interest for a feminist art history. Furthermore, the above mentioned shift in exhibition politics could indicate how the general idea of emancipation of women in the socialist Yugoslavia changed through time. It is worth noticing in that regard that *Woman*, journal of the Conference for the Social Activity of Women, never covered them. In her master's thesis in 2022,<sup>94</sup> Lucija Ečim did basic archival research on this so far completely obscure phenomenon, showing its massive and participatory character.

A closer look reveals that Women's Day exhibitions were a non-hegemonic phenomenon: from self-organised exhibitions of amateur artists to highly curated historical overviews. Their participatory character is visible in their aesthetic openness, as well as in the fact that they were often self-organised, artist-run, and structured on the open call in professional as well as amateur artists' associations. In Dubrovnik's branch of the Croatian Association of Visual Artists, women artists even formed a group *March 8*, which exhibited regularly from 1966. A group under the same name existed in Belgrade and exhibited in Zagreb on the occasion of Women's Day in 1963. The exhibition spaces themselves, from small galleries, cultural centres, libraries, local community councils to popular universities, scientific institutes and state companies, in art historical interpretation "less representative" and consequently of their lesser importance, represent a capillary and broad spatial network, which speaks of social importance and social acceptance of these exhibitions. This aspect should be considered in connection to the Yugoslav socialist experiment, self-management system and its placing importance on local infrastructure and its encouragement of activists on local level, within their workplaces or municipality.

Ečim's research was limited to the Fine Arts Archive in Zagreb, and its exhibitions inventory, which should be broadened to smaller towns and non-professional spaces, such as numerous culture sections and clubs in the factories. Unfortunately, after the 1990s privatisation, many factories' archives were destroyed and are not available to researchers. Even the first exhibition honouring International Women's Day is still not known. Šeparović states the one organised in the Pioneers' Theatre in Zagreb in 1964 was the first. She adds

93 Ibid.

94 L. Ečim, *Izložbe povodom Međunarodnog dana žena u SR Hrvatskoj*, MA thesis, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb, 2022.

though that the first was organised in 1960 outside Zagreb, in Vinkovci and Rijeka, “these were smaller in scope, and of lesser importance, and had no reception at all”.<sup>95</sup>

A retrospective exhibition of the Photo-Club Split revealed that its two women members, Karmela and Anka Marasović, organised a Women’s Day exhibition in 1962.<sup>96</sup> Recent research into activities of photo-clubs shows that in the 1970–1980s, they are characterised by collectively organised presentations and exhibitions of women photographers.<sup>97</sup> All this calls for further research into this collective exhibition phenomenon, now with hindsight and beyond the narrow confines of art. While art historians tend to emphasise that Women’s Day exhibitions are less important for a feminist art history since being instructed from “above”, in fact, they were self-organised by artists’ associations, cultural centres and communal organisations and more open to participation and reception than curated ones. It is because of this that we can start seeing them differently, as exhibitions from “below”.

Contrary to the International Women’s Day exhibitions, which often brought together women’s art of traditional media with non-professional women’s art and were less concerned with artistic quality and with a distinction into professional and non-professional art, two curated exhibitions organised in the same framework but as historical overviews of women’s sculptures and paintings, have received attention of art historians recently, as “the first Women’s Day exhibition with a feminist tendency“, “the most important feminist breakthrough”.<sup>98</sup>

*The Exhibition of Sculpture* in 1972 brought together 12 women sculptors from the late 19th and the 20th century in Croatia for the first time.<sup>99</sup> Unlike other Women’s Day exhibitions with modest catalogues, containing only lists of participating artists and exhibited works, this one had reproductions.<sup>100</sup> The curatorial statement<sup>101</sup> openly pointed to gender asymmetry in sculpting, for a long time exclusively male-dominated, and emphasised its recent development and especially women’s contribution to it. The second, *Northern Croatian Painters Born in the Second Half of the 19th Century* exhibited works from the private art collection of Dr. Josip Kovačić,<sup>102</sup> conceptualised as a view of that

---

95 Šeparović, op. cit., p. 205.

96 *110 godina Fotokluba Split. Velika retrospektiva* (exh. cat.), Split, 2021.

97 Magazine *Fototext* devoted its whole issue to the women photographers. See *Fototext 6*, 2022.

98 Šeparović, op. cit., p. 206.

99 *Izložba kiparskog stvaralaštva. Povodom 8. marta*, Croatian Academy Glyptothèque in Zagreb, 6 March – 6 April 1972 curated by Ana Adamec.

100 Ečim, op. cit., p. 51.

101 A. Adamec, *Izložba kiparskog stvaralaštva prigodom 8. marta* (exh. cat.), Zagreb, 1972.

102 *Sjevernokrvaške slikarice rođene u drugoj polovini XIX. stoljeća. Iz fundus zbirke Kovačić* was opened in the Museum of Međimurje in Čakovec in 1985, and then travelled to several towns of Northern Croatia - Bjelovar, Koprivnica, Križevci, Kutina, Varaždin, and



period through the lenses of women's art, mostly neglected in art historical overviews and historical exhibitions. The recent interest of art historians in these exhibitions could be explained from the standpoint of their artistic quality, in comparison to "less important" Women's Day ones, but – for our joint venture here – also as in compatibility with the ideas of second-wave feminism, and with similar exhibitions organised in the Western countries.<sup>103</sup> Although having no direct relation to the Yugoslav neofeminist circle, they are indicative of the development of the feminist/emancipatory discourses in the mid-1970s, first on the academic scene (in conferences and journals), and later in the 1980s as a wider cultural critic through popular press. At that time feminists of a new generation criticised socialist state gender politics and the Marxist theory for ignoring reproduction, in favour of production, as well as older women socialists and their political achievements in gender issues. Although focusing more and more on cultural and identity issues, and having a strong impact on women's literary production in the 1980s, especially with the popularity of French poststructuralist theory and the concept of *écriture féminine*, they seemed to have almost no connections with the fine arts scene and women artists, at least in Croatia. In Belgrade, though, there was an interesting synergy between two scenes, due to the engagement of Dunja Blažević and her leading position, first as curator and editor of the visual program of the Gallery of the Student Cultural Centre (1970–1976), and thereafter director of the Student Cultural Centre (1976–1979). Throughout her time, Blažević made SKC available for many feminist meetings.

The first explicitly feminist program Blažević organised at the SKC in 1975, within the framework of the fourth edition of the April Meetings, was an extended media festival.<sup>104</sup> The discussion "Women in Art" gathered women artists, art historians and critics, as well as feminist activists from the Western capitalist and Eastern socialist countries (only Poland and Yugoslavia).<sup>105</sup> In 1978, together with her sister-in-law, sociologist and anthropologist Žarana Papić, Blažević organised an international feminist conference *Comrade Woman*:

---

finally to Zagreb in 1986. Kovačić himself made a catalogue, wrote authors' biographies and description of paintings, and art historian and academician Matko Peić wrote the introductory text.

103 Šeparović suggests that this exhibition should be seen "as a starting point in the deconstruction of patriarchal patterns in the framework of Croatian art-historical canon, that is as the beginning of feminist intervention in Croatian art history".

104 There were no special exhibitions marking the International Women's Day in Yugoslavia. Documentation of the Conference for the Social Activity of Women in the Croatian State Archives shows that there was a plan for an exhibition, but it had been abandoned (HR HDA 1234-11).

105 Participants: Nena Baljković Dimitrijević, Ida Biard, Iole de Freitas, Natalia LL, Gisliud Nabakowski, Ulrike Rosenbach, Katharina Sieverding, Irina Subotić, Jasna Tijardović, Biljana Tomić and Jadranka Vinterhalter.

*The Woman Question – A New Approach?* in the same space, which is “still considered a landmark of feminist history in the former Yugoslavia”.<sup>106</sup>

During the conference, Blažević, together with Biljana Tomić and with the assistance of Bojana Pejić, curated an exhibition programme comprising of two documentary art exhibitions, *The Yugoslav Woman in Statistics* and *The Sexism that Surrounds Us*<sup>107</sup> and two solo exhibitions, by French cartoonist Claire Bretécher and Belgrade photographer Goranka Matić. Interestingly enough, the first two documentary exhibitions used activist format, which was common for socialist all-women exhibitions in the late 1940s and 1950s. *Comrade Woman* is locally historicized and almost mythologised as a paradigmatic event that gathered feminists from both Western capitalist and Eastern socialist countries for the first time, as the first autonomous second-wave feminist conference in a socialist country, the birthplace of Yugoslav feminism.<sup>108</sup> Recent research into the internationalism of the socialist women’s organisations in the framework of the WIDE, as well as connections of Yugoslav women’s organisations within the Non-Aligned Movement sheds a new light on this event and the history of state socialist emancipatory activities. It will hopefully build a new analytical framework to historicize all-women’s-exhibitions of the same period.

## Un/parallel histories of all-women exhibitions

A parallel analysis of all-women exhibitions revealed similar processes in (art) historiographies of this type of art events in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Croatia/Yugoslavia. Two interconnected tendencies – the interpretation of the state socialist period from the totalitarian perspective and perceiving women’s art through the lens of Western (almost always American) feminist art canon – has led to prevailing interest in the pre-World War II or post-1989 feminist art activities, based on the assumption that there was no “women’s agency” under state socialism. The period of state socialism is seen as an unfortunate interruption and women’s activities in the art field organised then, all-women exhibitions included, have been mostly ignored which led to their

---

106 C. Bonfiglioli, *Remembering the Conference ‘Comrade Woman: The Woman Question – A New Approach?’ Thirty Years After*, MA thesis, Utrecht University, 2008, p. 5.

107 Both shows, *Jugoslovenska žena u statistici* and *Seksizam oko nas*, displayed data collected from official statistics and state media outlining the position of women in Yugoslav society, alongside film and video programmes.

108 A periodization proposed by Jill Benderly in her text (“Feminist Movements in Yugoslavia, 1978–1992”, in: *State – Society Relations in Yugoslavia 1945–1992*, eds. M. K. Bokovoy, J. A. Irvine, C. S. Lilly, London, 1997) embraced by feminist historians: 1. 1978–1985: initiated by the conference “Drug-ca žena”, considered a period of building of the feminist discourse; 2. 1986–1991, a period characterised by feminist activism around domestic violence; 3. from 1991 on, a period of feminist activism against war and nationalisms.

absence in art historical narratives. It particularly refers to all-women exhibitions that were related to the state socialist project of women's emancipation, be it in the subject (e.g. women's labour), or organised on the occasion of state-supported events (e.g. International Women's Days, the International Women's Year in 1975). Political orientation to the West also obscured the real international relations in the framework of which some exhibitions projects were organised, e.g., cooperation within the Women's International Democratic Federation. The prevailing interest in neo-avant-garde art has resulted in some, very limited interest in all-women exhibitions that resembled Western feminist art and exhibitions.

Contrary to the above-mentioned tendency, in our analysis of all-women exhibitions organised in state socialist countries, we have approached them from the revisionist perspective. We distanced ourselves from anti-communist biased narratives that have dominated in our countries after 1989 and took into consideration all exhibition activities of women undertaken under state socialism, irrespective of whether they were part of the ruling parties politics or not. We also rejected the conceptual framework of Western feminism, instead concentrating on how emancipation of women was understood locally and how it manifested itself in all-women exhibitions. This has led us to a different chronology and to the beginning of our story after World War II. Although the history of all-women exhibitions varies from one state socialist country to another, there are some common points, especially in certain periods. Exhibitions and their policies reflected the general idea of emancipation of women that was introduced in state socialist countries and changed over the decades. But they also reflected the development of state socialism in a given country.

For a comparative approach, international exhibitions are of special interest, such as those undertaken under the umbrella of the WIDF, e.g. the 1948 exhibition in Paris or the 1960 in Budapest. Their initiative came from international cooperation of women in politics, where art was perceived as one of the means of supporting women locally and building alliances beyond borders. Yet, they also indicated the political tensions between state socialist countries. While Yugoslav women participated in the 1948 show, they were not present in Budapest in 1960 after having been expelled from the WIDF as a country that had chosen a different political path. The 1948 Yugoslavia-Soviet split and Yugoslav separate path of socialist development was also one of the reasons why the dynamic and character of all-women exhibitions to some extent differed in this country in comparison with Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The post-war period saw a general shift in the format of exhibitions – whereas the inter-war all-women exhibitions focused primarily on the sale of exhibited artworks and on the promotion of individual artists to the public, the post-war and post-1948 exhibitions were organised as large collective projects with their main objectives being their ideological goals, first and foremost the promotion of women's emancipation. The 1948 exhibition in Paris can serve as an example of how art was framed in these exhibitions organised

after the war in the countries we have studied. Although dealing with the aftermath of the war was still important for such events, turning to the past functioned primarily as a promise for the future on the way to building a new and more socially just post-war society. Along with the introduction of a new gender order, the new active role of women in society was emphasised with the focus on women's entry into the workforce and the public sphere in general. The central themes were the modernization of women's lives under socialism, class issues, and the role of the countryside in the newly established political order.

As we can see in the 1948 exhibition, it was important for post-war political projects to base their legitimacy also on national identity and to look for appropriate female symbols and role models in national histories, or directly to create a Marxist interpretation of the historical narratives, in which women played an important role in social revolutions. These exhibitions also took a very activist format, where the display of different types of artworks was only a part, leaving a lot of space for the promotion of sociological statistics, data and other photographic documentation on the social and material conditions of women in post-war societies. The aim to politically mobilise people and also to educate and to promote the the woman question was also manifested in the exhibition policies, which sought to reach a wider audience by organising conferences and public debates with lay people throughout the country, as some of them had a travelling format.

In state socialist countries, all-women exhibitions were very often organised on the occasion of the International Women's Day and the 50th anniversary of it that took place in 1960 was specially marked. This clearly demonstrates the persistence of the ideological framework of these exhibitions as the International Women's Day that originated from the labour movement was at that time celebrated by state socialist governments and left-wing parties worldwide. Yet, the exhibitions organised in 1960 also marked a clear departure from art that directly expressed socialist ideas. They were present in a general idea of supporting women's activities, also in the art field, but the activist frameworks of exhibitions aimed at the general public disappeared, and the form of art, formulated under socialist conditions, but without explicit political content, came more and more to the fore. Sometimes, these exhibitions corresponded with socialist ideas of emancipation of women in their interest in the socialist version of modernist life-style. In the case of Czechoslovakia and Poland, these changes can be explained by the fact that this was a period of revisionism of the Stalinist era, and in the case of Yugoslavia, by its change of political course after 1948 and re-orientation of cultural policy towards post-war modernism from the early 1950s. Therefore, in all three countries, we can talk about the distancing of art from the socialist realist doctrine with art subordinate to politics.

The 1960s can also be seen as a time when the exhibition histories of individual countries became more distinct. All-women exhibitions of various types,

including those in traditional media and by unprofessional women artists, placing importance on activation at the local level, started to intensify in Yugoslavia from the early 1960s onwards, hand in hand with the development of the self-management system. In the case of Czechoslovakia and Poland, on the contrary, women's collective activities on the art scene tended to fade into the background, which was probably related to the changes in gender politics in these countries. Paradoxically, while still supporting the emancipation of women, they strengthened traditional gender roles anew. In these two countries more intensive exhibition activity concentrated on women appeared in 1975 when the UN International Women's Year took place. The establishment of the International Women's Year in 1975 undoubtedly served as an event that connected women artists and their different feminist attitudes throughout the world, which was marked in the countries we studied by a large number of events, discussions and conferences, also with international participants. From the research we have done, it seems that Yugoslavia had the least number of exhibitions to mark this occasion, in contrast with Czechoslovakia and Poland, where many were held, giving the impression that the countries in the WIDF were more sympathetic to the celebration, while, for example, some feminist artists in Western countries were reluctant to participate in these events organised by individual governments. Therefore, in a protest in January 1975, a group of nearly fifty women artists complained about the background of the exhibition organised by the Austrian government in Vienna on the occasion of the IWY, which they saw as a mere formality without any attempt by the government to change the status quo in reality.<sup>109</sup> Their main concern was that the list of participating artists, selected by the cultural offices throughout Austria and the ministerial committee, was too broad and that the choice of art production lacked quality. A similar approach to exhibitions organised "from above", with the widest possible choice of artists and so avoiding any cultural elitism, was one of the aims of the IWY exhibitions held in socialist countries. Some of them even went so far as to include male artists, as we can also see in other non-Western countries, as in the case of the exhibition *Women as Creators and Theme in Art*, organised by the Museo de Arte Moderno on the occasion of the WIDF conference in Mexico City that year.<sup>110</sup> This practice was based on the assumption that the whole of state socialist society, including men, should be involved in the "solution of the woman question", which was totally unacceptable from the point of view of Western

109 E. Krasny, "For Us. Art is Work. Intakt – International Action Community of Women Artists", in: *All-Women Art Spaces in the Long 1970s*, eds. A. Jakubowska, K. Deepwell, Liverpool, 2017, pp. 96–118. For the Austrian IWY exhibitions, see more: M. Kaiser, "Feministische Kunst-Räume im Internationalen Jahr der Frau", in: *Neubesetzungen des Kunst-Raumes. Feministische Kunstausstellungen und ihre Räume, 1972–1987*, ed. M. Kaiser, Bielefeld, 2013, pp. 83–110.

110 A. Giunta, "Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art 1975–1987", *Artelogie*, 2013, 3, no. 5, <http://cral.in2p3.fr/artelogie/spip.php?article271> [accessed 18 June 2023].

feminism. Another phenomenon that links the discourses of many socialist states in the 1970s and 1980s was the re-emphasis on women's role as caregivers and the rehabilitation of the discourse of femininity. In contemporary research, some scholars interpret this as a conservative turn in state socialist gender policy, while others see it in a much more positive light, as maternity leave and other family benefits were introduced.<sup>111</sup> Since even the IWY exhibitions were based on the same premise, portraying women primarily as mothers and caregivers, the politics of these exhibitions could also be a subject to different interpretations today.<sup>112</sup>

It was in the second half of the 1970s that in some state socialist countries, a new type of exhibition started to appear – ones that were closer to Western feminist ideas. Their development depended on how much the individual country was “open” to the West in terms of encounters with Western feminists and/or their ideas, but also on politics independent of feminist issues. In Poland, organisation of this kind of events culminated at the end of the 1970s. Some art writers and artists were quite well-informed as far as Western feminist ideas are concerned, in relation to both social issues and the arts, which resulted in a number of all-women exhibitions corresponding with the second wave art movement.<sup>113</sup> Paradoxically, feminism developing behind the Iron Curtain was perceived as ideology and hard to accept as something that makes art subject to politics. The situation changed at the beginning of the next decade. The development of the Solidarity movement, the introduction of martial law in December 1981, and the disastrous economic situation all favoured political discourse that focused on freedom and independence and marginalised the woman question. Of the countries studied, Czechoslovakia was the one most “closed” to “Western influences” after the invasion of Soviet troops and their Warsaw Pact allies in August 1968, resulting in the women's exhibition projects being organised solely in local contexts. The two exhibitions mentioned above, which took place in the early 1980s, were exceptional in that they were initiated by a group of women artists who were not affiliated to any organisation, but at the same time, their exhibitions did not have a clearly defined political or artistic concept, which today offers all sorts of even contradictory interpretations of their feminist position. Western feminist ideas were adapted early in Yugoslavia, due to the country's

---

111 For Czechoslovakia see: Havelková, Oates–Indruchová, eds., op. cit.; B. Havelková, op. cit. For Bulgaria, see: K. Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*, Durham–London, 2019. For Yugoslavia see: Burcar, op. cit.

112 M. Placáková, E. Skopalová, “Ženy vystavující, ženy vystavené. Oficiální výstavní politika v období normalizace”, *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, 2019, 13, no. 26, pp. 86–118.

113 A. Jakubowska, “The Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland”, in: *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, eds. B. Hock, A. Allas, New York–London 2018, pp. 135–148.

peculiar position between blocs, which resulted in travelling opportunities and fellowships for scholars in the West. The direct effects on exhibition projects can be traced in Dunja Blažević's engagement in the SKC in Belgrade from the mid-1970s. Two exhibitions that are recently gaining researchers' attention among many organised around Women's Day, one from 1972 and another from 1985, both mentioned above, can be put in that explanatory framework.

## Conclusion

We have tried to make our analysis as exhaustive as possible, yet we are aware that the various periods and specific events have been covered in an uneven way. This is the result of a few of factors, the main being: the extent to which these events were covered by the contemporary press, the availability of other sources (e.g. of women's organisations) and the research conducted so far by other scholars. Despite this unevenness, and even lack of research, a comparative approach has been insightful for our respective context(s). It has enabled us to indicate what the common points in histories of all-women exhibitions and art historical narratives about them are. And in what aspects they differ.

The juxtaposition of histories of all-women exhibitions in socialist Poland, Czechoslovakia and Croatia/Yugoslavia is partially random. The choice of these three particular countries is the result of our joint participation in a research seminar on narrating art and feminism in Eastern Europe and Latin America.<sup>114</sup> We feel safe to assume that these convergences and divergences would also appear if we added analyses of all-women exhibitions from other state socialist European countries. We are also convinced that what is called the revisionist paradigm in studies on the socialist Europe can bring a better understanding of women's activities in the art field. The history of women-only exhibitions that came out of our research, that approached them from the perspective encompassing all positions of women towards the state, socialist ideology and everyday life, is much richer and more nuanced than studies concentrating on the reception of second-wave feminism in Eastern European art. This history, concentrating on the relationship between art exhibitions and state-socialist projects of the emancipation of women, is also a contribution to global feminist art history. Not because we add research on local, less known events, but rather because we propose going beyond second-wave feminism parameters in thinking about art, women and emancipation in the second half of the 20th century.

---

114 Narrating Art and Feminisms: Eastern Europe and Latin America, <http://cah.wnks.uw.edu.pl/> [accessed 17 June 2023].

## References

- “List of exhibition catalogues of feminist art and contemporary women artists (post-1970)”, <https://www.ktpress.co.uk/feminist-art-exhibitions.asp>.
- “Výstava v Paříži”, *Vlasta*, 1948, 2, no. 16.
- “Wystawy prezentujące twórczość plastyczną kobiet”, in: *Artystki polskie*, Warsaw, 1991, p. 374.
- “Z výstav našich umělkyně”, *Vlasta*, 1960, 14, no. 13.
- 110 godina Fotokluba Split. Velika retrospektiva* (exh. cat.), Split, 2021.
- Adamec, A., *Izložba kiparskog stvaralaštva prigodom 8. marta* (exh. cat.), Zagreb, 1972.
- Alujević, D., Nekić, D., “Women’s Art Club and Women’s Group Exhibitions in Zagreb from 1928 until 1940”, *Art@s Bulletin*, 2019, 8, no. 1, pp. 166–182.
- Appeltoová, M., *Did the Body Have a Cold War? Gendered Bodies and Embodied Experiences in Late Socialist Czechoslovakia*, PhD thesis, Chicago, 2019.
- Arnoux, M., “About the West”, in: *Horizontal Art History And Beyond. Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, eds. A. Jakubowska, M. Radomska, London, 2022, pp. 51–60.
- Artwińska, A., Mroziak, A., “Generational and Gender Memory of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe. Methodological Perspectives and Political Challenges”, in: *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, eds. A. Artwińska, A. Mroziak, London, 2021, pp. 9–28.
- Benderly, J., “Feminist Movements in Yugoslavia, 1978–1992”, in: *State – Society Relations in Yugoslavia 1945–1992*, eds. M.K. Bokovoy, J.A. Irvine, C. S., Lilly, London, 1997.
- Blumówna, H., “Wystawy w Krakowie”, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 18, July 1948, p. 10.
- Bologna, C., *Błyski z życia*, Cracow, 2006.
- Bonfiglioli, C., “Women’s Internationalism and Yugoslav-Indian Connections: From the Non-Aligned Movement to the UN Decade for Women”, *Nationalities Papers*, 2020, 49, no. 3, pp. 1–16.
- Bonfiglioli, C., *Remembering the Conference ‘Comrade Woman: The Woman Question – A New Approach’ Thirty Years After*, MA thesis, Utrecht University, 2008.
- Bonfiglioli, C., *Revolutionary Networks. Women’s Political and Social Activism in Cold War Italy and Yugoslavia (1945–1957)*, PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 2012, <http://www.uu.nl/faculty/humanities/EN/Current/agenda/Pages/20120914-promotie-bonfiglioli.aspx>.
- Bonfiglioli, C., Žerić, S., “Working Class Women’s Activism in Socialist Yugoslavia: An Exploration of Archives from Varaždin, Croatia”, *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 2022, 70, no. 1, pp. 80–102.
- Budujeme socialistickou Prahu* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1951.
- Büngerová, V., Gregorová, L., Želibská, J., *No Touching* (exh. cat.), Bratislava, 2012.
- Burcar, L., *Restauracija kapitalizma: repatrijarhalizacija društva*, Zagreb, 2020.
- Chaloupka, D., *Kruh výtvarných umělkyně v dokumentech a datech 1920–2020* (exh. cat.), Náchod, 2020.
- Ćirštoceva, I., “Challenges and Pitfalls of Feminist Sisterhood in the Aftermath of the Cold War”, *Aspasia*, 2020, 14, no. 1, pp. 1–19.
- de Haan, F., “The Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main Agenda, and Contributions, 1945–1991”, in: *Women and Social Movements Dublin*, eds. T. Dublin, K. Kish Sklar, (WASI) Online Archive, 2012, <https://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international-1840-present>.
- de Haan, F., ed., “Ten Years After, Communism and Feminism Revisited”, *Aspasia*, 2016, 10, no. 1, pp. 102–168.
- Drury, R., ed., *Květa and Jitka Válová. A Path Destined by Fate*, Kutná Hora, 2022.



- Dudová, R., *Interrupce v České republice: zápas o ženská těla*, Prague, 2012.
- Dziamski, G., "Sztuka feministyczna – kronika wydarzeń", in: *Obecność III*, exh. cat., Poznań, 1992.
- Ečim, L., *Izložbe povodom Međunarodnog dana žena u SR Hrvatskoj*, MA thesis, University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb, 2022.
- Fidelis, M., *Women, Communism and Industrialization in Post-War Poland*, Chicago, 2010.
- Frýdlová, P., "Women's Memory: Searching for Identity under Socialism", in: *Czech Feminisms. Perspectives on Gender in East Central Europe*, eds. I. Jusová, J. Šiklová, Bloomington–Indianapolis, 2016, pp. 95–110.
- Funk, N., "A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women's Organizations, Women's Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism," *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 2014, 21, no. 4, pp. 344–360.
- Galjer, J., Ceraj, I., "Uloga dizajna u svakodnevnom životu na izložbama 'Porodica i domaćinstvo' 1957–1960 godine", *Radovi Instituta za povijest umjetnosti*, 2011, no. 35, pp. 277–296.
- Ghodsee, K., "Tale of 'Two Totalitarianisms': The Crisis of Capitalism and the Historical Memory of Communism", *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, 2014, 4, no. 2, pp. 115–142.
- Ghodsee, K., *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*, Durham–London, 2019.
- Giunta, A., "Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art 1975–1987", *Artelogie*, 2013, 3, no. 5, <http://cral.in2p3.fr/artelogie/spip.php?article271>.
- Gjuričová, A., "Standing for Women: Female Presence in Socialist Legislatures", in: *"Vorhang auf!" Frauen in Parlament und Politik*, eds. T. Kaiser, A. Schulz, Düsseldorf, 2022, pp. 489–499.
- Grabowska, M., "Bringing the Second World", in: *Conservative Revolution(s), Socialist Legacies, and Transnational Silences in the Trajectories of Polish Feminism, Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2012, 37, no. 2, p. 401.
- Grabowska, M., *Zerwana genealogia. Działalność społeczna i polityczna kobiet po 1945 roku a współczesny ruch kobiecy*, Warszawa, 2018.
- Grimmichová, M., "Beseda na výstavě", *Vlasta*, 1949, 3, no. 24.
- Hajná, Z., *Ženy v sametu. Český svaz žen v časech změn*, Prague, 2001.
- Hana, "Čím bych chtěla být? Debata na výstavě Rady žen Budováním k míru", *Vlasta*, 1949, 3, no. 25.
- Hašková, H., Uhde, Z., eds., *Women and Social Citizenship in Czech Society: Continuity and Change*, Prague, 2009.
- Havelková, B., *Gender Equality in Law: Uncovering the Legacies of Czech State Socialism*, Oxford, 2017.
- Havelková, H., "Abstract Citizenship? Women and Power in the Czech Republic", *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 1996, 3, no. 2–3, pp. 243–260.
- Havelková, H., Oates–Indruchová, L., eds., *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism. An Expropriated Voice*, New York–London 2014.
- Hrdinová, H., "České a slovenské umělkyně vystavují", *Vlasta*, 1950, 4, no. 15.
- Jakubowska, A., "Exhibiting Women's Art in Post-War Europe", *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2019, 8, no. 1, Article 16.
- Jakubowska, A., "The Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland", in: *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, eds. B. Hock, A. Allas, New York–London 2018, pp. 135–148.
- Jambrešić Kirin, R., "Yugoslav Women Intellectuals: From a Party Cell to a Prison Cell", in: *Disrupting Historicity, Reclaiming the Future*, eds. R. Jambrešić Kirin, S. Carotenuto, F. Gabrielli, Napoli–Zagreb, 2019, pp. 179–198.

- Janković, I.R., "Women's Art. Practice, New and Contemporary", in: *Zagreb, Grad umjetnica* (exh. cat.), Zagreb, 2020.
- Jaszczukowa, M., "Międzynarodowe wystawa kobiet w Paryżu", *Kobieta*, 33, July 1948.
- Jukić, T., Vukić, F., "Utjecaj didaktičkih izložbi 'Porodica i domaćinstvo' na promoviranje modela stambenih zajednica", in: *Modeli revitalizacije i unaprjeđenja kulturnog naslijeđa. Multidisciplinarni dijalog*, ed. M. Obad Šćitaroci, Zagreb, 2017.
- Kaiser, M., "Feministische Kunst-Räume im Internationalen Jahr der Frau", in: *Neubesetzungen des Kunst-Raumes. Feministische Kunstaustellungen und ihre Räume, 1972–1987*, ed. M. Kaiser, Bielefeld, 2013, pp. 83–110.
- Képzőművészeti Nemzetközi Kiállítás (exh. cat.), Budapest, 1960.
- Kiczková, Z., ed., *Pamät žien. O skúsenosti sebauvárania v biografických rozhovoroch*, Bratislava, 2006 / Kiczková, Z., ed., *Women's Memory. The Experience of Self-shaping in Biographical Interviews*, Bratislava, 2006.
- Kostka, Z., *Žena v současné tvorbě. Výsledky výtvarné soutěže k Mezinárodnímu roku ženy* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1976.
- Kotalík, J., *Našim ženám* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1992.
- Kotík, Ch., "Post-Totalitarian Art: Eastern and Central Europe", in: *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (exh. cat.), eds. M. Reilly, L. Nochlin, New York, 2007.
- Krasny, E., "For Us. Art is Work. Intakt – International Action Community of Women Artists", in: *All-Women Art Spaces in the Long 1970s*, eds. A. Jakubowska, K. Deepwell, Liverpool, 2017, pp. 96–118.
- Lóránd, Z., *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia*, London, 2018.
- Losurdo, D., *Historijski revizionizam*, Zagreb, 2017.
- M.K., "Dar žen republike k IX. sjezdu", *Vlasta*, 1949, 3, no. 19.
- Mance, I., "Female Artists and Modernism", in: *Zagreb, Grad umjetnica* (exh. cat.), Zagreb, 2020, p. 57.
- Mark, G., ed., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (exh. cat.), Los Angeles, 2007.
- Matasová, A., "Female Encounters", in: *Grey Gold. Czech and Slovak Female Artists over 65*, eds. V. Fremlová, T. Petišková, A. Vartecká, Brno, 2014, pp. 76–78.
- Morawińska, A., "Artystki polskie", in: *Artystki polskie* (exh. cat.), Warsaw, 1991.
- Morganová, P., ed., *Někdy v sukni. Umění 90. let* (exh. cat.), Brno, 2014.
- Morganová, P., Nekvindová, T., Svatošová, D., *Výstava jako médium. České umění 1957–1999*, Prague, 2020.
- Morineau, C., ed., *elles@centrepompidou* (exh. cat.), Paris, 2009.
- Nečasová, D., "Women's Organizations in the Czech lands, 1948–89: an historical perspective", in: *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism. An Expropriated Voice*, eds. H. Havelková, L. Oates–Indruchová, New York – London, 2014, pp. 57–81.
- Nečasová, N., *Buduj vlast – posílíš mír!: Ženské hnutí v českých zemích 1945–1955*, Brno, 2011.
- Oates–Indruchová, L., "Blind Spots in Post-1989 Czech Historiography of State Socialism: Gender as a Category of Analysis", *East European Politics and Societies*, 2021, 36, no. 3, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/08883254211012763#fn4-08883254211012763>.
- Okić, T., "From Revolutionary to Productive Subject: An Alternative History of the Women's Antifascist Front", in: *The Lost Revolution – Women's Antifascist Front Between Myth and Forgetting*, eds. A. Dugandžić, T. Okić, Sarajevo, 2018.
- Pachmanová, M., "Inč Outč In Betweenč Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory", in: *Gender Check: A Reader. Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. B. Pejić, Cologne, 2010.
- Pachmanová, M., "Po mateřské linii: Pokus o diagram", in: *Někdy v sukni. Umění 90. let*, ed. P. Morganová, Brno, 2014, pp. 77–84.

- Pachmanová, M., ed., *Z Prahy až do Buenos Aires. "Ženské umění" a mezinárodní reprezentace meziválečného Československa* (exh. cat.), Prague, 2014.
- Peterajová, E., *Žena vo svete dneška a zajtrajška* (exh. cat.), Bratislava, 1975.
- Placáková, M., "Československá zkušenost jako východisko. Feministické umění v období státního socialismu", *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, 2019, 13, no. 27, pp. 26–63.
- Placáková, M., "Emancipation Despite Circumstances: The Prague Spring, (Dis)engagement on the Art Scene and the Emergence of Feminist Consciousness among Women Artists", *Umění*, 2022, 70, no. 4, pp. 383–405.
- Placáková, M., Skopalová, E., "Ženy vystavující, ženy vystavené. Oficiální výstavní politika v období normalizace", *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, 2019, 13, no. 26, pp. 86–118.
- Podzemská, J., *Žena, rodina a dítě. K Mezinárodnímu roku ženy* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1975.
- Prokopová, J., "Výstava Mezinárodní demokratické federace žen", *Vlasta*, 1948, 2, no. 32.
- Roubal, P., *Spartakiads: the Politics of Physical Culture in Communist Czechoslovakia*, Prague, 2019.
- Roubíčková, R., "Žena v současné tvorbě", *Mladá fronta*, 30 March 1976.
- Šeparović, A., "Feministički iskazi u kritičkoj recepciji skupnih izložbi hrvatskih umjetnica", *Ars Adriatica*, 2018, 8.
- Šiklová, J., "The 'Grey Zone' and the Future of Dissent in Czechoslovakia", *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 1990, 57, no. 2, pp. 347–364.
- Snitow, A., *Visitors. An American Feminist in East Central Europe*, New York, 2020.
- Stańczak-Wislicz, K., Perkowski, P., Fidelis, M., Klich-Kluczewska, B., *Kobiety w Polsce. 1945–1989. Nowoczesność, równouprawnienie, komunizm*, Cracow, 2020.
- Starý, O., "Žena v boji, práci a tvorbě!", *Architektura ČSR*, 1947, 6, no. 1.
- Štefková, Z., "The East Side Story of (Gendered) Art: Framing Gender in Czech and Slovak Contemporary Art", in: *Czech Feminisms. Perspectives on Gender in East Central Europe*, eds. I. Jusová, J. Šiklová, Bloomington–Indianapolis, 2016, pp. 247–269.
- True, J., *Gender, Globalization, and Post-Socialism: The Czech Republic After Communism*, New York, 2003.
- Urbanová, V., "Setkání města s venkovem", *Vlasta*, 1949, 3, no. 26.
- Urbanová, V., "Výstava ženské práce v Paříži", *Vlasta*, 1948, 2, no. 23.
- Volavková, H., *Československé výtvarnice k padesátému výročí Mezinárodního dne žen* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1960.
- Vydrová, J., *České a slovenské výtvarné umělkyně vystavují u příležitosti slučovacího sjezdu Rady žen s Živenou* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1950.
- W. K., "Kobieta w walce o pokój", *Dziennik Polski*, 16–17 March 1952.
- Walczewska, S., *Damy, rycerze, feministki. Kobiety dyskursu emencypcyjny w Polsce*, Cracow, 1999.
- Wystawy Sztuki Kobiet*, <http://wystawykobiet.amu.edu.pl/>.
- Zaharijević, A., "Fusnota u globalnoj istoriji. Kako se može čitati istorija jugoslovenskog feminizma?", *Sociologija*, 2015, 58, no. 1, pp. 72–89.
- Zaharijević, A., "The Strange Case of Yugoslav Feminism: Feminism and Socialism in the 'East'", *Montenegrin Journal for Social Sciences*, 2017, 1, no. 2, pp. 135–156.

*Wiktoria Szczupacka*

INSTITUTE OF ART OF THE POLISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

ORCID: 0000-0003-1138-0144

## 1975 – International Women’s Year and the Exhibitions Organised on this Occasion in Warsaw: A Case Study on State Feminism and Art Through a Revisionist Lens

### Abstract

The article centres around International Women’s Year IWY (1975) and the celebrations of this international event in Warsaw – the capital city of the People’s Republic of Poland. Based on archival documents held in the Department of the 20th and 21st Century Visual Arts Documentation at the Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, correspondence and press reviews, this text describes plans and realisations of art exhibitions related to IWY. This case study aims to add to the growing body of research regarding IWY, especially to the research focused on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. It adopts a revisionist approach to analysing the intersection of cultural policy and women’s emancipation in the state-socialist context. The 1970s is seen as a unique moment when feminist art rooted in the western second wave met state-socialist initiatives for women’s art.

**Keywords:** 1975, International Women’s Year, feminism, revisionism, Warsaw exhibitions on the occasion of IWY

### Introduction

“Launch pad for an array of global feminisms”,<sup>1</sup> “greatest consciousness-raising event in history”<sup>2</sup>, “seminal event for the international women’s movement”,

---

1 J. Olcott, *International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History*, New York, 2017, p. 5.

2 Ibid, p. 6.

“a milestone in histories transnational of feminist activism, and a moment when the status of women became part of mainstream thinking about development, human rights, and global security”<sup>3</sup> – these are just a few phrases describing the International Women’s Year (IWY) 1975 in academic articles and books. The importance of this international event for women’s emancipation remains uncontested. It is worth mentioning that the discourse around it was connected primarily with state policy. As Kristen Ghodsee, an American ethnographer and Professor of Russian and East European Studies, observed, it was “the first time that governments were compelled to send official delegations to discuss the status of women in their countries. [...] Sovereign states would commit themselves to improving the lives of women, and it was the first time that women in different nations could compare their legal, social, economic, and political equality with that of other women around the globe”.<sup>4</sup> However, in the feminist discourse, state and UN global initiatives do not occupy such a prominent place and are often even unknown or disregarded as a façade, particularly those examples from the eastern side of the Iron Curtain.

The objective of this article is to reacquaint the reader with state and global initiatives for women and to bring this debate to the field of art history. The text will showcase a case study of Warsaw’s exhibitions organised on the occasion of IWY. This study will delve into the cultural policies of the People’s Republic of Poland in relation to women’s emancipation. The discussion starts with a focus on plans for the artistic events, followed by a detailed examination of their execution (or lack thereof). Although only residual documentation survives, the analysis will be based on archival documents and press reviews. The reconstructions of the exhibitions were based on the documents, mostly press reviews, archived at the Department of the 20th and 21st Century Visual Arts Documentation, at the Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences. Furthermore, the exhibitions that were held in Warsaw during IWY will be contextualised in relation to a local avant-garde milieu familiar with Western second-wave feminism and other capital cities during the 1975 IWY celebrations. State and non-state initiatives in Poland and abroad will be described as two tribunes of the for-women initiatives.

The topic of this article lends itself to the term *state feminism*, originally developed in Sweden to describe “bureaucrats” working for the emancipation of women. Subsequently, the term was developed in the publication *Comparative State Feminism* (eds. D. McBride Stetson, A. Mazur).<sup>5</sup> Then its application to politics in a socialist country was considered by Chinese scholar Wang

3 H. McCarthy, “The Diplomatic History of Global Women’s Rights: The British Foreign Office and International Women’s Year, 1975”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2015, 50, no. 4, pp. 833–853.

4 K. Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex*, Durham–London, 2019, p. 146.

5 D. McBride Stetson, A. Mazur, eds., *Comparative State Feminism*, Thousand Oaks, 1995.

Zheng.<sup>6</sup> In advocating the application of the term, she emphasised that the belief that gender inequalities are the result of unequal social relations was also characteristic of this type of feminism, and that when such injustices were resolved, various forms of oppression and discrimination would be eliminated. The correlation between socialism and the emancipation of women seen from a revisionist perspective had already been discussed by authors at the “Aspasia” Journal, famous for investigating topics like women’s state organisations, feminist global socialism, and the like, such as Francesca de Haan, Clara Bonfiglioli or Natalia Jarska, to name just a few.

Research on state feminism is also conducted in Poland in various fields, such as women’s history, history of women’s literature, or history of women’s movements.<sup>7</sup> As Poland’s involvement in IWY seems a perfect field for this kind of investigation, it has also recently been receiving more coverage in Polish academic literature. From the level of detailed and primary investigation, like the local IWY celebrations in Białystok<sup>8</sup> or media (women’s press) analysis,<sup>9</sup> to the more general, and revisionist-theory-oriented research on women’s organisations in the People’s Republic of Poland and the history of for women activism<sup>10</sup> to the comparative global research on IWY celebrations including the Polish case.<sup>11</sup> The Polish sociologist Magdalena Grabowska places her research within the wider debate on feminism in Central and Eastern Europe and declares a revisionist perspective, focusing on entanglements between the influences of socialism and liberal democracy in the histories of women’s emancipation.

Following her and the Polish literature scholar Agnieszka Mrozik,<sup>12</sup> I argue that state feminism was far from a homogenous and immutable project. It was a subject of intense negotiations and transformations over time. Nor did it mean the exclusion or non-existence of grassroots initiatives. While the histories of grassroots feminism still require attention, this article focuses on the official for-women initiatives which the state organised, aiming to be part of the new, above-mentioned current research, especially in the field of art and its connection to IWY.

---

6 Z. Wang, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China”, *Feminist Studies*, 2005, 3, pp. 519–551.

7 See publications by: Anna Dobrowolska, Małgorzata Fidelis, Magdalena Grabowska, Agata Jakubowska, Natalia Jarska, Agnieszka Mrozik.

8 M. Dajnowicz, “Obchody Międzynarodowego Roku Kobiet – 1975 na Białostocczyźnie”, *Czasopismo Naukowe Instytutu Studiów Kobiety*, 2017, 2, no. 1, pp. 9–27

9 U. Sokołowska, “Międzynarodowy Rok Kobiet 1975 na łamach ‘Kobiety i Życia’”, *Czasopismo Naukowe Instytutu Studiów Kobiety*, 2019, 7, no. 2, pp. 94–108,

10 M. Grabowska, *Zerwana genealogia. Działalność społeczna i polityczna kobiet po 1945 roku a współczesny polski ruch kobiecy*, Warsaw, 2018.

11 N. Jarska, “Women’s Activism and State Policies during International Women’s Year and the United Nations Decade for Women: a Comparative Perspective”, *Women’s History Review*, 2023, pp. 1–7.

12 A. Mrozik, *Architektki PRL-u*, Warsaw, 2023.

## 1975 IWY, UN and WIDF

IWY (1975) and then the Women's Decade which ran from 1976 to 1985 were one of the United Nations international celebratory years and decades.<sup>13</sup> The role of both was twofold. On the one hand, it marked the culmination of years of concerted effort from women, as well as meetings and joint actions. On the other, it was a launching platform for women to voice their concerns and advocate for change on a global scale. In 1972, the UN General Assembly declared this year to be the International Women's Year. Since then the organisational work started to sustain and promote progress on women's rights. This led to the International Women's Conference in Mexico City and the following international women's conferences<sup>14</sup>, and, as Ghodsee argued in the above-mentioned fragment, provided a chance to meet, juxtapose and discuss the situation of women from all over the world.

IWY was not as pioneering as it may seem; it was not the first initiative in international women's meetings and activism. Women activists had been meeting regularly since the 19th century. Furthermore, after the Second World War, the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) was established by leftist women from around the world and fought for the following goals: women's rights, children's rights, anti-fascism and peace.<sup>15</sup>

13 United Nations International Years –

“The United Nations designates specific days, weeks, years and decades as occasions to mark particular events or topics in order to promote, through awareness and action, the objectives of the Organisation. Usually, it is one or more Member States that propose these observances and the General Assembly establishes them with a resolution. On occasion, these celebrations are declared by the specialized agencies of the United Nations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF, FAO, etc., when they concern issues that fall within the scope of their competencies. Some of them may be later adopted by the General Assembly”.

<https://www.un.org/en/observances/international-years>.

14 The UN organised only 4 international conferences. These conferences were held in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995). Each conference focused on different aspects of women's rights and gender equality and aimed to bring together representatives from various countries to discuss and address these issues. The conferences provided a platform for sharing experiences, exchanging ideas, and designing strategies to promote women's rights on a global scale.

15 E. de Haan, “The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main Agenda, and Contributions, 1945–1991”, in: *Women and Social Movements (WASI) Online Archive*, eds. T. Dublin, K. Kish Sklar (essay online from October 2012), <http://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international> [accessed 16 May 2024]. Research on WIDF often addresses the issue of the Second and the Third World in the context of non-Western perspectives on women's emancipation, See: Y. Gradskova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South, and the Cold War*, London–New York, 2021.

WIDF has been organising international conferences for women’s rights since 1945.<sup>16</sup>

The UN conference in the summer of 1975 was, however, the first time that governments were compelled to send official delegations to discuss the status of women in their countries. The delegates came to Mexico City from 122 out of 135 UN countries. Besides the global scale of the meeting, the priorities of IWY were supposed to be reflected locally in the UN countries too.<sup>17</sup> The most important document that the Mexico conference produced was the *World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Women’s Year*, which set out a comprehensive agenda for advancing women’s rights and promoting gender equality. This, as well as international meetings, was to be reflected locally and nationally, along with the internal policies towards women of the UN countries. But as the author of *International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* has pointed out, while the western parts of the story have been well described, the eastern side of the Iron Curtain and the local IWY celebrations are still to be researched and analysed.

Discovering and analysing the intersection between socialism and women’s emancipation has been the aim of a revisionist approach in recent historiographical research. As Sheila Fitzpatrick puts it in an article devoted to the changes of the knowledge paradigms regarding the research of the socialist and Soviet history,<sup>18</sup> the revisionist approach can be described briefly as displacing political history by social history and imposing new ways of reading primary sources. The revisionist perspective provides an understanding of the modernisation elements of socialist projects, without the negative connotations associated with anti-communism. In this perspective, events, and organisations like IWY and WIDF appear particularly interesting. Through meticulous research based on primary documents, sheds light on socialist states’ advocacy for the emancipation of women, contrary to the dominant feminist narratives of the West, and historiographies – minimising the impact of the socialist and Eastern actors.

Regarding the different geographies and feminisms previously cited by Jocelyn Olcott, an associate professor of History and Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke University, in her 2017 book devoted to the Mexico Conference, titled *International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-raising Event in History*,<sup>19</sup> the research on IWY related to the cultural policy immediately

---

16 1st, Founding Congress, 1945, Paris; 2nd, 1948, Budapest; 3rd, 1953, Copenhagen; 4th, 1958, Vienna; 5th, 1963, Moscow; 6th, 1969, Helsinki; 7th, 1975, East Berlin; 8th, 1981, Prague; 9th, 1987, Moscow; 10th, 1991, Sheffield; 11th, 1994, Le Blanc-Mesnil; 12th, 1998, Bobigny; 13th, 2002, Beirut; 14th, 2007, Caracas; 15th, 2012, Brasília; 16th, 2016, Bogotá; 17th, 2022, Caracas.

17 *Przegląd Międzynarodowego Roku Kobiet. Sprawozdanie Sekcji Specjalnej*, 1974.

18 S. Fitzpatrick, “Revisionism in Soviet History”, *History and Theory*, 2007, 46, no. 4, pp. 77–91.

19 Olcott, op. cit.



invokes the distinction between state and state-sceptical initiatives. Splits between different types of women's initiatives already happened at the conference in Mexico City. As Olcott describes,<sup>20</sup> the conference was divided into two tribunals. An official tribunal, where the women delegates mostly represented their countries and delivered official speeches prepared beforehand, and the NGO tribunal, which worked actively on methods of communication and cooperation. This split between the two tribunals also reflected a larger divide within the women's movement itself.<sup>21</sup> While the official tribunal focused on policymaking and advocating for women's rights at the governmental level – akin with the socialist countries, the NGO tribunal emphasised grassroots activism and mobilisation – featuring the second wave activists rooted in the North American and West European dynamics. Critics argued that this division undermined the unity and effectiveness of the women's movement, as it prioritised different approaches to achieving gender equality. Similar splits between different visions for women's activism (governmental and non-governmental) also took place nationally. However, local cases, as well as the artistic aspect of the IWY celebrations, remain under-researched.

Although the two tribunals' metaphor may be useful, it can also oversimplify the image. To shed light on it, in the case of IWY it is also important to mention the role of the WIDF which represented socialist and communist women's organisations across the world, and especially in the Second and Third Worlds. Although it might seem like that, WIDF was not the direct organiser of IWY. Nevertheless, the organisation with its consultative category 'A' in the UN, inaugurated the whole process, took part in preparations and was in line with the programme of the Year and the Decade – the WIDF was financially and ideologically supported by the USSR (Socialist Poland's early involvement in WIDF is not surprising in this context).<sup>22</sup> During the preparations for IWY, the USA was discussed as a strong financial partner of this event.<sup>23</sup> That might have influenced the reduction of the role of the WIDF, which had finally played a marginal role in IWY. Additionally, in 1975 the WIDF celebrated its own thirtieth anniversary and organised an international congress in East Berlin.

---

20 Ibid.

21 The metaphor of two tribunals is some kind of simplification. Ghodsee herself pointed out the inconsistencies and flows between the two, but she too used such a simplification for the sake of showing some broader tendencies.

22 Grabowska, op. cit., p. 251. At the II Women's Congress in 1948 Poland was represented by: Izolda Kowalska, Eugenia Pragierowa, Edwarda Orłowska, Irena Sztachelska and Zofia Wasilkowska (who had already been active on behalf of women before the war; here, however, emphasised the civilizational jump that had been made in socialist Poland in terms of women's rights).

23 WIDF's involvement in the IWY celebrations was discussed in Warsaw, at the WIDF's Council session held there in May 1974. See: W. Tycner, ed., *Women of the Whole World*, Berlin, 1974.

It is worth noting that in the 1970s not only WIDF was losing their position in the organisation of IWY; the People’s Republic of Poland also lost its position in the international forum of the WIDF. As the Polish sociologist researching women’s organisations and activism Magdalena Grabowska explained, it was related to the change in international priorities of the for women policies.<sup>24</sup> During the first decades of the post-war period the priority was antifascism, peace and the role of women in keeping the world secure – Poles served as witnesses and important figures severely traumatised by the war and Nazism. Then, during the next decades, when the main objective shifted into the direction of general modernisation: work, economic equality, the position of the People’s Republic of Poland in the international women’s movement degraded. However, Polish women remained part of the organisation and participated in meetings and international gatherings. While Polish women activists and politicians remained active in the UN bodies in the 1960s and 1970s, including UNESCO, where they were involved in women’s advocacy,<sup>25</sup> their role in the organisation changed over time. Also, the representatives of the socialist countries often initiated and co-authored the most basic UN documents like the DEDAW 1967 and CEDAW 1979.<sup>26</sup> During the 1970s the position of Poland and other countries of the region took a step back. As Magdalena Grabowska argued,<sup>27</sup> the changes taking place in the global politics of the international women’s movement were coupled with local transformations. In Poland, the depoliticization of the women’s movement took place in the 1960s and 1970s and instead of an “ideological” – a “practical activism” developed, as Grabowska called it. Many post-war women’s activists had withdrawn from political life in the preceding years, and the new “practical activists” replaced the original aim of building political support for women’s equality with strategies to help with the problem of the “double burden” of workers and mothers.<sup>28</sup>

## State feminism and the state socialism – the People’s Republic of Poland and Warsaw in 1975

The decade in focus (1970s) in the history of the People’s Republic of Poland coincides almost exactly with the time of the leadership of Edward Gierek. A term that has been repeated by researchers in relation to the so-called Gierek decade was “conservative modernity”. It seems to reflect well the paradoxes

---

24 M. Grabowska, “Przeciw ‘reakcji’ i faszystowowi: rzeczniczki pokoju z Polski”, in: idem, op. cit., pp. 251–255, 272.

25 Mrozik, op. cit.

26 Grabowska, op. cit., p. 272.

27 Ibid., pp. 274–275.

28 Ibid.

present in socialist Poland's policies during this period. Historian Marcin Zaremba wrote so in his article *Bigosowy socjalizm*<sup>29</sup> highlighting the contradictions of the socialist system and the new vision of a capitalist welfare-state. Paradoxically, as researchers have noted, in the 1970s and 1980s many communist countries, including the People's Republic of Poland, were more faithful to middle-class ideology with its belief in the primacy of the domestic sphere in women's lives. After all, they had attempted to subvert the same ideology more than two decades earlier.

As Polish historian, based in the US, Magdalena Fidelis argued regarding the situation of women during the 1970s it was a "conservative modernity": "While the new laws introduced facilities for women and often helped to solve material problems, they also reaffirmed the primacy of women's maternal and caring functions. In the process, social policies increasingly emphasised gender differences and the 'natural' assignment of women to domestic roles." According to Fidelis, the Gierek decade was the time when a new female role model emerged – no longer the working woman, but the mother-worker, in just that order. "Both consumer and strictly social policies in the Gierek version emphasised the traditional roles of women as mothers, caregivers, housewives and consumers. [...] This model did not emerge in isolation but reflected trends throughout the Eastern Bloc".<sup>30</sup>

## Plans and preparations for the IWY celebration in the People's Republic of Poland

The People's Republic of Poland, like many other countries, officially decided to support an international UN resolution for women and initiated the diplomatic actions required to celebrate IWY. The main legal act regulating Polish participation in IWY was the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of 1 August 1974 on the International Women's Year.<sup>31</sup> Apart from declaring support for the international initiative, it pointed out Polish priorities of the year. This document established an honorary committee<sup>32</sup> and included a framework

29 M. Zaremba, "Bigosowy socjalizm". Dekada Gierka, in: *Polacy wobec PRL. Strategie przystosowawcze*, ed. G. Miernik, Kielce, 2003, pp. 183–200.

30 M. Fidelis, *Kobiety, komunizm i industrializacja w powojennej Polsce*, Warsaw, 2015, p. 140.

31 Central Archives of Modern Records (AAN) in Warsaw. Archival unit: Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków w Warszawie 2/794/0/4/31/48.

32 Honorary committee of IWY in Poland included: Piotr Jaroszewicz – Prime Minister; Janusz Groszkowski – Chairman of the National Committee of the National Unity Front; Władysław Kruczek – President of the Central Council of Trade Unions; Maria Milczarek – President of the National Council of Polish Women, President of the General Board of the League of Women; and many others including politicians, academic authorities, leaders of the unions, farmers.

action plan. However, the plan did not provide much detail. It promised to link the IWY’s priorities with the socio-economic state development plan for the years 1976–1980. It also obliged other authorities, heads of central offices, unions and social organisations to draw up appropriate plans and proposals before the end of 1974. In addition, it envisaged celebrating Women’s Day in March and Mother’s Day in May (as in previous years). The only more specific and intentionally planned event seems to have been a research session devoted to the situation of women and scheduled at the Polish Academy of Sciences for the last quarter of 1975. One might assume that exhibitions were meant in the last paragraph under the name of “propaganda activities”.

However, a more detailed action plan was prepared and executed by the organisation that took charge of the events connected to IWY – the National Council of Polish Women (Krajowa Rada Kobiet Polskich, KRKP).<sup>33</sup> In 1974, KRKP published its *Review of the International Women’s Year. Report of the Special Section*. It boldly described the main objective of IWY as “achieving de jure and de facto equality between men and women; increased participation of women in work for development; highlighting the role of women in the struggle for world peace and friendship between nations”.<sup>34</sup> The planned programme, also in the field of art and artistic events, was scheduled for months and days. The proposed events were synchronised with UN campaigns. The local plans explained the ideas of the initiator in terms of medium and topic. For example, UN documents stated: “7 or 8 March 1975; a photographic exhibition entitled ‘Women’s contribution to society’ will be opened by the Secretary-General at the United Nations Headquarters Office, and if possible, at about the same time, identical exhibitions will be opened in all countries [...]”<sup>35</sup> or “The United Nations photographic team will produce a colour wall newspaper entitled ‘Women in the 1970s’. National International Women’s Year groups will be encouraged to make their own language versions of this newspaper”.<sup>36</sup> KRKP initiated local actions, for example, by contacting the Association of Polish Visual Artists (Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków ZPAP).

33 National Council of Polish Women – since 1966, the supervisory body for all women organisations affiliated with the League of Women, unions, agricultural and cooperative circles became The National Council of Polish Women, which was set up by the Ogólnopolski Komitet Frontu Jedności Narodu [All-Poland Committee of the National Unity Front]. W. Jackowska, “Z 35-letniej historii Ligi Kobiet”, *Nasza Praca*, 1980, 2, pp. 25–26. See also: B. Nowak, *Serving Women and the State: the League of Women in Communist Poland*, PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 2004, [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=osu1091553624](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1091553624) [accessed 1 August 2023]. In 1975 Maria Milczarek was in charge of this organisation.

34 *Przegląd Międzynarodowego Roku Kobiet. Sprawozdanie Sekcji Specjalnej*, 1974, Central Archives of Modern Records (AAN) in Warsaw. Archival unit: Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków w Warszawie 2/794/0/4/31/48.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

In a letter dated 26 August 1974 the head of the KRKP asked “to consider the possibility and determine the forms of participation of Polish visual artists in the preparation and celebration of IWY”.<sup>37</sup> As this article discusses later, the implications of this letter envisaged a prestigious exhibition that never happened.

These one-and-the-like plans appeared mostly in the internal workflow of documents between officials and unions or organisations. The IWY celebrations in Poland were not widely discussed in the media. However, in the *Nasza Praca* (Our Work) bulletin, issued by the Main Board of the Women’s League<sup>38</sup> for the internal use of the branches of the organisation, the listing of activities planned for 1975 appeared twice – in the 1974<sup>39</sup> and 1975 issues of the magazine.<sup>40</sup> In the first case it was the main act – the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of 1 August 1974 on International Women’s Year and a call for proposals. However, a detailed celebration plan was published in the 1975 issue. It was entitled: *Women’s League Programme of Activities in International Women’s Year* and indeed represented the involvement of the Women’s League with IWY. Besides the previously planned Women’s Day (8 March) celebrations and the planned conference at the Institute of Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences – both mentioned in the bulletin issued in 1974 – other forms of celebrations were also listed. The activities and ideas that can be attributed to the Women’s League consisted of meetings, talks and even competitions for children and families, last on the list at 16th position appears: “To organise, together with the Capital House of Culture, a painting exhibition entitled *Portret kobiety* (Woman’s Portrait), as a side event to the proceedings of the 6th National Congress of the Women’s League and the celebration of International Women’s Day – March 1975”.<sup>41</sup>

Most of the documents and action plans leave no doubt that art exhibitions were intended as part of the for-women activities and IWY celebrations. They appeared both in UN and in local – in this case, Polish – plans. The question remains, however, how the ideas were put in practice.

## Exhibitions on the occasion of IWY held in Warsaw during 1975

While the plans were clear, their implementation faced significant challenges. Hardly any documentation has survived. The reason for this might be that the exhibition venues no longer exist or had no archives. Additionally, the relevance

37 Letter dated dated 26 August 1974. Central Archives of Modern Records (AAN) in Warsaw.

Archival unit: Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków w Warszawie 2/794/0/4/31/48.

38 Women’s League, Liga Kobiet, see: Nowak, op. cit.

39 *Nasza Praca*, 1974, 8–9, Jackowska, op. cit., pp. 3–10.

40 *Nasza Praca*, 1975, 1–2, pp. 9–17.

41 Ibid.



**Fig. 1.** Exhibition view: *Kobiety* [Women], KMPiK, Nowy Świat, Warsaw. Source: *Zwierciadło*, 1975, 15, p.15.

of the exhibitions itself might not have been strong enough. Although the plans for IWY celebrations in the People’s Republic of Poland mentioned only one art exhibition entitled *Portret kobiety*, at least five other exhibitions connected with the celebration of this international event opened in Warsaw in 1975. At least three of them might be interpreted as a modified version of the planned exhibition. Two exhibitions were held at International Press and Book Club (Klub Międzynarodowej Książki i Prasy, KMPiK)<sup>42</sup> and one at Desa. These have been linked to the IWY celebrations in Warsaw through exhibition texts or press reviews, and they all will be reconstructed later in this article (Fig. 1).

*Kobiety* (Women), opened at KMPiK, at Nowy Swiat, and was co-organized by NCPW. This show most resembles the idea of a photographic exhibition mentioned in the UN documents. The League of Women’s magazine

42 KMPiK – Klub Międzynarodowej Prasy i Książki – International Press and Book Club – a chain of bookshops present in all major cities of the People’s Republic of Poland. The premises of many of these bookshops also housed galleries and exhibition spaces operating under the auspices of the KMPiK chain.

*Zwierciadło* (Mirror)<sup>43</sup> reported that one hundred and fifty photograms and twenty-six huge diapositives presented portraits of women. The collection was supposed to create a general portrait of a Polish woman. The image was both serious and humorous, as the reviewer framed it. However, the press review gave no information about the authors of the photographs. From the example of one reproduced view of the exhibition, it can be anticipated that the images came from the press and reportage circles – i.e., state institutions and databases. Nevertheless, the pictures were not commissioned for the show. It was neither a call, nor a contest; instead, the exhibition was created as a selection of the pictures from the previous huge show *XXX Years of the People's Republic of Poland. Poland – Country and People* (Royal Castle in Warsaw, and later Moscow, Kiev and West Germany). In the case of the *Women* exhibition, after closing in Warsaw, it was supposed to travel to other Polish cities, such as Częstochowa, later to Nowa Huta, Łódź and Gdańsk. However, there is no evidence that this ever happened.

Another exhibition that might be connected to IWY but represents a different approach to art and promotion of women was organised at *Galeria Współczesna* (Contemporary Art Gallery), in KMPiK, at Plac Zwycięstwa (Victory Square) in Warsaw – an all-women art exhibition, centred around the creative work of female artists<sup>44</sup> (in a traditional media), and not a topic of portrait. A press review entitled *Ani jednego mężczyzny*<sup>45</sup> (Not a Single Male) stated that “Warsaw’s female artists decided to show themselves as a distinct artistic milieu, since this was the first time IWY was celebrated”.<sup>46</sup> Twenty women artists from Warsaw representing painting, graphics, and sculpture showed just a sample of their work. The gallery space was relatively small – only two rooms, thus it was used to draw attention to these female artists and their work rather than arrange a comprehensive exhibition. The reviewer described the artworks as novel and interesting; and the chosen authors as representing a mix of older, already-established female artists as well as the new generation. Unfortunately, no brochure was printed and the gallery’s documentation and promotion of the show was poor or non-existent.

The third exhibition that could relate to action plans of the NCPW and Women’s League was *Portret kobiety* (Women’s Portrait). However, its connection to the state’s cultural politics might seem controversial because the exhibition was organised in one of the first auction houses in the People’s

43 (Z), “Kobiety”, *Zwierciadło*, 1975, 15, p. 15.

44 Participating artists mentioned in: (HEN), “W Galerii Współczesnej: Ani jednego mężczyzny”, *Sztandar Młodych*, 19 May 1975, 118; Monika Cynke-Goebel, Maja Gumińska, Doren Heaton-Potworowska, Emilia Nóżko-Paprocka, Ewa Stankiewicz, Zofia Woźna.

45 (HEN), “W Galerii Współczesnej: Ani jednego mężczyzny”, *Sztandar Młodych*, 19 May 1975, 118.

46 Ibid.

Republic of Poland – Desa<sup>47</sup> in Nowy Świat street. The concept of the exhibition was to show women’s portraits (paintings) created by Polish women artists. Thus, painting and traditional media again dominated the show. Artists that took part in the show included professional, but not very well known female painters: Halina Bielińska, Maria Bilińska, Lidia Bogusławska–Rompańska, Stefania Brandt, Anna Brzezińska, Iwona Graczyk, Olga Imbierowicz, Aniela Kulesza, Jadwiga Mijał, Maria Urban–Mieszkowska, Irena Weiss (Aneri), Maria Zaboklicka–Budzichowa and Bronisława Willmowska. Their works were accompanied by pottery by Hanna Modrzewska–Nowosielska and textiles by Honorata Blicharska and Karol Broniatowski. However, the connection to state policy should be seen here in the context of the 1970s People’s Republic of Poland’s turn towards the free market, including the art market, and the opening up of the Desa to an ever-widening group of private collectors (the emerging quasi-middle class during this period of communism).<sup>48</sup> Published images reveal the traditional, salon-like characteristics of the show, with paintings densely hung on the walls and vases of flowers decorating the exhibition space. Because of the title and the presence of the authorities – representatives of the Polish Women’s League at the opening – this show appears to have been connected to the state vision of the IWY celebrations. However, both reviews published in *Stolica*<sup>49</sup> (Warsaw illustrated weekly) point to the auction house context. One of the reviews notes: “We consider the direction that Desa has taken in its sales policy to be the right one. It represents the elevation of art dealing. Increased sales are accompanied by increased artistic ambition and more careful selection of works.”<sup>50</sup> *Portret kobiety* was described as an elegant, well-arranged, and successful show, but primarily in the context of Desa rather than the situation of women in the socialist state. If it was intended to relate to a celebration, it would be more fitting for Women’s Day rather than IWY, as the opening date was March 1975. (Fig. 2).

While the Women’s League representatives opened *Portret kobiety* at Desa in March 1975, two months earlier, in January, in the Women’s League Gallery, Irena Huml (art historian responsible for the program of the gallery) had opened another exhibition titled *Maternitas*.<sup>51</sup> The presentation was dedicated

47 Desa – founded in the 1950s, a chain of auction houses that played a dominant role when it came to the art trade in Poland. See: I. Bloch, “W darze dla antyrewolucyjnej burżuazji. Historia przedsiębiorstwa państwowego Desa”, *Szum*, 2018, 20, pp. 54–63.

48 J. Banasiak, “Przeźniona dekada. Próby modernizacji państwowego systemu sztuki 1971–1980”, in: *Awangarda i państwo*, ed. D. Monkiewicz, Łódź, 2018, pp. 312–326.

49 *Stolica*, 16 March 1975, 11 and *Stolica*, 20 April 1975, 16.

50 *Stolica*, 16 March 1975, 11.

51 During 1975 only two exhibitions were organised in the Women’s League Gallery in Warsaw: graphics exhibition by Hieronim Skurpski, *Maternitas*, 22 January 1975, and Barbara Mołojec–Bernatowicz, *Kompozycje z traw i ziół* (Herb and grass compositions), 15 December 1975. One can assume that *Maternitas* occupied the space for almost a year, so also during the IWY celebrations.





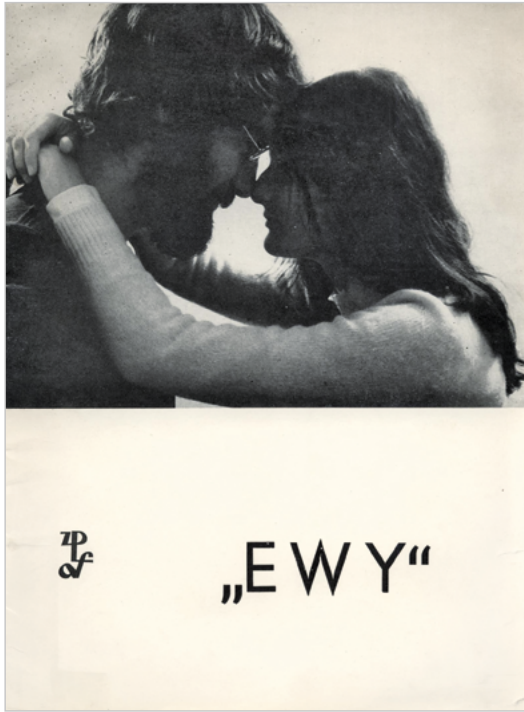
**Fig. 2.** Exhibition view: *Portret kobiety* [Woman's Portrait], Desa, Warsaw. Source: *Zwierciadło*, 1975, 14, p. 6.

to motherhood but arranged as a selection of works from the oeuvre of a male artist – Hieronim Skurpski. As Huml described – the topic of motherhood was important and recurring in his art practice throughout many years. The works represent a whole range of forms of expression, iconographies, and techniques. The reviewer of *Zwierciadło*<sup>52</sup> magazine – a monthly magazine established by the League of Women in 1957, praised the exhibition's idea, but one may ask today why the Women's League Gallery chose to give a male artist the platform to create a vision of women and motherhood, instead of promoting the art of female artists, their voices, and perspectives. Especially since *Maternitas* had a long run and occupied the gallery for almost the whole of 1975 (Fig. 3).

Finally, an exhibition entitled *Ewy* (Eves) was organised by the Association of Polish Art Photographers (Związek Polskich Artystów Fotografików, ZPAF<sup>53</sup>) at the Old Town Galeria Stara (Old Gallery). It seems to be the best documented of the aforementioned shows. ZPAF printed a catalogue/

52 (N), "Maternitas", *Zwierciadło*, 1975, 12, p. 14.

53 Association of Polish Art Photographers – Związek Polskich Artystów Fotografików ZPAF. A professional and creative association for people working in the photography professions. The association helped turn photography into a profession and made it possible to offer and receive photographic commissions.



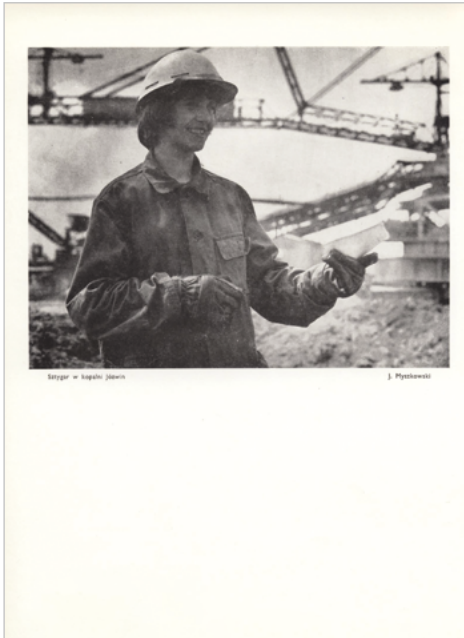
**Fig. 3.** Cover of the booklet “EWY” issued to the exhibition *EWY* [EVES] at Galeria Stara, Warsaw, 1975.

brochure with reproductions of the photographs and a written by Romuald Kłosiewicz.<sup>54</sup> The author stated that equality between women and men had already been achieved in the socialist Poland. That is why this exhibition, in the text connected to the UN and UNESCO initiative of IWY “[was] free of dramatic tension, social exposing, protest, disclosure of iniquities, sympathy for the weak and vulnerable”.<sup>55</sup> This statement seems very clear and straightforward – this event would not take a critical approach. The above-mentioned four exhibitions took a similar approach. Kłosiewicz described the exhibition in a way that the *Kobiety* exhibition could also be described: “This lets us see the rich panorama of a woman’s life. The professions she has traditionally pursued and the ones she can pursue today and does so successfully. A panorama of her family and intimate affairs”.<sup>56</sup> The *Women* and *Eves* exhibitions could have looked quite similar, as an accumulation of photographic portraits of women. However, the motivation to organise these two exhibitions might have been quite different. In the case of *Kobiety*, it was more

54 Romuald Kłosiewicz – photographer, author of texts related to photography. Probably in charge of the Old Gallery for the short period of time when Adam Johann, another photographer usually in charge of the gallery, withdrew.

55 R. Kłosiewicz, “\*”, *Ewy* (exhibition booklet), Warsaw, 1975.

56 Ibid.



**Fig. 4.** Page from the booklet “EWY” issued to the exhibition *EWY* [EVES] at Galeria Stara, Warsaw, 1975. Signed: J. Myszkowski, *Szttygar w kopalni Józwin* [Foreman at the Józwin mine].



**Fig. 5.** Page from the booklet “EWY” issued to the exhibition *EWY* [EVES] at Galeria Stara, Warsaw, 1975. Signed: Z. Rydet, XXX.

likely to have been official or driven by celebration, although in the case of *Eves* it seems to have been an occasion to present the association’s members’ work. In his introductory text, however, Kłosiewicz firmly stated that “this exhibition intends to present the situation of Polish women in the modern world to a global forum. Particularly in those areas of the world where humanist political assumptions are only just being assumed and local conditions or unjust social mechanisms – most often – do not spare women. ZPAF’s current presentation is a response to this call. This fact defines the nature of the show, as well as the scope and selection of its visual information”.<sup>57</sup> Neither *Ewy* nor *Kobiety* exposed Polish women’s problems or their actual experiences. In both cases, a critical approach was not adopted. The panorama of women’s portraits was created primarily by male photographers<sup>58</sup> (Fig. 4; Fig. 5).

An overview of these five exhibitions held in Warsaw in 1975 presents an underwhelming picture of the response to IWY in terms of the number and scale of the shows. Some of the exhibitions seem to have been organised *ad hoc*, like *Kobiety* in KMPiK, while others may have been connected to IWY

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

*post factum*, like *Maternitas* in the Women’s League Gallery. However, none of the Warsaw events was organised at a leading state art institution, such as the National Museum or Zachęta – The Central Bureau for Exhibitions. Media only emphasised the attendance of the Women’s League’s officials during the opening of the *Portret kobiecy* exhibition at Desa. Most of the exhibitions followed a rather conservative format of a salon exhibition. Four out of five exhibitions focused on the iconography of women – primarily photographic portraits – with most of the images paradoxically authored by men. The photographs printed in the *Ewy* brochure promoted an image of a woman that combined the characteristics of a worker and a mother, the most popular when it came to portrayal of Polish womanhood in the 1970s. Only the exhibition in KMPiK at Galeria Współczesna (at Victory Square) opted for a different strategy, namely promoting Warsaw women artists. Although it had no specific theme, the exhibition was structured according to the traditional media – painting, graphics, sculpture. This show aimed to connect the local female artists rather than intentionally contribute to the international debate on the situation of women.

## The exhibition that never happened – *Polskie Artystki* (Polish Female Artists) at Zachęta The Central Bureau for Exhibitions<sup>59</sup>

Having listed the IWY-related exhibitions that took place in Warsaw in 1975, one more should be mentioned, which, however, did not take place. If it had happened, certainly it would have been the largest and most prestigious of Warsaw’s exhibitions. It was planned for the Zachęta Central Bureau for Exhibitions as a national exhibition. Traces of these plans can be found in documents belonging to the Association of Polish Artists (ZPAP),<sup>60</sup> in the correspondence between Janusz Kaczmarek, then President of the Board of ZPAP, and Władysława Jaworska,<sup>61</sup> a professor and art historian working at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Kaczmarek invited Jaworska to be a commissioner of an exhibition covering a cross-section of the work of con-

59 Central Archives of Modern Records (AAN) in Warsaw. Archival unit: Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków w Warszawie 2/794/0. *Udział ZPAP w obchodach "Roku Kobiet"*. 2/794/0/4/31/48. I would like to express my gratitude to Agata Jakubowska for drawing my attention to this exhibition and for pointing out the archival sources.

60 *Ibid.*

61 More on Władysława Jaworska, her recognition and academic career can be found in: K. Łabowicz-Dymanus, “Władysława Jaworska: o karierze zawodowej, próbach wprowadzenia polskich artystów do zachodniego kanonu i ‘efekcie Matyldy’”, in: *Krytyka artystyczna kobiet: sztuka w perspektywie kobiecego doświadczenia XIX–XXI wieku*, eds. B. Łazarz, J.M. Sosnowska, Warsaw, 2019, pp. 273–292.

temporary Polish women artists on a national scale. This exhibition was initiated as one of the artistic manifestations of IWY in 1975.

Jaworska's letter (dated 7 February 1975) seems to be crucial in this case. In it the art historian complains about the lack of response and the lack of further and concrete action taken by the president of ZPAP, who was the initiator of the exhibition. However, in her first letter on the 1975 exhibition, she already admitted that her involvement in the project would be difficult and that she could only agree to a limited scope of work, due to other professional and private commitments. At the time of the early arrangements, between 1974 and 1975, Jaworska was about to travel to London for a month-long stay. In addition, in 1974, due to the death of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences director Juliusz Starzyński, Jaworska had to take over some of his work and administrative duties. On top of this, she was elected chairwoman of the International Association of Art Critics<sup>62</sup> (AICA) and was responsible for organising the association's congress planned for autumn 1975.

Despite these numerous duties, Jaworska declared her willingness to take on what she wrote was an honourable function of being commissioner of the exhibition *Polskie Artystki. Współczesne malarstwo, rzeźba, grafika i wnętrzarsztwo* (Polish Female Artists. Contemporary Painting, Sculpture, Graphics, Interior Design) proposed and planned by Janusz Kaczmarski. The art historian determined exactly to what extent she could take over the preparation of the exhibition, and to what extent the organisation of this event would have to be done by others. Despite this, she was already planning the details of the exhibition. At least 300 female artists from all over Poland were to be invited (ZPAP was appointed to assist in their selection, but no specific selection criteria were provided), and each of them was to have the opportunity to present two to five works. The venue for this nationwide exhibition was to be perhaps the most prestigious institution possible, namely the Zachęta Central Bureau for Exhibitions. The exhibition was to occupy all its rooms and even the green spaces in front of the building (an outdoor sculpture was to be exhibited there). Jaworska had already suggested how to arrange works made in particular techniques throughout the various rooms of Zachęta. In addition, she planned other promotional activities, including the publication of a catalogue with reproductions of the works, for which she would write an introduction.

In Jaworska's letter,<sup>63</sup> one remark is noteworthy among several proposals, one I believe to be crucial for understanding the character of the planned exhibition. Namely, Jaworska wrote that she would not be able to undertake

62 International Association of Art Critics – Międzynarodowe Stowarzyszenie Krytyków Sztuki (AICA Association internationale des critiques d'art).

63 Jaworska to Kaczmarski, letter dated 7 February 1975. Central Archives of Modern Records (AAN) in Warsaw. Archival unit: Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków w Warszawie 2/794/0/4/31/48.

“what is still, in a rather vague way, called an ‘author’s exhibition’”.<sup>64</sup> Thus, one can conclude that the art historian was intentionally abandoning the more personal concept of the exhibition in favour of a more traditional form, in this case an exhibition of female artists of various disciplines and of members of various sections of ZPAP. So, the exhibition would have had the character of a salon<sup>65</sup> and it would have been more important to present outstanding works made by women, and not necessarily items merely featuring women as subject matter. Nevertheless, Jarowska expressed her awareness that maybe this kind of author’s thematic exhibition, meaning an exhibition presenting her statement regarding the situation of women artists, would be needed, but at that time she was not able to undertake such a task.

Nevertheless, the purpose of the exhibition had already been outlined in Kaczmariski’s and Jaworska’s action plans, and would rather align with the state narrative, rather than deliver any critical or art topic-driven message. It was formulated as follows:

“The exhibition will show women as great scientists, outstanding educators, political leaders, philosophers, benefactors of humanity, artists and others.

The exhibition aims to:

- focus international attention on the International Year of Women through the mass media;
- emphasise the participation of women in the accomplishment of serious tasks, and in this way encourage women and girls to make an active effort in the future;
- provide a forum for national leaders to speak about equality between men and women;
- distribute material to legislators on the de jure situation at the national level”.<sup>66</sup>

It can be said that the objectives of this initiative were seen primarily in the light of the IWY celebrations and were reduced to just that.

Unfortunately, the question of organising this exhibition was not revisited by Kaczmariski. Jaworska suggested her replacement (art historians – Bożena Kowalska and Urszula Czartoryska) and then another replacement was sent by the Presidium of the Artistic Council of the Painting Section of ZPAP (the proposed persons were: Bożena Kowalska and Janina Guze – art historians, and Teresa Pałowska – an artist). Furthermore, the suggested promotional activities were not undertaken: printing a catalogue, creating commemorative medals or badges. It seems that for Kaczmariski being involved in IWY was not important enough to make this organisational effort.

---

64 Ibid.

65 Salon, like an exhibition, refers to 19th century salons of art. Salon art exhibitions were held in galleries or other dedicated venues. They were typically characterised by a large variety of artistic works. These types of exhibitions covered a variety of artistic genres, such as painting, sculpture, photography or printmaking. Salon exhibitions were often an opportunity for less and more well-known artists to present their work to a wider audience.

66 Ibid.

In the second half of the year, when the women's exhibition was supposed to take place in Zachęta, other events, such as *XXX Anniversary of the Victory over Fascism in the Visual Arts* (09 May – 15 August 1975); *Art for social demand National competitions on the XXX anniversary of the People's Republic of Poland* (21 July – 15 August 1975); *Art critics propose 30 works for the XXX anniversary of the People's Republic of Poland selected by critics from the Polish Section of the International Association of Art Critics AICA* (27 August – 17 September 1975); *Czech and Slovak artistic textiles 1945–1975* (29 September – 10 October 1975), followed by a big exhibition: *Romantism and Romanticism in 19th and 20th century Polish art* (20 October – 30 November 1975). No one heard about the plans for a huge exhibition of Polish women artists linked to IWY. And the plans for its celebration remained unknown for decades.

Despite the failure to organise a prestigious all-women art exhibition in Warsaw, similar ideas successfully materialised in other Polish cities. In these cases, the venues were also prestigious – National Museums in Poznań and Gdańsk.<sup>67</sup> The connection to IWY was made very clear in the introductory texts and printed materials for both exhibitions. However, for many years there was no interest in these shows, which were overlooked and not mentioned in the feminist discourse in Polish art history after the 1990s.<sup>68</sup> Only recently have they reemerged in the context of all-women art exhibitions and the discussion on revisionist feminism.<sup>69</sup> Archival material regarding these shows can be found online, on the *History of All-Women Exhibitions in Poland* project website.<sup>70</sup> Even though they referred to the international 1975 initiative, these exhibitions were intended as local shows, providing an opportunity for female artists from the region to present their works. Both shows were subordinated to the traditional techniques – painting, sculpture, and the like. In Poznań it was: *Dziela współczesnych artystek polskich* (Works by Contemporary Polish Women Artists) 7–31 March 1975, while in Gdańsk it was *Twórczość kobiet plastyczek* (The Creative Work of Women Artists) November–December 1975. So it means that IWY inspired projects to promote women's creative work not only in Warsaw but also in other cities in Poland. Archival materials regarding the above-mentioned women's initiatives are still to be discovered; currently there is no information about broader discussion or criticism of these two exhibitions.

67 *Wystawy sztuki kobiet* [website of a research project by Agata Jakubowska], <http://wystawykobiet.amu.edu.pl> [accessed 01 August 2023].

68 A. Morawińska, ed., *Artystki polskie*, Warsaw, 1991.

69 A. Jakubowska, "Feminist Art and Art History in State Socialist Poland, as Seen through All-women Exhibitions." *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte*, 2023, 2, pp. 94–119. Online: <https://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/mod/article/view/8672671> [accessed: 01.08.2023].

70 *Wystawy sztuki kobiet*, op. cit.

## Local IWY exhibitions as “detonators” for discussions on feminism and the women’s position in the art field

A step towards filling the above-mentioned gap about IWY research in art history was made in the book *All-women Art Spaces in the Long 1970s* edited by Agata Jakubowska and Katy Deepwell,<sup>71</sup> devoted to all-women art initiatives, galleries and institutions in general. Three of the published texts focus on 1975 and discuss exhibitions, sometimes even local conflicts around IWY. Unfortunately, these texts analyse case studies from only from the western side of the Iron Curtain; from Paris (France), Copenhagen (Denmark) and Vienna (Austria). Nonetheless, it is worth recalling these three cases and discussions about 1975 regarding the exhibitions and relationships between official and unofficial for-women initiatives in different capital cities. As an interesting coincidence, the research to date focuses on capital cities rather than taking a national approach instead favouring comparative analyses of urban centres. The alter-globalist concept of *trans-cosmopolitanism* by Piotr Piotrowski is about local artistic worlds seen in a broader global perspective. He wrote:

“I understand this [...] concept [...] as a combination of the city (polis) and the world, the universe (kosmos): the cosmopolis – the world city, the city-world, the universal city, the city whose citizens are citizens of the world, for whom the proper place of debate is both the urban agora and the universal space.  
[...] Of course, cities have always had their own identity, which did not necessarily coincide with the national identity”.<sup>72</sup>

The bigger picture allows for a comparative analysis and for seeing the specifics of the Warsaw case rooted in a state socialist context. It gives a nuanced and detailed image of the situated celebrations of IWY and allows us to see how these events worked as “detonators” for discussions on women’s emancipation and art.

France is an interesting example of close cooperation on IWY with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). It was Paris, where the headquarters of this organisation were, and still are, based. In 1975, IWY was celebrated with an exhibition *Feminie 75*. As Fabienne Dumont argued in her essay,<sup>73</sup> the exhibition followed a rather conservative

---

71 K. Deepwell, A. Jakubowska, eds., *All-Women Art Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s*, Liverpool, 2018.

72 P. Piotrowski, *Agorafilia. Sztuka i demokracja w postkomunistycznej Europie*, Poznań, 2010, pp. 79–80.

73 F. Dumont, “Women Artists’ Collectives in France: A Multiplicity of Positions in a Turbulent Context”, in: *All-Women Art Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s*, eds. K. Deepwell, A. Jakubowska, Liverpool, 2018, pp. 19–46.



scheme of a salon (in line with the annual exhibition of the Union of Women Painters and Sculptors – UFPS, established in 1881), and excluded more progressive female artists. What the author pointed out, however, was not the conflict or debate between them, but rather the heterogeneous and dynamic character of the women’s artistic milieu at that time in Paris and France. The author shows in her text a coexistence of the kind of for-women state initiatives rooted in the pre-war women artists’ associations and at the same time avant-garde art groups closer to Western, second-wave feminism. However, the official IWY exhibition was described as a catalyst for the creation of new groups among French women artists, for example: *Femmes en lute and collectif Femmes/Art*. Thus, an exhibition with a salon-traditional character would have an inspiring effect on the local women’s artistic community.

Another case comes from Copenhagen, Denmark, and it is described by Monika Kaiser in her essay entitled “The International Exhibition ‘Kvindeudstillingen XX på Charlottenborg’ in Copenhagen and the Idea of Feminist Art Space”.<sup>74</sup> The text gives a detailed analysis of the exhibition, which is described as a unique and distinct cooperation strategy of two Danish groups of artists. Although IWY was the reason to organise it, the author focuses on the concept of feminist space. She discussed the liberal political atmosphere of Denmark at that time that allowed such a provocative exhibition to happen. The exhibition openly criticised the church, and at the same time took place in an important art institution. In this case, IWY was employed to create an exhibition with a very strong political message, the formula being closer to the American *Woman’s House* than a salon exhibition.

The most radical case in terms of conflict and negotiation around IWY and local female artists comes from Vienna, Austria. Elke Krasny in her essay entitled “‘For Us, Art is Work’” InAkt – International Action Community of Women Artists<sup>75</sup> described all-women artists groups that were active during the 1970s, out of which one is particularly interesting. This is InAkt – an artists’ association that was established in reaction to the all-women exhibition organised in Vienna on the occasion of IWY. The venue chosen for the most prestigious exhibition was an ethnographic museum, and this itself provoked lively discussions regarding the position of women as “the other” of the art world. However, the InAkt members focused primarily on demanding more economic support for women artists. As Krasny stated, although there was no evidence that the artists had studied feminist theory or feminist art history available at that time, they adopted critical, materialist and feminist

74 M. Kaiser, “The International Exhibition ‘Kvindeudstillingen XX på Charlottenborg’ in: Copenhagen and the Idea of Feminist Art Space”, in: *All-Women Art Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s*, eds. K. Deepwell, A. Jakubowska, Liverpool, 2018, pp. 144–166.

75 E. Krasny, “‘For Us, Art is Work’ InAkt – International Action Community of Women Artists”, in: *All-Women Art Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s*, eds. K. Deepwell, A. Jakubowska, Liverpool, 2018, pp. 96–118.

standpoints. In this case, their gender-based critique and activism in the art field arose from local economic and institutional issues. In this case, IWY and an exhibition organised on this occasion most evidently played the role of a detonator.

From the examples provided from the western side of the Iron Curtain, it is evident that cities like Paris and Vienna had nuanced art environments. State-led initiatives, such as those in museums, resembled salons. On the other hand, the neo-avant-garde community viewed IWY as aligned with their feminist demands. However, due to the experimental nature of the medium they used, they were not included in these exhibitions. Notably, the discussions cited above testify to the stratification at the level of artistic communities or mediums used by artists. The Copenhagen example diverged from this trend, as IWY acted in Denmark as a catalyst for an exhibition with a powerful political message, rather than a safe exhibition-salon.

Outside of the above-mentioned volume *All-women Art Spaces in the Long 1970s*, an early and particularly important article mentioning exhibitions organised on the occasion of IWY was Andrea Giunta’s “Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art”.<sup>76</sup> This text also points out the above-described divide between the official celebrations and the repercussions in the local art scene. Since the international conference was held in Mexico City, it was particularly puzzling whether and how the event influenced the local art scene and the situation of Mexican woman artists. This was Giunta’s question. However, her article focuses on later (1975–1987) art initiatives, calling them “the feminist disruption in Mexican art”, only mentioning that it has its roots in the art events organised on the occasion of IWY. In the first paragraph, Giunta underlines embedding the Mexican conference in the political situation: “The event was linked with the strategy of Luis Echeverría Álvarez’ government to improve the country’s international status in terms of human rights, which had been damaged due to the Taltelolco massacre in 1968”.<sup>77</sup> She also mentions the following exhibitions: *La mujer en la plástica* (Women in the Visual Arts) in the Palacio de Bellas Artes and *Pintoras y escultoras de México* (Women Painters and Sculptors of Mexico) held at the Poliforum Cultural Siqueiros. The most significant exhibition was referred to as the one organised by the Museo de Arte Moderno, *La mujer como creadora y tema del arte* (Women as Creators and Theme in Art), in which, as Giunta points out, many of the paintings had been paradoxically authored by men. Yet this is where references to IWY end, and the focus shifts to later artistic activities. Apart from the exhibitions, the author acknowledges the important role played by the international seminar organised by Carla Stellweg in 1975. It was popularised in the next year as published comments in *Artes Visuales*, a magazine issued by the museum that

---

76 A. Giunta, “Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art, 1975 – 1987”, *Artelogie*, 2013, 5, <https://journals.openedition.org/artelogie/5103> [accessed 25 August 2023].

77 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

organised one of the IWY exhibitions. This discussion inspired Mexican artists to pursue their own research and creative work. During the years 1975–1987, they created an interesting mix of Mexican and second-wave feminist initiatives, as Giunta called them – languages and intervention strategies that were unparalleled in Latin America. Based on this research, however, one can assume that IWY did not provoke protests or discussions in the art scene of Mexico City, but somehow “detonated” a feminist disruption within.

In comparison with these capital cities, Warsaw comes off similarly. The exhibitions organised in the People’s Republic of Poland on the occasion of IWY also had a salon-like character and favoured the traditional artistic medium. However, unlike in Paris, Vienna and Mexico City, it is difficult to speak of a “disruption” or “detonation” in a local art scene.

## The two tribunes – the state and the non-governmental feminism

When examining feminism on an international level, one may refer to Olcott’s description of the two tribunes from the International Women’s Conference in Mexico City as symbolic representations of two distinct types of feminism: state feminism, which is rooted in Marxist ideology present in socialist countries to the east of the Iron Curtain, and non-governmental feminism, representing the second wave of feminism to the west of the Iron Curtain. As evidenced by local art scenes in Paris, Copenhagen, Vienna, and Mexico City around 1975, different types of feminism could emerge. IWY, and the 1970s in general, was a significant time when these two types of feminism intersected.

However, Warsaw’s case shows that no public conflict or wide-ranging discussion happened around IWY in the Polish art world or media. However, two public references to IWY can be recalled here and can be taken as a symptom of the “avoidant relationship” between neo-avant-garde artists interested in feminist issues (Natalia LL, Anna Kutera) and state initiatives around IWY.

One example is Natalia LL’s 1977 speech given at the ZPAF Gallery in Katowice and, according to sources, in Lublin at the Labirynt Gallery.<sup>78</sup> The content of the speech was reprinted in the sourcebook *Natalia LL’s Texts on the Creative Work of Natalia LL*.<sup>79</sup> In her lecture, the artist chose to outline the so-called feminist tendency in art, but what is particularly significant is that she (admittedly not very precisely) referred to IWY to demand greater support for female artists in the People’s Republic of Poland. She wrote: “The feminist tendency is a real strength, not a fallacy, which is confirmed by the fact that

78 N. LL, “The Feminist Tendency”, in: *Teksty Natalia LL o twórczości Natalii LL*, ed. Natalia LL, Bielsko Białą, 2004, pp. 320–324.

79 LL, op. cit.

such a respectable and influential institution as the United Nations bowed to the pressure of the Women’s Liberation Movement spanning the globe, and announced 1976 (sic!) as the year of women”.<sup>80</sup> This reference and mention of important feminist symposia and exhibitions in Europe (Belgrade, Innsbruck) was necessary for Natalia LL to justify her criticism. She wrote: “The issue of feminism is almost unheard of in Poland, which is best illustrated by the fact that the national press ran just two (yes, two) articles pertaining to the subject in the whole preceding year, in which the problem was presented with patronising irony and disdain. Let me remind you one more time that 1976 (sic!) was the World Year of Women”.<sup>81</sup>

Another example comes from Anna Kutera, just like Natalia LL, a female neo-avant-garde artist based in Wrocław. She, on the other hand, prepared an art text/manifesto for the invitation to the Contextual Art Conference entitled *Czy wyraz “kobieta” to rzeczownik czy przymiotnik?* (Is the Word “Woman” a Noun or an Adjective?).<sup>82</sup> Her work was introduced, as inspired by the 1975 declared as IWY. But, as is also clear, the catalyst for this idea was the artist’s trip to Canada and a meeting with an American conceptual artist Sarah Charlesworth. Kutera formed questions using data from the Yearbook of the Statistical Office on the percentage of women in different types of education. She wrote:

- “1. Why are they still favoured, or discriminated if you wish, in the society?
2. Who keeps coming back to the issue of dissimilarity?
3. Does ‘dissimilarity’ exist, and if yes, what is it based on? [...]
4. Why do the differences appear only when women try to undertake independent tasks?
5. Why is there a lack of women’s engagement in those areas that prove our progress as a civilization?

The problems illustrated by these questions can also be traced in artistic practice. In fine arts secondary schools 62.1% of the students are girls, in tertiary education – 49.2%, and in the Association of Polish Artists and Designers it is only 45.8%.

1. What proportion of these women are artistically active?
2. What were the reasons of international feminist tendencies in art?
3. Perhaps women themselves aimed at alienation?”<sup>83</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that the two references mentioned were created subsequent to the artists’ encounters with Western feminism, and two years after the IWY gatherings held in socialist Poland. Consequently, it would be difficult to categorise Warsaw’s exhibitions as “detonators” of regional discussions.

Criticising the insufficient celebration of IWY in Poland, Natalia LL demanded greater attention and recognition for feminism in the Polish art world. However,

---

80 Ibid., pp. 320–324.

81 Ibid.

82 A. Markowska, ed., *The Recent Art Gallery. The Avant-garde Did Not Applaud. Part 1*, Wrocław, 2014.

83 Ibid.

the situation was not as bad as Natalia LL described it. After all, as listed above, several exhibitions were organised to celebrate IWY. Nevertheless, the complete separation of the neo-avant-garde milieu from national pro-women initiatives should be pointed out.<sup>84</sup> This short fragment of Natalia LL's statement can serve as proof of this. She and other female artists close to her, including Anna Kutera, interested in art experiments, probably did not even know, did not see or did not want to participate in the events co-organised by state socialist women's organisations, and *vice versa*, the salon-like exhibitions – focused on traditional media such as painting, sculpture, graphic art, and crafts, including textiles – did not notice the neo-avant-garde female artists either. While in the case of the aforementioned exhibitions organised west of the Iron Curtain, also in the salon style, for example in Paris, they provoked discussions between artistic communities and inspired the formation of female-artists groups, a similar result cannot be noticed in the case of Warsaw.

However, it proved to be challenging to use Warsaw as a representative case study, because the reasons for the lack of success of the largest planned exhibition of a Polish female artist at the Zachęta Gallery remain unclear. While the capital of the People's Republic of Poland did not host a significant all-women art exhibition in a leading state art institution, other cities like Gdańsk and Poznań successfully held such exhibitions in national museums. The criticism against the state initiatives grew from the neo-avant-garde milieu outside of Warsaw (Natalia LL, Anna Kutera – both based in Wrocław). If the scope of the article were different, protests such as women throwing acid on photos of female-nudes presented at the Kraków's periodic exhibition *Venus* while referring to IWY would be discussed.<sup>85</sup> However, this article intended to present an almost unknown example of an IWY celebration in a socialist state of Poland from the perspective of the art world.

## Conclusion: Reception, impact, and the lack of the research on IWY in art history

In conclusion, the Warsaw case study of exhibitions organised on the occasion of IWY is an example of the “state-feminist tribune” not presented in research to date. It shows that it was not only feminism rooted in the Western second wave, which was discussed in the Polish art world around 1977, that thematised

84 A. Jakubowska, “The Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland”, in: *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, eds. B. Hock, A. Allas, New York–London, 2018, pp. 135–148.

85 A. Dobrowolska, “‘Why Don't They Display Male Nudes?’ Nude Photography, Women's Art, and the Redefinition of Socialist Morality in 1970s Poland”, *Aspasia*, 2023, 17, pp. 164–182.

the situation of women; an incentive for this could also have been state activities, such as those related to the celebration of IWY 1975.

It is worth noting that the planned Zachęta exhibition as well as the other IWY exhibitions emphasised traditional media: painting, sculpture and interior design. One might assume that this was the reason for a lack of substantial dialogue between state and neo-avant-garde artists in Warsaw, unlike in other capital cities. But in the other capital cities (Paris, Vienna and Mexico City) the presentations also had a salon-like character although they did provoke discussions and later led to the formation of women artists’ groups. The exhibitions in Warsaw failed to incite any circles or disagreements. Instead, the state of women’s emancipation in the art world during the 1970s in the capital of socialist state – the People’s Republic of Poland – can be viewed as one of two tribunes. These were separate and employed different methods and artistic languages. Nevertheless, both supported the situation of women-artists.

Given that feminism in art has traditionally been sought in neo-avant-garde circles, it is not surprising that state feminism has been overlooked in art history so far. Though this case study may seem modest, this type of research has the potential to challenge the Western-centric narrative and to shed light on locations that are often unfairly depicted as being behind the times.

## PostScript. 1975 and *Polish Woman* from the Second World to the Third World

In the aforementioned analysis of the women’s press in relation to 1975, an opinion is expressed that IWY used to be presented primarily through the international aspect – through foreign coverage.<sup>86</sup> The emphasis was on presenting women’s political activities and role models from abroad, but also on showing the achievements and problems of women in other countries.

An opposite trend – not in an international, but rather national and local direction – can be observed when analysing the exhibitions organised on the occasion of IWY in Warsaw and Poland. All of these shows were presentations of art by artists from Poland. In the case of the show at Galeria Współczesna or the two exhibitions outside Warsaw – at the National Museum in Gdańsk and in Poznań – the scope was even more narrow. Some works by artists from a given city or from the collection of a given institution were presented.

The exception to this background in terms of exhibitions on the occasion of IWY and their international circulation was ZPAF. Although the *Ewy* exhibition discussed above was a presentation of the work of artists from Poland, ZPAF probably organised similar exhibitions under international agreements. In the ZPAP Information Bulletin in the exhibition plans for 1975 – Polish

---

86 Sokołowska, op. cit., p. 97.

exhibitions abroad – one can read: “Photographic Exhibition *Woman in Poland* ZPAF Romania, transferred from East Germany or vice versa; Algeria – Photographic Exhibition *Polish Woman* ZPAF and Iraq – Photographic Exhibition *Woman in Poland* ZPAF”.<sup>87</sup>

Although there is no information about the final realisation of these shows, the very fact of their planning would be evidence of the use of art in the People’s Republic of Poland for international outreach on women’s issues. In addition, areas hitherto depreciated in the feminist narrative of women’s liberation – the so-called Second and Third World, or in other words the East (Romania) and the Global South (Algeria, Iraq) – are highlighted here. These are of particular interest within the revisionist paradigm.<sup>88</sup> This is because the contacts between women activists from these parts of the world make it possible to question the dominant role of the West in the field of women’s emancipation and to point to the role of the Second World in the emancipation of the Third World.

## References

- (HEN), “W Galerii Współczesnej: Ani jednego mężczyzny”, *Sztandar Młodych*, 19 May 1975, 118.
- (N), “Maternitas”, *Zwierciadło*, 1975, 12, p. 14.
- (Z), “Kobiety”, *Zwierciadło*, 1975, 15.
- Banasiak, J., “Prześlona dekada. Próby modernizacji państwowego systemu sztuki 1971–1980”, in: *Awangarda i państwo*, ed. D. Monkiewicz, Łódź, 2018, pp. 312–326.
- Central Archives of Modern Records (AAN) in Warsaw. Archival unit: Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków w Warszawie 2/794/0/4/31/48.
- Dajnowicz, M., “Obchody Międzynarodowego Roku Kobiet – 1975 na Białostocczyźnie”, *Czasopismo Naukowe Instytutu Studiów Kobięcych*, 2017, 2, no. 1, pp. 9–27.
- de Haan, E., “The Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main Agenda, and Contributions, 1945–1991”, in: *Women and Social Movements (WASI) Online Archive*, eds. T. Dublin, K. Kish Sklar (essay online from October 2012), <http://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international>.
- Deepwell, K., Jakubowska, A., eds., *All-Women Art Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s*, Liverpool, 2018.
- Department of the 20th and 21st Century Visual Arts Documentation at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences.
- Dobrowolska, A., “‘Why Don’t They Display Male Nudes?’ Nude Photography, Women’s Art, and the Redefinition of Socialist Morality in 1970s Poland”, *Aspasia*, 2023, 17, pp. 164–182.
- Fidelis, M., *Kobiety, komunizm i industrializacja w powojennej Polsce*, Warsaw, 2015.

<sup>87</sup> *Biuletyn Informacyjny ZPAF*, 1975, 6(26).

<sup>88</sup> Ghodsee, op. cit.

- Fitzpatrick, S., “Revisionism in Soviet History”, *History and Theory*, 2007, 46, no. 4, pp. 77–91.
- Ghodsee, K., *Second World, Second Sex*, Durham–London, 2019.
- Giunta, A., “Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art, 1975 – 1987”, *Artelogie*, 2013, 5, <https://journals.openedition.org/artelogie/5103>.
- Grabowska, M., *Zerwana genealogia. Działalność społeczna i polityczna kobiet po 1945 roku a współczesny polski ruch kobiecy*, Warsaw, 2018.
- Gradszkova, Y., *The Women’s International Democratic Federation, the Global South, and the Cold War*, London–New York, 2021.
- Jackowska, W., “Z 35-letniej historii Ligi Kobiet”, *Nasza Praca*, 1980, 2.
- Jakubowska, A., “Feminist Art and Art History in State Socialist Poland, as Seen through All-women Exhibitions.” *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte*, 2023, 2, pp. 94–119. Online: <https://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/mod/article/view/8672671>.
- Jakubowska, A., “The Circulation of Feminist Ideas in Communist Poland”, in: *Globalizing East European Art Histories. Past and Present*, eds. B. Hock, A. Allas, New York–London, 2018, pp. 135–148.
- Jarska, N., “Women’s Activism and State Policies during International Women’s Year and the United Nations Decade for Women: a Comparative Perspective”, *Women’s History Review*, 2023.
- Kłosiewicz, R., “\*”, *Ewy* [exhibition booklet], Warsaw, 1975.
- Łabowicz–Dymanus, K., “Władysława Jaworska: o karierze zawodowej, próbach wprowadzenia polskich artystów do zachodniego kanonu i ‘efekcie Matyldy’”, in: *Krytyka artystyczna kobiet: sztuka w perspektywie kobiecego doświadczenia XIX–XXI wieku*, eds. B. Łazarz, J.M. Sosnowska, Warsaw, 2019, pp. 273–292.
- LL, N., *Teksty Natalia LL o twórczości Natalii LL*, Bielsko Biała, 2004.
- Markowska, A., ed., *The Recent Art Gallery. The Avant-garde Did Not Applaud. Part 1*, Wrocław, 2014.
- McBride Stetson, D., Mazur, A., eds., *Comparative State Feminism*, Thousand Oaks, 1995.
- McCarthy, H., “The Diplomatic History of Global Women’s Rights: The British Foreign Office and International Women’s Year, 1975”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2015, 50, no. 4, pp. 833–853.
- Morawińska, A., ed., *Artystki polskie*, Warsaw, 1991.
- Mrozik, A., *Architekty PRL-u*, Warsaw, 2023.
- Nasza Praca*, 1974.
- Nasza Praca*, 1975.
- Nowak, B., *Serving Women and the State: the League of Women in Communist Poland*, PhD dissertation, Ohio State University, 2004, [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=osu1091553624](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=osu1091553624).
- Olcott, J., *International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History*, New York, 2017.
- Sokołowska, U., “Międzynarodowy Rok Kobiet 1975 na łamach ‘Kobiety i Życia’”, *Czasopismo Naukowe Instytutu Studiów Kobięcych*, 2019, 7, no. 2, pp. 94–108.
- Stolica*, 16 March 1975, 11
- Stolica*, 20 April 1975, 16.



Wang, Z., “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China”, *Feminist Studies*, 2005, pp. 519–551.

*Wystawy sztuki kobiet* [website of a research project by Agata Jakubowska] <http://wystawykobiet.amu.edu.pl>.

Zaremba, M., “‘Bigosowy socjalizm’. Dekada Gierka”, in: *Polacy wobec PRL. Strategie przystosowawcze*, ed. G. Miernik, Kielce, 2003, pp. 183–200.

*Marina Vinnik*

BAUHAUS UNIVERSITY WEIMAR, WEIMAR, GERMANY

ORCID: 0000-0001-8338-7586

## Feminist Museology Applied to the Leipzig Museum of Arts (The MdbK)

### Abstract

In this article, I explore how museums navigate the contradictions between contemporary discourses and the presence of colonial European art. Museums as sites of education and collection of items have been approached critically by various feminist artists and activists in recent decades. And in response, museums have begun to hold exhibitions that embrace feminist narratives. Therefore, I connect these peculiarities at a museum in former East Germany and its attempt to appeal to these discussions. For my case study I have chosen *das Museum der bildenden Künste* (further shortened to the MdbK) in Leipzig.

I explore how local and global agendas play out in current exhibitions, how and by whom feminist frameworks are applied to its collection, and what dynamics can be seen in its permanent and temporary exhibition projects. For the purposes of the “Connecting Eastern Europe and Latin America” project, I focus on the exhibition entitled *Olga Costa: Dialogues with Mexican Modernism* that took place at the MdbK from 1 December 2022 to 26 March 2023. I ask the following questions: Do these temporary projects educate the museum’s team and challenge the narratives that are being told through the permanent exhibitions and publications? Do those temporary exhibitions transform the museum’s general narrative? I turn to how large exhibitions, which are curated by the core museum’s team, present gender, race, (in)justice, German nationalism, and equality.

**Keywords:** feminism, museum, East Germany, Leipzig school of painting, socialism, neoliberalism, Olga Costa, Latin America, Jewish identity, Mexican modernism, woke-washing.

## What is Feminist Museology?

At the beginning of the 20th century, British suffragettes slashed paintings in London galleries and museums, stressing the fact that female nudity and beauty were on display while real women were suffering in British prisons for their political activism.<sup>1</sup> Almost a century later, activists continued to challenge art museums. One of the most famous interventions came from the Guerilla Girls: *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met Museum?* (1989). They posed this question as relevant to all the museums of visual arts that position themselves in the Western museum discourse.<sup>2</sup> Most visual arts museums recreate art history through the names of great male artists and their “patrilineal chronological tendency” rather than “matrilineal resonance”.<sup>3</sup> Thus, they demonstrate an overwhelmingly male presence in every epoch and style while, at the same time, having quite a few female bodies on display. Therefore, a museum-goer is perpetually put in the position of a voyeur encountering naked female bodies represented by male artists.

While efforts have been made by a number of museums, finding female artists in museums of visual arts is often still difficult (Fig.1). Art museums, submerged in the logic of late capitalism, encourage their visitors to structure their visit around famous masterpieces, commodify the museum experience through Instagram pictures, and later purchase (in the museum gift shop) the same masterpiece as a magnet, poster, or postcard. This logic of museums and art collections makes it especially difficult to criticise or restructure the past. After all, museums are etymologically the home of the muses (feminine creatures). And their institutionalisation began as “cabinets of curiosities” or private aristocratic picture galleries.<sup>4</sup> Today, many features of such galleries have survived, and so visual arts museums are in fact deeply embedded within a patriarchal worldview. In order to generate a meaningful educational change in times of social tension, many museums (as well as many public and private institutions these days) are attempting serious processes of self-criticism and self-restructuring. However, vestiges of the past and the underlying logic of the institution often remain.

Scholars and curators who advocate for transformation call for the theoretical reframing of what we see as “progress” or “typical representation”. Here,

1 For more: L. Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London–New York, 2002.

2 Though, it is important to stress that there are some attempts to subvert the existing power structures and at the same time to preserve a museum as an institution. Such as the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington DC. See: <https://nmwa.org/> [accessed 1 July 2023].

3 Terms coined by Clare Johnson. See: C. Johnson, *Femininity, Time and Feminist Art*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

4 A.K. Levin, “Unpacking Gender: Creating Complex Models for Gender Inclusivity in Museums” in: *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, eds. R. Sandell, E. Nightingale, Taylor & Francis, 2012, p. 156.



**Fig. 1.** Elisabeth Sirani, *Cupid and Psyche*, oil on canvas (c. 1660), Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig, photo: MdbK.

feminist theory, with all of its plurality and open-ended approaches, could be seen as a tool to restructure the traditional museum.<sup>5</sup> In the opinion of Hilde Stern Hein, feminist theory is especially useful for three reasons: (1) it challenges universalising theories that usually are perpetuated by, and benefit, men, (2) feminist theory addresses the problematic binary of subject/object divide that is frequently the core of museums' collections, and (3) it confronts the Western celebration of an autonomous individual opening up the rigid systems of classification.<sup>6</sup> Feminist theory can provoke new questions, like: Is it possible for the museum to focus not on the masterpiece but instead on the "mistresspiece" or on a variation thereof?

Darlene E. Clover and Kathy Sanford repeat Griselda Pollock's question from 1988: "Are feminism and the museum, as we know them, compatible at any level?"<sup>7</sup> Australian feminists offer a set of guidelines to examine any

5 H.S. Hein, "Redressing the Museum in Feminist Theory", *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 2007, 22, no. 1, p. 29.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

7 D.E. Clover, S. Williamson, "The Feminist Museum Hack as an Aesthetic Practice of Possibility", *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 2019, 10, no. 2, pp. 143–159, p. 64.

given museum and see the structures defining it. Clover and Sanford see museums mainly as educational spaces and “pedagogical contact zones”<sup>8</sup> and aim to redefine the narrative in order to create change within the museum’s logic. As the centrepiece of a feminist intervention at a museum, researchers focus on visual, textual, and spatial analysis, analysis of permanence and temporality, critical visual literacy disruption, and agency.

For my own case study, I decided to build upon these guidelines in order to poke and prod the exhibitions at the MdbK. In 2022, I taught a seminar titled “An Attempt of Feminist Museology” at the University of Leipzig. During the seminar, my students and I engaged in a critical feminist analysis of the MdbK’s collection and exhibitions. The questions that we wanted to explore were:

- Are there any specific masterpieces central to the collection?
- What is the ratio of male/female artists?
- Is there any diversity among the curators at the museum?
- What is at the centre of the permanent collections and what is discussed in the temporary exhibitions?
- Whose works are stored in the archive?
- From whose collections do the museum objects come?

These questions then focused on many of the points that Clover and Sanford raised, but also on the historical and structural framework of the MdbK itself. Thanks to the students,<sup>9</sup> we were able to count all the works made by women artists and move forward with a critical analysis. In a report written by Janine Büttner and Genia Gröne, we can see that simply by counting the number of female artists in the museum, a fairly astounding discrepancy emerges. The museum has three floors and the numbers look as follows:

First floor (15th–18th century art):

Female artists	Female representations	Artworks made by men
4	73	162

Second floor (19th century art):

Female artists	Female representations	Artworks made by men
2	42	145

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Many thanks to all the participants of the seminar: Adam Salome Lisa, Buchmann Lara, Büttner Janine, Carr Smilla, Gröne Genia, Hauswaldt Ricarda, Heilmann Emma Charlotte, Hellwinkel Arne, Herzog Miriam, Hoffmann Linda Carolin, Janicke Vanessa, Klawitter Malvine, Raum Franz Valentin, Rauser Anna, Reiter Claudia, Schulze Paulina, Ullrich Lena, Weise Marie, and Wolff Selma.

Third floor (20th–21st century art):

Female artists	Female representations	Artworks made by men
11	36	142

Indeed, despite the fact that many museums have made efforts to ameliorate this discrepancy, that ratio is still quite typical in visual arts museums and especially among old collections. In the MdbK, visitors are also offered a selection of outstanding male figures (e.g., Lukas Cranach, Max Klinger, and Werner Tübke, among others) and masterpieces (e.g., *Lebensstufen* (1834) by Caspar David Friedrich). These figures and masterpieces become the centrepiece of the museum experience. Of course, the museum makes exclusions not just based on gender, but race, disability, and class as well. Nevertheless, feminist scholars and curators invite us to rethink this heritage and the museum structure itself in the light of recent feminist and post-colonial theories.

## Museum of Painting from the East German context

As a city museum of visual arts, the MdbK is a public institution in Leipzig and is funded mostly by the city budget.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, its collection comes from various sources. Part stems from the original museum founded in Leipzig by the local *Kunstverein* (Artists' Union) in 1848 (the first exhibition took place eleven years earlier in 1837). The artists who initiated this process were a part of the Dresden Artists' Union, but they decided to create a separate Leipzig-based exhibition and collection. The History of the MdbK from a 1987 publication made by Dieter Gleisberg<sup>11</sup> stresses the connection of the *Kunstverein* with the industrial and financial structures in Leipzig in the 19th century. In other words, the connection relied on the railroad industry that was mainly building a railway between Leipzig and Dresden, the important trade industry in Leipzig, but also prominent publishing houses such as a publishing house of Philipp Reclam and Otto Wigand (where the first copy of Marx's *Kapital* was published).<sup>12</sup> Publishing houses in Leipzig in the middle of the 19th century were engines for the swift industrialisation of the city.

One of the key publishing houses was established by Friedrich Arnold Brockhaus, and later inherited by his sons Friedrich and Heinrich Brockhaus. The Brockhaus family played a crucial role in the history of Leipzig. Their publishing house survived two wars and in the 1940s it was split between

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://MdbK.de/> [accessed 1 July 2023].

<sup>11</sup> D. Gleisberg, *150 Jahre Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig, 1837–1987: 150 Jahre Sammeln zeitgenössischer Kunst; Ausstellung zum Jubiläum d. Museums d. bildenden Künste Leipzig*, Leipzig, 1987, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the East German *Brockhaus* and West German *F. A. Brockhaus* publishing houses. At the same time, another key figure for the museum's collection appeared as one of the original founders Maximilian Speck von Sternburg. The GDR publication defines him as “*neureichen*” (nouveau riche).<sup>13</sup> Notably, these families still play an important role in the life of the city of Leipzig today.

For that first exhibition in 1837, the *Kunstverein* already had works by such German superstars as Caspar David Friedrich and Johann Christian Clausen Dahl. Before 1914, the collection had already had over 300 artists from the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. Furthermore, entire collections from Adolph Heinrich Schletter, Christian Heinrich Demiani, Moritz Eduard Mayer, or Alexander Schmidt–Michelsen were donated to the museum at the end of the 19th century. In between the two wars, the MdbK lost a number of artworks, due to the destruction of the city, but also due in part to the infamous “Degenerative Art” confiscation process carried out by the Nazi government.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, through the Giepel Foundation, the MdbK's collection acquired some paintings that were previously in the possession of Jewish families and were unlawfully confiscated. The initial museum's building was destroyed during the Second World War in 1943 by the British air force, but most of the collection survived. In the post-war period, the MdbK became one of the highlights of the newly-founded German Democratic Republic. Without a permanent building, the museum's collection was exhibited in several locations throughout the city of Leipzig. After 1952 and until the collection's relocation to its modern building in 2004, the MdbK had been located in the building that is now the *Bundesverwaltungsgericht* (the Federal Court) in Leipzig. This location was right next to the main Leipzig Academy of Arts, the *Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst* (the HGB).

As a Leipzig-based museum, the MdbK has always been keen to emphasise the local art scene. However, some scholars argue that it changed drastically after 1990 and that the museum, like other structures in the GDR, have transformed due to the swift neoliberal turn in Germany. As April Eisman points out: “The MdbK's shift in focus to artists well-known in the West was largely the result of new staff, most of whom were themselves from the West and had little knowledge of East German art”.<sup>15</sup> That might be true to some extent regarding major exhibitions, but in regards to the museum's permanent exhibition politics, the collection remains deeply rooted in the local context. As in many cases, the history of the museum's works is quite complex and has many ruptures and rewritings. At the same time, however, due to its significant size, there are many opportunities for significant improvement.

13 Ibid., p. 5.

14 <https://MdbK.de/ausstellungen/provenienzforschung/> [accessed 01 July 2023].

15 A. Eisman, “Curating Out the Socialist Alternative” in: *Curating (Post-)Socialist Environments*, eds. P. Schorch, D. Habit, Bielefeld, 2021, p. 86.

Interestingly, the fact that the MdbK once had a strong socialist agenda is almost invisible today. Although the museum is not as openly anti-communist as other museums in Leipzig, where communism and Nazism are equated, it nevertheless decontextualizes its own history in a subtler way. Once a museum-goer visits the MdbK, they are immediately bombarded by references, some of which are obvious, while others require serious investigation or in-depth knowledge. For instance, at the museum's entrance stands an enormous sculpture by the Leipzig artist Max Klinger. The statue is *Beethoven* (1902), commemorating high culture, grand times, and a noble past. Near Klinger's statue, there is a large mosaic by Stephan Huber *Stiftermosaik* (2004), produced specifically for this museum opening and displaying the gathering of people that are crucial to the history of Leipzig. In its museum rendition, this mosaic is perhaps the most telling item marking the neoliberal turn in the city's history.

The only two women that are present in the mosaic amongst 13 people (that are named) are: Charlotte Speck von Sternburg (1787–1836) and Marion Bühler–Brockhaus (born 1944). The men in the mosaic, directly at the entrance of the museum, are its significant contributors. For instance, there is a portrait of Caspar David Friedrich as well as a portrait of Heinrich Brockhaus. Interestingly, the people commemorated by this mosaic while they were still alive are Marion Bühler–Brockhaus, Hans–Peter Bühler, and Wolf–Dietrich Speck von Sternburg.<sup>16</sup> These three people are representatives of multigenerational German upper class families and the main contributors and donors to the MdbK's current collection (Fig. 2). No communists or socialists appear, despite having maintained the museum collections for over 40 years.

Passing through the first and the second floors of the museum, the viewer has no clue that this collection was once framed as social criticism. Instead, there is no critical narrative regarding the paintings from the 16th or the 18th century. Only on the third floor can one find paintings made during the GDR and most of them are attributed to the Leipzig School of Painting.

This leftover of the socialist past is the most prominent part of the third floor in the MdbK, since this movement has functioned as the figurehead of the Leipzig art scene since the 1990s. The Leipzig School of Painting is usually separated into three main periods: the First Leipzig School of Painting, the Second (or the "New") Leipzig School of Painting, and the Third (the *Newest*) Leipzig School of Painting.<sup>17</sup> All the formations of the Leipzig school are usually known through male names, sometimes later in the connection between master and student. Thus, the First Leipzig School of Painting is firmly associated with Werner Tübke or Wolfgang Mattheuer, and later

---

16 See: <http://www.sternburg-stiftung.de/> [accessed 1 July 2023].

17 K–S. Rehberg, *60, 40, 20-Kunst in Leipzig seit 1949: Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig*, Leipzig, 2009.





**Fig. 2.** Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, *Why Born Enslaved* (1868), Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig, Donation Bühler-Brockhaus, photo: MdbK.

Arno Rink.<sup>18</sup> The Second with Neo Rauch as the biggest and most significant painter. Finally, the Third with artists such as Titus Schade or Tilo Baumgärtel. Women painters who worked in this movement are usually underrepresented and under-researched.

## The MdbK and its attempt to align with a feminist discourse

One can notice that since 2021, the MdbK has made regular attempts to include feminist discourse in its exhibitions. Nevertheless, this engagement is mostly limited to temporary exhibitions. In 2022, for instance, the exhibition *Underestimated* took place in the museum. In this project, an assistant curator, Marian Reisinger, and students from the above-mentioned Leipzig art academy, the HGB, attempted to promote female artists whose works were archived and never received the attention they deserved. *Underestimated* took place

<sup>18</sup> Though there were also women artists such as Elisabeth Voigt, Rosa Loy and others.

in the museum's basement floor — a typical, though quite telling location for a museum's temporary projects — and highlighted several female artists from the beginning of the late 19th and early 20th century, e.g., Marianne Fielder (1864–1904), Emilie Mediz–Pelikan (1861–1908), and Philippine Wolf–Arndt (1849–1940). The point of connection for these artists was their participation in the *Sächsisch–Thüringische Industrie- und Gewerbeausstellung* (STIGA).

The curatorial text implied that they faced obvious obstacles in developing their professional career, without going into too much detail. In the publication, there is a brief mention that thanks to Philippine Wolf–Arndt, who was not just an artist, but also a part of the *Frauenbewegung* (the Women's Movement),<sup>19</sup> women students started to be welcomed by the HGB as early as in 1905. The brochure for the exhibition only mentions this very briefly. The lives and work of each artist in this short text is described in no more than four sentences. Additionally, this exhibition was not accompanied by any catalogue, except the publication mentioned above: a two-page inquiry in *125 Jahre Sächsisch–Thüringische Industrie- und Gewerbeausstellung* and a little advertising brochure published by the Hochschule für Technik, Wirtschaft und Kultur Leipzig (HTWK).<sup>20</sup> Thus, even with this exhibition, these artists were effectively left underestimated.

Another temporary project that regularly takes place in the MdbK is *Next;raum*. The idea behind this is to offer some critical commentary on the museum's collection. The stated aim is also to open up the museum to the intervention of artists who currently live and work in Leipzig.<sup>21</sup> The project is presented through the museum's art mediation team and creates temporary installations in the museum's collection. Functionally, it creates critical inquiries that bridge the contemporary feminist (mostly white and liberal) discourses in Leipzig and the art that is exhibited in the museum. For instance, one of the artists sets up a display with sex toys in front of the reclining nude painting *The Water Nymph at the Fountain* (1518) by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Another artist sets up a chair with a cloth and commentary about nakedness and discomfort near the painting *Group Portrait of Leipzig's Artists* (1961) by Harry Blume, where all the artists are male and fully clothed, while the female model is naked.

Yet another temporary initiative that takes place at the MdbK is the *360 degrees* project that aims to address the problematic sides of the traditional museum and fulfils the aim of diversifying the museum's team. In the frame of this project, the exhibition *Re-Connect: Kunst und Kampf im Bruderland* was

---

19 More about her life: P. Wolff-Arndt, "Leipziger Frauenporträts", *Stadt Leipzig*, (nd), <https://www.leipzig.de/jugend-familie-und-soziales/frauen/1000-jahre-leipzig-100-frauenportraets/detailseite-frauenportraets/projekt/wolff-arndt-philippine> [accessed 01 July 2023].

20 *125 Jahre Sächsisch–Thüringische Industrie- und Gewerbeausstellung, Hochschule für Technik, Wirtschaft und Kultur Leipzig* (HTWK), 2022.

21 See: <https://MdbK.de/MdbK-next-raum/> [accessed 1 July 2023].

created. It marked an impressive precedent in terms of addressing the questions of race and racism and brought up non-German artists who worked in Leipzig. As immigrants, these artists were never included in the canonical Leipzig School of Painting. At the same time, it is important to notice, that *360 degrees* is funded not by the city of Leipzig (as happens with the more permanent museum employees), but through grants for multiple years from the *Kulturstiftung des Bundes*, a central project-based stipend from the federal government of Germany.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the workers that are employed in the museum as part of the *360 degrees* program are not called curators or even researchers, but “diversity agents”. This precariousness inevitably creates a certain dynamic within the museum. For the public, it becomes clear that the feminist or anti-racist agenda only lurks at the museum’s surface, with such temporary exhibitions open only until the new funding year or until a blockbuster exhibition comes around.<sup>23</sup>

## Case study: Olga Costa at the MdbK

Partially as a result of ongoing interest in feminist agendas, in 2022–2023, the MdbK (among other projects targeting women artists) launched an exhibition that is especially interesting in terms of its attempts to connect Eastern Europe and Latin America. The exhibition was entitled *Olga Costa: Dialogues with Mexican Modernism*.<sup>24</sup> Being a local museum that expands to global contexts and frameworks, the MdbK chose to positively emphasise Olga Costa’s connection to Leipzig. This connection was stressed multiple times in the curatorial texts and in the exhibition catalogue.

It is worth presenting a brief overview of Olga Costa’s life. Her family, like many Jewish families in Europe at the time, left Europe for North America. The artist was born in Leipzig and lived in Germany for a long time, but later moved to Mexico and gained recognition as a famous Mexican painter. As the MdbK’s director Stefan Weppelmann narrates this in the opening article of the exhibition catalogue:

“In 1913 her parents Anna Fabrikant and Jacob Kostakowsky leave the Ukrainian city of Odessa, which at that time was under the rule of the Russian tsar [...]. Leipzig, a city of music, is not a random destination for the Kostakowskys family ... the First World War breaks out, and the family moves to try to establish itself in the capital city of Berlin... During the crises of the Weimar Republic the Kostakowskys decide, probably

22 See: <https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/de> accessed [accessed 1 July 2023].

23 It is also important to mention that the museum employs a provenance researcher, whose aim is to re-examine the museum’s collections and determine the history of the objects.

24 S. Weppelmann, S. Hoffmann, eds., *Olga Costa: Dialogues with Mexican Modernism*, Hirmer, 2022.

mainly for economic reasons, to board a ship in the port of Saint-Nazaire in France and head to Veracruz in post-revolutionary Mexico, where they arrive in September 1925”.<sup>25</sup>

The same sentiment of the search for better opportunities and changing countries on a quest to find a “true home” was brought up by one of the museum’s curators Sabine Hoffman in her inquiry “From Leipzig to Guanajuato: Stages of Life”. In these texts, Leipzig is called “her native city” and the city Guanajuato “her true home”. One can notice a slight change of tone from previous scholarship on Olga Costa, which took into account her Jewish identity. As Magdaleno writes, “Also for political and economic reasons – and perhaps also ethnic reasons, for they were Jewish – the Kostakovski family decided to move to Mexico when Olga was 12 years old”.<sup>26</sup>

It is unsurprising that as a local museum in the 2020s, the MdbK attempts to create a positive and preferably non-problematic picture for its local audiences. Undeniably, it must be a tremendously difficult task, while narrating the migration of a Jewish family at the beginning of the 20th century. The Kostakovskys were running from pogroms in Odessa and unfortunately chose to come to Germany. This Jewish part of the narrative was almost completely invisible in the exhibition and the catalogue. The only case where any open resentment and the absence of any *Heimatliebe* for Germany in Olga Costa’s perception appears in some direct quotes from the interviews in which she remembered her German childhood.<sup>27</sup>

It was clearly complicated for a museum that is building on positive (or even just neutral) local German identities to frame the travels of Olga Costa and her family, all while addressing German history. On top of that was the fact that it was not exactly a coincidence she was not called a *German* artist – even though Olga Costa had made such a great addition to the artistic community from the city of Leipzig (Fig. 3). In the end, the exhibition, launched by a modern German museum about a Jewish woman artist, told a surprisingly unproblematic story, with a convenient “feminist” element, stressing that Leipzig was, in fact, this female artist’s “native town”.

The exhibition centred around Olga Costa’s work *La vendedora de frutas* [The Fruit Seller] (1951) (Fig. 4). This large oil-on-canvas painting was presented as a centrepiece and appeared as a poster for the exhibition. And the wide range of other works, which took up smaller space, were arranged by topic. Right at the entrance, near to the curatorial text, was a timeline of Costa’s life. The public was offered a detailed chronicle of events that started by emphasising her birth in Leipzig. The structure of the exhibition narrative guided the visitor through a historical narration of Costa’s career. Interestingly, the

---

25 Ibid., p. 10.

26 C. Magdaleno, “Olga Costa: a Brief Look at a Serene Life”, *Voices of Mexico*, 2001, 56, p. 37.

27 Weppelmann, Hoffmann, op. cit., p. 163: “I left nothing [in Germany]... that is nothing that is worth missing... I was happy to leave that place...”.



**Fig. 3.** Opening of the exhibition *Olga Costa. Dialogues with the Mexican Modernism* at the MdbK (2022), photo: Alexander Schmidt/Punctum.

show did not limit itself to only her work. As a matter of fact, the exhibition also highlighted other Latin American artists in order to strengthen Costa's *Mexican* identity and firmly ground her in the context of Mexican art.

The exhibition narrative was broken into several parts, which were represented by smaller halls. There, the emphasis was placed on Costa's gradually becoming Mexican. To stress this process, one of the parallel narratives is the story of the importance of her husband, who was a Mexican artist himself, and exhibiting his (distinctively different) works alongside her art. At the same time, her *feminine* belonging was pointed out and other female artists from Latin America were shown in the frame of this exhibition. By the end of the tour, the viewer had no clue that Olga Costa came from a Jewish background, due to the overwhelmingly Mexican visual content. Simultaneously, however, her nativeness to Leipzig was stressed in the curatorial texts. In the narrative, she was a Mexican female artist who was born in Leipzig. Uncomfortable details were glossed over.

It is worth asking why. Jewish German writer and curator Max Czollek<sup>28</sup> explores the German culture of integration and memory in an incredibly deep and personal way. His analysis clearly shows how "normalised understandings

28 M. Czollek, J. Cho-Polizzi, "Overcoming the Present", *TRANSIT*, 2021, 0(0), pp. 80–86.





**Fig. 4.** Social Media Dance at the exhibition *Olga Costa. Dialogues with the Mexican Modernism* at the MdbK (2022), photo: MdbK.

of belonging and the return of right-wing thought are intertwined”. German society, according to Czollek, did not magically rid itself of the nationalistic, xenophobic, or anti-Semitic tendencies after the end of the Second World War.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, he stresses, German people desire nothing more than an assertion of a positive national identity and the reassessment of the opportunity to fly the national flag at the World Cup, for instance.

Although not an immigrant himself, Czollek is often addressed as a foreigner. In his analysis, most likely this misconception stems from the fact that 90% of Jewish people in Germany today are, in fact, immigrants (90% are

<sup>29</sup> The most recent anti-Semitic shooting in the Synagogue was in the city Halle (nearly Leipzig) as recently as on 9 October 2019.

former Soviet Jews who came to Germany in the 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union)<sup>30</sup> and are perceived exclusively as immigrants even if they are “the good ones”. In his analysis, Czollek stresses how badly German society desires to be hegemonic and discount foreigners as a separate non-Germanified and non-integrated body of people. He insists that there could never be any German society or Germany itself, for this matter, without Jewish people, among many others. Czollek is therefore highly critical of current German policies of “integration” to which he devoted his recent book *Desintegriert Euch* (Deintegrate Yourselves).<sup>31</sup>

In this particular framework, it becomes visible that the MdbK’s goal is to narrate Olga Costa as a woman artist who was born in Leipzig and worked in Mexico. Other markers of her identity and history are downplayed or ignored altogether. Positively stressing the connections of Olga Costa to Leipzig, the curatorial texts are clearly designed to cater to German audiences, so they can feel good about the fact that this city is birthplace to yet another artist. On top of that, Leipzig is the birthplace to a woman artist who was able to effortlessly succeed in Mexico. Most of the exhibition is devoted to the foreign Mexican context, a topic that is far easier to play positively. Olga Costa, in this case, presents a perfect opportunity to tell the story of identity transformation, because Costa’s art and career are often mentioned alongside *Mexicanidad*<sup>32</sup> – a national movement that occurred in post-revolutionary Mexico. As such, the curators even engaged in something highly unusual for the museum: a semi-positive reading of the communist project in Mexico, likely sterilised by the fact that it took place so far away.

In the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition, one can trace the attempt to quickly frame Olga Costa as a *feminist* artist, even though she did not position herself in such a way. Following the trend to insert every woman artist, if necessary, into feminist readings, the MdbK was happy to frame Costa’s work this way. Nevertheless, even while attempting to offer this “critical” perspective, the exhibition and catalogue constantly mentioned the important *men* that she studied from or had a relationship with. Clearly, they were happy to contextualise Costa and her work in some ways, while decontextualizing her life and art in other ways.

In an article by Dina Comisarenco Mirkin about Costa’s work,<sup>33</sup> she argues that Costa is often presented as an ambassador for feminism (or more precisely *white liberal feminism*) in Mexico. Her legacy is discussed in contrast to European/

30 Czollek, Cho–Polizzi, op. cit., p. 80.

31 M. Czollek, *Desintegriert euch!*, Veltman Distributie Import Books, 2018.

32 P.E. Martin, *Olga Costa’s Feminine Mexicanidad*, MA dissertation, Texas Christian University, 2021.

33 D. Comisarenco Mirkin, “Against the Canon—a New Interpretation of Olga Costa’s works”, in: *Olga Costa: Dialogues with Mexican Modernism*, eds. S. Weppelmann, S. Hoffmann, Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig and Hirmer Verlag, 2022, p. 78.

Western art and also separated from the Jewish or Mexican traditions. In her text, Comisarenco Mirkin discusses some of Costa's works, such as *Nude Man* (1937), depicting José Chaves Morado. This is a tempera-on-paper painting that presents Costa's sleeping husband leaning towards some blossoming bushes. He is covering his genitalia with an ornamental cloth. Furthermore, he is surrounded by flowers with a wild cat in the background looking at the spectator. Comisarenco Mirkin writes that "in this case, it is the male model who is depicted in a reclining position, thus exchanging the traditional roles of the male artists who creates and the female model who poses, subverting the iconographic tradition of some of the greatest masters of Western painting".<sup>34</sup> The painting is thus presented as a significant subversion of the existent visual codes—namely, for a woman artist to paint a man as a reclining nude model.

Although Comisarenco Mirkin does not address the racial undertones that are also present in the work, they also play an important role.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, there are tendencies from the same Western colonial context that celebrate the depiction of non-white bodies as savages, sexual, naked, close to nature, and wild. This iconography is quite present in the works of Western artists and the German expressionists from *Die Brücke*, with whom Costa's work is compared in this text. A member of *Die Brücke*, painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), even went as far as asking his black models to have sex in front of him in order to capture their movements for a carving. Needless to say, the same request was never addressed to the white models. As Christian Weikop puts it, he "repetitively produced images of hyper-sexualized black bodies, therefore visually reinforcing the core belief of Western colonialism".<sup>36</sup> Here we can notice the tendency to code every woman artist as positively applicable to modern audiences' feminist figure: rendering discussions of race or class absolute. In the case of this text, it relies on a white American perception of feminism and art done by Linda Nochlin in the 1970s, a perception that was itself criticised in order to highlight the intersectional nature of every positionality.

Analysing Costa's legacy further and applying a positive feminist spin to it, Comisarenco Mirkin tends to look at Costa's depiction of naked feminine body as a feminist gesture, emphasising the presence of corpulent, curvy models in the iconography of the artist. Here Costa's female nudes are compared to some Western European (with the exclusion of Peter Paul Rubens) canon and accompanied with quotes from Nochlin. Thus, it is presented as

---

34 Ibid., p. 80.

35 Here I am just pointing out the gaps in this kind of non-problematic framing of any woman artist and one can see that the author is deeply informed about the racial contexts in North America and Latin America through her other texts such as: D. Comisarenco Mirkin, "Negro Woman and the Postmemory of Slavery in Elizabeth Catlett", *La Venetana. Revista de Estudios de Género*, 2021, 6, no. 54, pp. 110–142.

36 See: C. Weikop, "Avatars and Atavism: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's Encounters with Africa", in: *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Imaginary Travels.*, ed. K. Beisiegel, Munich–London–New York, 2018, pp. 100–135.



an attempt to change the attitude – it is unclear where exactly except the West – towards full-bodied women. Sadly, this claim of a subversive resistance to some pre-existing norms is done without any inspection of Mexican, Jewish, or any non-Western canons, where full-bodied women were often presented as ideal embodiments of femininity and prosperity.

Furthermore, the erasure of Costa's Jewish identity makes her a Western European artist. She apparently challenges the vague canon that exists somewhere in the West, but at the same time aligns with the writings of Northern America-based feminist scholars like Linda Nochlin. For instance, if one takes a brief look in the other direction, for example at the works of Eleanor Antin such as *Carving: a Traditional Sculpture* (1972) and Lisa Bloom's and Carol Zemel's discussions of it the different idea of a canon for a Jewish woman emerges. "Short-legged, white-hipped, and full-breasted Antin", Bloom suggests, "represents a Jewish body in these images, if not essentialized, then at least somewhat genetically formed".<sup>37</sup>

In the same way, Costa's painting *The Bride* (1941) is discussed as a work that criticises traditional marriage and advocates for the older age of a bride, even though there is no indication either of the age of the model (again she is more corporeal than her Western counterparts) or of Costa's critical attitudes towards marriage in the 1940s in Mexico: "it questions the social convention of marriage, which in many cases does not correspond to the supposed ideal of happiness and personal fulfillment, but in real life brings inequality and sorrow".<sup>38</sup> Costa's work somehow again perfectly corresponds to American Second-Wave Feminism. While the painting itself is quite open to the interpretation and speculation on the bride's age, the role of flowers, the bride's dress, and Costa's own views on marriage, it is also important to have in mind that feminism does not have a united position on marriage and family.

Observing the feminist debate on kinship today, one can argue that there are, after all, "white" and "non-white" feminist movements, or "left" and "liberal" feminist movements. And these themselves contain all sorts of multiplicities. A vivid difference in the approaches to such institutions as marriage could be seen in some strands of "white feminism", which tend to emphasise the role of the individualistic, working, "liberated", and rich woman. In contrast to these ideas, some non-white thinkers, such as bell hooks, have put an emphasis on kith and kin.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, in some recent feminist writings, the whole structure of family is presented as subject to immediate abolition, but not from a liberal perspective (emphasising happiness and self-fulfilment), but instead from a socialist viewpoint (highlighting the need to abolish the capital-

37 C. Zemel, *Looking Jewish: Visual Culture & Modern Diaspora*, Bloomington–Indianapolis, 2015, p. 123.

38 Comisarenco Mirkin, "Against the canon...", p. 84.

39 See: R. Zakaria, "Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption", *Media & Jornalismo*, 2021, 23, no. 43, and b. hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, Perennial, 2002.

ist system). The catalogue certainly does not try to bring Costa's work in with these tendencies. There is no mention of how Costa's art relates to Soviet experiments from the 1920s.<sup>40</sup>

This instrumental approach to feminist criticism that was produced in the Northern American context between the 1970s and the 1990s leads to a presentation of any given woman artist as a feminist artist, mostly in order to create a narrative of courage and exceptional excellence. This narrative renders a historically subversive movement, a site of resistance, into a comfortable addition to any given topic. At the same time, it also avoids a proper intersectional approach, largely neglecting some structural elements such as race or class, accompanied by the strategic silencing of certain uncomfortable parts of artists' lives and aligning women artists with significant male figures of their time. It makes almost no emancipatory impact on the audience's perception of women artists and feminist criticisms. In the Olga Costa exhibition, the story of "The Jewish girl, who became a great Mexican artist"<sup>41</sup> turned into "Olga Costa comes home to Leipzig".<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

It is important to distinguish between the symbolic presence of a project that addresses the feminist agenda and the deep reconstructive work in the museum's collections, funding structures, provenance research, politics of purchasing art, and leadership. In order to start a meaningful discussion on feminist approaches to art, museums need to undergo some serious structural changes. Otherwise, as in the case of the MdbK, it will remain merely a symbolic gesture. While symbolic gestures have their place, they need to do more than address surface inequalities while leaving intact patriarchal, imperial or racist narratives. In the recent years, the term "woke-washing" has been used to describe disingenuous activism undertaken by big brands,<sup>43</sup> and it is also used in relation to museums.<sup>44</sup>

---

40 S. Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, London–Brooklyn, NY, 2022.

41 P. Schwartz, "Olga Costa, the Jewish Girl who Became a Great Mexican Artist", *Forward*, 20.03.2023, <https://forward.com/yiddish/540456/olga-costa-the-jewish-girl-who-became-a-great-mexican-artist/> [accessed 01July 2023].

42 "Olga Costa Comes Home to Leipzig", *The Leipzig Goal*, 14.04.2023, <https://leipziglo.com/2023/04/14/olga-costa/> [accessed 01July 2023].

43 F. Sobande, "Woke-washing: 'Intersectional' Femvertising and Branding 'Woke' bravery", *European Journal of Marketing*, 2019, 54, no. 11, pp. 2723–2745.

44 R. Tombs, "Our Cultural Institutions are Wokewashing the Past. Spiked", *CAMD*, 3.12.2020, <https://camd.org.au/our-cultural-institutions-are-wokewashing/> [accessed 01July 2023].

Stepping beyond totally neglecting critical feminist theories to today, where the curatorial team is trying to “redress” the museum with a somewhat feminist agenda, is an important move. Nevertheless, the danger for such big institutions as museums, which are part of structures that are much bigger than any singular human agency, is to end up doing only the surface symbolic attempt to implement this criticism. This can actually stifle meaningful change. The MdbK’s Instagram is quite progressive and attempts to attract young and critical audiences. However, at the same time, museum’s curatorial texts on the walls are a continuation of a rigid narrative, centring male geniuses and their masterpieces.

Inauthentic museum activism creates a tension between a “strong activist message” and the absence of “values-driven prosocial corporate practices to support such a bold message”.<sup>45</sup> The absence of deep connections and engagements with activist discourses and communities generates misunderstandings that can result in broader conflicts surrounding museums.<sup>46</sup> In order to achieve authenticity in its practice, the MdbK and museums like it need to implement serious structural changes and fully engage with their values stated on paper.

## References

- Clover, D.E., Williamson, S., “The Feminist Museum Hack as an Aesthetic Practice of Possibility”, *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults*, 2019, 10, no. 2, pp. 143–159.
- Comisarenco Mirkin, D., “Negro Woman and the Postmemory of Slavery in Elizabeth Catlett”, *La Ventana. Revista de Estudios de Género*, 2021, 6, no. 54, pp. 110–142.
- Comisarenco Mirkin, D., “Against the Canon—a New Interpretation of Olga Costa’s works”, in: *Olga Costa: Dialogues with Mexican Modernism*, eds. S. Weppelmann, S. Hoffmann, Hirmer, 2022.
- Czollek, M., *Desintegriert euch!*, Veltman Distributie Import Books, 2018.
- Czollek, M., Cho–Polizzi, J., “Overcoming the Present”, *TRANSIT*, 2021, 0(0), pp. 80–86.
- Eisman, A., “Curating Out the Socialist Alternative” in: *Curating (Post-)Socialist Environments*, eds. P. Schorch, D. Habit, Bielefeld, 2021.
- Gleisberg, D., *150 Jahre Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig, 1837–1987: 150 Jahre Sammeln zeitgenössischer Kunst; Ausstellung zum Jubiläum d. Museums d. bildenden Künste Leipzig*, Leipzig, 1987.

45 J. Vredenburg, S. Kapitan, A. Spry, J.A. Kemper, “Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?”, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 2020, 39, no. 4, p. 451.

46 For instance: U. Seidler, “Rassismus: Ein Eklat in Leipzig zeigt, wie schwer es ist, über Fremdenhass zu sprechen”, *Berliner Zeitung*, 07.06.2023, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/debatte/ein-eklat-in-leipzig-im-museum-fuer-bildende-kunst-zeigt-wie-schwer-es-ist-ueber-rassismus-zu-sprechen-li.356647> [accessed 1 July 2023].

- Hein, H.S., "Redressing the Museum in Feminist Theory", *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 2007, 22, no. 1, pp. 29–42.
- hooks, b., *Communion: The female Search for Love*, Perennial, 2002.
- Johnson, C., *Femininity, Time and Feminist Art*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Lewis, S., *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*, London–Brooklyn, NY, 2022.
- Magdaleno, C., "Olga Costa: a Brief Look at a Serene Life", *Voices of Mexico*, 2001, 56, pp. 36–43.
- Martin, P.E., *Olga Costa's Feminine Mexicanidad*, MA dissertation, Texas Christian University, 2021.
- Nead, L., *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London–New York, 2002.
- "Olga Costa Comes Home to Leipzig", *The Leipzig Goal*, 14.04.2023, <https://leipglo.com/2023/04/14/olga-costa/>.
- Rehberg, K-S., *60, 40, 20-Kunst in Leipzig seit 1949: Museum der Bildenden Künste Leipzig*, Leipzig, 2009.
- Schwartz, P., "Olga Costa, the Jewish Girl who Became a Great Mexican Artist", *Forward*, 20.03.2023.
- Seidler, U., "Rassismus: Ein Eklat in Leipzig zeigt, wie schwer es ist, über Fremdenhass zu sprechen", *Berliner Zeitung*, 07.06.2023, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/debatte/ein-eklat-in-leipzig-im-museum-fuer-bildende-kunst-zeigt-wie-schwer-es-ist-ueber-rassismus-zu-sprechen-li.356647>.
- Sobande, F., "Woke-washing: 'Intersectional' Femvertising and Branding 'Woke' bravery", *European Journal of Marketing*, 2019, 54, no. 11, pp. 2723–2745.
- Tombs, R., "Our Cultural Institutions are Wokewashing the Past. Spiked", *CAMD*, 3.12.2020, <https://camd.org.au/our-cultural-institutions-are-wokewashing/>.
- Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., Kemper, J.A., "Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?", *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 2020, 39, no. 4, pp. 444–460.
- Weikop, C., "Avatars and Atavism: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's Encounters with Africa", in: *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Imaginary Travels*, ed. K. Beisiegel, Munich–London–New York, 2018, pp. 100–135.
- Weppelmann, S., Hoffmann, S., eds., *Olga Costa: Dialogues with Mexican Modernism*, Hirmer, 2022.
- Wolff–Arndt, P., "Leipziger Frauenporträts", *Stadt Leipzig*, (nd), <https://www.leipzig.de/jugend-familie-und-soziales/frauen/1000-jahre-leipzig-100-frauenportraits/detailseite-frauenportraits/projekt/wolff-arndt-philippine>.
- Zakaria, R., "Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption", *Media & Jornalismo*, 2021, 23, no. 43.
- Zemel, C., *Looking Jewish: Visual Culture & Modern Diaspora*, Bloomington–Indianapolis, 2015.

*Georgina G. Gluzman*

CONSEJO NACIONAL DE INVESTIGACIONES CIENTÍFICAS Y TÉCNICAS, ARGENTINA

ORCID 000-0001-7541-1291

## Latin American Women Artists: Subsidiary Human Beings? *The Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995 case*

### Abstract

In 1995, the exhibition *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* opened at the Milwaukee Art Museum. This exhibition marked the first-ever survey of Latin American women artists organised in the United States. Curated by Geraldine Pollack Biller, the show included works by thirty-five women artists active in eleven Latin American countries. This article aims to analyse the categories (“women artists”, “Latin American art”, and “Latin American women artists”) adopted by the exhibition and to examine some of the artists whose works were exhibited. What artists were selected? What were the implications of the selection? Did it reinforce certain stereotypes associated with Latin America and its art? Informed by feminist and Latin American art theories, deconstructing Euro-American notions of Latin American art, I argue that the emphasis on women artists did not significantly change the perception of Latin American art as “fantastic”. The thesis presented by anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner in 1974, which suggests that women have been traditionally linked with nature while men are associated with culture, can be illuminating when applied to comprehending the Latin American exotic cliché presented by the exhibition. Women were seen as doubly subsidiary human beings (in *Rivolta Femminile’s* words): non-Western and members of the second sex.

**Keywords:** women artists, Latin American art, exhibition history

### Introduction

In 1995 the touring exhibition *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* opened at the Milwaukee Art Museum, a large institution whose history goes back

to the last years of the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> Curated by Geraldine Pollack Biller (1933–2021), it was the first survey exhibition of art produced by women artists of Latin America fully conceived and presented in the United States of America. The show was organised chronologically in three parts. The first section included works from 1915 until the early 1940s. The second section, from about 1945 to 1975, included mostly abstract art. The final section focused on the last twenty years of art created by women in Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

Though it was largely based upon an evolutionist scheme, that is a clear succession of aesthetic choices understood as movements,<sup>3</sup> and presented clichés surrounding women’s artistic trajectories, the show was very influential, for it was the very first exhibition that presented a panorama of women artists in Latin America as a whole, spanning almost a century of women in the Latin American arts. As Cecilia Fajardo–Hill, co-curator of the hugely influential *Radical Women* opened in 2017, pointed out: “[Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995] was the first and, until *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, the only large-scale exhibition in the United States devoted to the topic”.<sup>4</sup> Hence, it is important to critically look back at this exhibition and to analyse, almost thirty years after its opening, the almost stubborn legacy of this show, partially funded by a grant of the American National Endowment for the Arts.<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, the catalogue (like many other texts about Latin America written in the Global North and then exported to the South) found its way to Latin American countries, facilitated by its bilingual publication (in English and Spanish).

Very often these panoramic readings of Latin American art and those of art made in other peripheral and non-canonical areas are produced in the Global North and are then read avidly in the regions where the artworks were created in the first place. Obvious economic reasons account for this situation. The financing of international research projects, demanding archival and oral history work in many different countries, is simply too high to be funded from Latin America. Therefore, those of us in the Global South are often left

1 This was its first venue, after which the exhibition travelled to Denver, Phoenix, and Washington D.C., all venues in the United States of America.

2 C. Lowe, “Women artists show dazzles”, *Tucson Citizen*, 20 July 1995, <http://tucsoncitizen.com/morgue2/1995/07/20/193010-women-artists-show-dazzles/> [accessed 27 June 2023].

3 The curator referred to women’s contribution to the “evolution of most of the major trends that arose during that time period”. G.P. Biller, “Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995”, in: *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995*, ed. G.P. Biller, Milwaukee, 1995, p. 23.

4 C. Fajardo–Hill, “The Invisibility of Latin American Women Artists: Problematizing Art Historical and Curatorial Practices”, in: *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, Los Angeles—Munich, 2017, p. 22.

5 “Museum”, *National Endowment for the Arts 1994. Listing of Grants and Financial Report*, p. 58.

to make sense of our own history through texts produced elsewhere, which generally make little reference to local intellectual traditions. A decolonial approach to shows like *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* must highlight local contributions to our understanding of artistic phenomena, that is the extant bibliography upon which these hegemonic narratives are built, as well as challenge the wide circulation of certain texts, questioning their uncritical acceptance. In particular, the catalogue of *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* was presented, from the very moment of its publication, as “an important milestone for Latin American women artists”.<sup>6</sup>

The show included about one hundred and fifty works by thirty-five women artists active in eleven Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, and Venezuela) during the years encompassed.<sup>7</sup> The selected artists were involved with diverse media, attempting to make the selection representative of the region. However, by focusing mainly on traditional media (painting, sculpture, and printing), the show adhered to an art-historical hierarchy and thus reinforced up to a certain point traditional views in art history. Moreover, the attempt to insert women artists into a male-defined narrative also strengthened a conservative view of art history, for women were simply added and any possible contributions were obscured by predefined male masters in each area.

The aim of this article is twofold: firstly, to explore the analytical categories that were developed within this exhibition (“women artists”, “Latin American art”, “Latin American women artists”); secondly, to examine carefully how two women artists from the first section of the show were presented. To this end, I shall analyse in depth the exhibition through its catalogue, the accompanying video produced for the show as didactic material, and a selection of the exhibition’s reviews<sup>8</sup> – that is, a representative selection of the traces left by any exhibition. Other dimensions of the show, such as the wall texts at some of the venues of the exhibition, seemed to have been lost, at least to my knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

---

6 C. Puerto, *Latin American Women Artists, Kahlo and Look who Else: a Selective, Annotated Bibliography*, Westport, 1996, p. xii.

7 The artists were Raquel Forner, Sarah Grilo, Alicia Penalba, Liliana Porter (Argentina), Marina Nuñez del Prado, María Luisa Pacheco (Bolivia), Tarsila do Amaral, Leda Catunda, Lygia Clark, Jac Leirner, Anita Malfatti, Tomie Ohtake, Mira Schendel (Brazil), Catalina Parra, Soledad Salamé (Chile), Olga de Amaral, Beatriz González, Ana Mercedes Hoyos, Fanny Sanín, (Colombia), María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Ana Mendieta, Amelia Peláez (Cuba), Leonora Carrington, Elena Climent, Olga Costa, María Izquierdo, Frida Kahlo, Rocío Maldonado, Cordelia Urueta, Remedios Varo (Mexico), Tilsa Tsuchiya (Peru), Mari Mater O’Neill (Puerto Rico), Rosa Acle (Uruguay), Elba Damast, and Gego, (Venezuela).

8 I would like to thank Anthony Morgano, the librarian and archivist at the Milwaukee Art Museum, for his help.

9 H. Hinisch wrote, in her review of the show, about the wall texts at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Heidi Hinisch, “Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995 essays by Geraldine P. Biller, Bélgica Rodríguez and Marina Pérez de Mendiola. Milwaukee Art Museum, 1995”, *Woman’s Art Journal*, 1997, 18, no. 1, p. 56.

However, the two most important traces (the catalogue and the documentary) are still extant.<sup>10</sup>

This essay is informed by feminist re-readings of art history as well as by Latin American art theories, which have helped to deconstruct the Euro-American notions often applied to Latin American art. Therefore, I argue that the focus on women artists did not alter radically the label “fantastic”, often applied to Latin American art in the 1980s and 1990s in the American context, but rather reinforced it, particularly within the first section of the show, which I shall examine from the examples of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo (1907–1954) and the Brazilian painter Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973), a key modern artist often praised for her radical artistic vision. Finally, this text is also framed by the field of exhibition studies, an increasingly important area within art history that draws attention to the key role played by shows in crafting art historical narratives.

In 1974, the anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner presented a key development for the study of women and their relation to culture. She affirmed that “women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture”.<sup>11</sup> This idea may be usefully applied to better understand the reinforcement of the Latin American exotic cliché in the show *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995*. In this context, women were seen as basically subsidiary human beings, to borrow the words of the *Rivolta Femminile*.<sup>12</sup> Women artists from Latin America were a symbolical other in two different ways, for they were non-Western and were also members of the so-called second sex. In her 2015 article on the category of “Latin American women artists”, Mónica Eraso Jurado expressed it very clearly: “In the representation of Latin American artists in contemporary feminist exhibitions such as *Global Feminisms*, there is a certain scent of essentialism surrounding both the concept of woman and the imaginaries about Latin American identity. Due to these concerns, it became necessary to inquire about the political contexts in which the notion of the Latin American woman artist had originated”.<sup>13</sup>

10 As Ana Maria Albani de Carvalho points out “This temporary event [the art show], intended to be experienced in phenomenological terms, will, in turn, be published in a catalogue or exhibition book. The catalogue performs various functions, including dissemination –of the event itself, as well as of the institution or the sponsor, whether public or private– and also registration and documentation, providing a view of history and criticism of art”. A.M. Albani de Carvalho, “A Exposição como Dispositivo na Arte Contemporânea: Conexões entre o Técnico e o Simbólico”, *Revista Museologia e Interdisciplinaridade*, 2012, 1, no. 2, p. 53. All translations are my own.

11 S.B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”, in: *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968–2014*, ed. H. Robinson, Chichester, 2015 [1974], p. 21.

12 R. Femminile, “Ausencia de la mujer en los momentos exaltadores de las manifestaciones creadoras masculinas”, in: *Escupamos sobre Hegel y otros escritos sobre liberación femenina*, ed. C. Lonzi, Buenos Aires, 1978 [1971], pp. 129–133

13 M. Eraso Jurado, “¿Qué es una mujer artista latinoamericana? ‘Figuras algo soñadoras, fantásticas, y eróticas’”, (*Pensamiento*), (*Palabra*) y *Obra*, 2015, 14, p. 25.



## What is Latin American art, anyway?

In his survey of 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin American art, the well-known American art historian Edward Sullivan wrote about *Latin American Women Artists* and its influence on the American art scene. Sullivan highlighted the relevance of the show and its impact on the American public, who had a privileged opportunity to discover the work of relevant Latin American women artists:

“... in 1994 an ambitious exhibition was inaugurated at the Milwaukee Art Museum: *Latin American Women Artists (Mujeres artistas latinoamericanas 1915–1995)*. Both the exhibition, whose curator was Geraldine Biller, and the catalogue, written by several specialists (including myself) from the United States and Latin America, made known to the American public important images and a large number of female artists from all Latin America”.<sup>14</sup>

This exhibition was part of a larger process, described in detail by Mari Carmen Ramírez as the “boom” of exhibitions on Latin American art presented in the United States. Shifra M. Goldman had already identified this phenomenon in 1989, when she compared the “literary boom” that had brought Latin American writers to the U.S. audiences with the new interest the “Latin American art boom” of that decade. Goldman emphasised the timely events: “Booms in the art arena can be identified by numerous blockbuster museum shows, lots of mainstream critical attention, a proliferation of gallery exhibits, and sustained activity on the auction market. All of these “symptoms” have occurred since the early 1980s, and the stage is set for the 1990s—at least through the 1992 Quincentennial of Columbus’s voyages to the New World”.<sup>15</sup>

In this same vein, Ramírez highlighted in 1992 “the unprecedented number of shows of Latin American/Latino art organized and funded by US institutions (museums, galleries, alternative spaces) over the past decade or so”.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Ramírez carefully analysed how art exhibitions are “privileged vehicles for representation of individual and collective identities”.<sup>17</sup> But, despite the good intentions of many curators, the Latin American art exhibitions, such as the well-known *Art of the Fantastic* often reinforced cultural stereotypes, as Ramírez has argued. Edward J. Sullivan, who had been one of the *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* advisors, stated in his review of the show: “There

---

14 E. Sullivan, *Arte latinoamericano del siglo XX*, Madrid, 1996, p. 12.

15 S.M. Goldman, “The (Booming) Spirit of Latin America”, in: S.M. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas. Art and Social Change in Latin America and The United States*, Chicago—London, 1994, p. 358.

16 M.C. Ramírez, “‘Beyond ‘The Fantastic’: Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art”, in: *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. G. Mosquera, Cambridge, 1996, p. 229.

17 Idem.

is no denying, of course, that fantasy and a ‘larger-than-life’ quality can be found in Latin American art throughout the ages”.<sup>18</sup>

Ramírez also mentioned the existence of an “unequal axis of exchange” between Latin America and the United States, demonstrated by the fact that curators who were not experts in Latin American art organised many Latin American art exhibitions.<sup>19</sup> The case of Geraldine Pollack Biller is strikingly clear in this sense, for she was hardly an expert in Latin American art and culture. Biller, who had received a B.A. in interior design and fine arts in the 1950s, lived in Ecuador, Argentina and Chile, thanks to her husband’s job in the 1960s. The curator was certainly not an expert in the field of Latin American art and had not been engaged in similar projects before. After returning to Milwaukee in the 1980s, Biller, who was working at the Milwaukee Art Museum as a curatorial assistant, defended her M.A. dissertation at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee on a topic unrelated to Latin America: *New York Pop and Chicago Imagism of the 1960s: the Question of Affinities and Influences*.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, in his preface to the catalogue, Russell Bowman, then Director of the Milwaukee Art Museum, stated that Biller “was ideally experienced to direct this project”, particularly thanks to “her years of residence in Latin America during her husband’s career in the diplomatic service, her fluency in Spanish and her art history background”.<sup>21</sup>

Another relevant issue raised by Ramírez was the enduring presence of surrealism in shaping Euro-American conceptions on Latin American art.<sup>22</sup> This was evident in the space that was granted to Frida Kahlo in the exhibition, the comments in the catalogue explicitly linking her to surrealism,<sup>23</sup> and in the reception of the show. To begin with, the cover of the catalogue featured a still life by the already celebrated Mexican artist, famously praised by André Breton as a *natural* surrealist. The context of the so-called *fridamania* provided a useful platform to promote the show, even if it meant conceding to stereotypes. As Patricia Mayayo explained: “immortalized in posters, calendars and t-shirts, the Mexican artist has become a true cult figure”.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Kahlo seemed to be the ideal Latin American woman artist: mestiza, victimised by her womanising husband, and perpetually suffering.

The critical reception of the show focused on the fascinating personality and work of Kahlo, even if other eight women artists from Mexico. Some of them had clear links to Kahlo, such as María Izquierdo. But Kahlo indeed stole the show. Heidi Hinich, in her review of the show for the *Woman’s Art*

18 E.J. Sullivan, “Review: Art of the Fantastic”, *Art Journal*, 1988, 47, no. 4, pp. 376–379.

19 Idem.

20 G.P. Biller, *New York Pop and Chicago Imagism of the 1960s: the Question of Affinities and Influences*, MA dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 1991.

21 Bowman, “Preface”, in: *Latin American...*, p. 3

22 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘The Fantastic’...”, p. 232.

23 “Frida Kahlo”, in: *Latin American...*, p. 107.

24 P. Mayayo, *Frida Kahlo. Contra el mito*, Madrid, 2008, p. 12.

*Journal*, wrote: “Best known for her arresting self-portraits and fantastic imagery, Kahlo still manages to shock us with works like *Suicide of Dorothy Hale* (1939), which graphically portrays her friend’s death”.<sup>25</sup>

Paul Richard, in his review of the show for *The Washington Post*, also began his review with Kahlo: “Of the 96 objects in ‘Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995’, at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, one is unforgettable. It’s a painting of a suicide, by jumping, in Manhattan”.<sup>26</sup> So, what is the reader left to think about the remaining “objects”? Predictably the rest of the article focused almost exclusively on Kahlo and ended like this: “‘Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995,’ [...] also includes a wall of magical imaginings by Remedios Varo of Mexico. But it is Frida Kahlo’s art that flays the viewer’s memory and dominates the show [...]”. Instead of taking Kahlo’s career as an example of women artists’ perpetual presence in the art world, for women have always created art, the exhibition showcased Kahlo as an exceptional woman.

## What are Latin American women artists, anyway?

When *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* opened, there had been some all-female exhibitions in the United States completely dedicated to Latin American women artists, focused on specific groups of artists rather than attempting to offer a survey of women’s interventions in the visual arts.<sup>27</sup> Shows like *Latin American Art: A Woman’s View* (1981), organised at the Miami-Dade Community College, contrasts sharply with the ambitious scope of Biller’s project and with her self-awareness, which I shall explore at the very end of this text.

The catalogue for this 1981 show spoke of Latin American society as “male-oriented”,<sup>28</sup> a cliché that intersects with racism and the alleged superiority of American society. Jacqueline Barnitz had already expressed this racist trope in 1975, in an article where she analysed the work of some Latin American women artists. The issue of the “less freedom” Latin American women had, “especially in Hispanic countries with their Islamic heritage” according to the noted art historian, stood in sharp contrast with the “Anglo-Saxon

---

25 Hinish, op. cit., p. 54.

26 P. Richards, “Stilled Life with Flowers”, *The Washington Post*, 2 March 1996, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1996/03/02/stilled-life-with-flowers/97b441b0-f737-4917-be16-0bbd29b29f0c/?utm\\_term=.9c4fca5f6cfb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1996/03/02/stilled-life-with-flowers/97b441b0-f737-4917-be16-0bbd29b29f0c/?utm_term=.9c4fca5f6cfb) [accessed 21 May 2022].

27 Other shows, such as *Women of the Americas: Emerging Perspectives* organised in 1982 by the Kouros Gallery and the Center for Inter-American Relations in New York, were not focused solely on Latin America, but rather chose to encompass also American artists, such as Alice Neel and Lynda Benglis, and Canadian artists. G. Glueck, “Art”, *The Guide*, *The New York Times*, 10 October 1982, p. 3.

28 R. Griffin, “Latin American Art: A Woman’s view”, in: R. Griffin, *Latin American Art: A Woman’s View*, Miami, 1981, unpagged.

world”.<sup>29</sup> However, as celebrated American painter Lee Krasner put it rather bluntly in 1971: “Any woman artist who says there is no discrimination against women in art should have her face slapped”.<sup>30</sup> Sexism is evidently present in North American culture, and it is not just a “primitive” aspect of Latin America.

*Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* was much more nuanced, researched and intelligent than *Latin American Art: A Woman’s View*. How were the stereotypes surrounding Latin American art exhibitions altered by the focus on women artists, if they were indeed transformed? Charlotte Lowe, reviewing the show for *Tucson Citizen*, wrote: “This broad scope exhibit covers all major movements ranging from figuration and abstraction to surrealism, earth art and site-specific installations. Gender, politics and contemporary life are interpreted and re-evaluated”.<sup>31</sup> Firstly, it must be noted that the curator maintained the traditional succession of male-defined movements. Secondly, the opinions of the reviewer were not clearly supported by the show itself, as I shall argue, for the critical category of gender was not consistently applied or considered. The curator herself made clear her political position when she declared: “‘I am not a feminist,’ says guest curator Geraldine P. Biller, ‘but the work of women artists in Latin America has not been given the credence it should’”.<sup>32</sup> The curator’s work was simply to set the record straight and to incorporate women into established, male-defined narratives.

Moreover, the intersection of race, class, sexual orientation, and gender was often hidden. The curator often fell into broad generalisations. For example, after making a brief mention of the immigration of the artists’ families (forced in the case of María Magdalena Campos Pons, descendant of enslaved people), Biller pointed out that the concern for the “cosmos” and “cosmic themes” was typical of Latin American artists.<sup>33</sup> Even if key texts on Latin American women artists had been already published, such as some of Shifra Goldman’s ground-breaking texts,<sup>34</sup> the exhibition took a far more traditional, almost conservative, path. Complexities, instead of being highlighted and analysed, were simply erased. *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* seemed to present a “natural” group of artists on two different grounds. Firstly, the “primal, ahistorical and instinctual essence”,<sup>35</sup> in Ramírez’s apt words, the so-called Latin American identity was presented as a single and closed category, as well as those of “women artists”.

29 J. Barnitz, “5 Women Artists”, *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, 1975, 9, no. 14, pp. 38–39.

30 C. Nemser, “Forum: Women in Art”, *Arts Magazine*, 1971, 45, no. 4, p. 18.

31 Lowe, op. cit.

32 G.P. Biller, “Milwaukee. Latin Beauties”, *Departures*, Milwaukee Art Museum, Research Center, March–April 1995, p. 28.

33 Biller, “Latin American...”, p. 23.

34 S.M. Goldman, “Six Women Artists of Mexico”, *Woman’s Art Journal*, 1983, 3, no. 2, pp. 1–9.

35 Ramírez, “Beyond ‘The Fantastic’...”, p. 235.

Secondly, the analytical category of “women artists”, developed from the 1970s onwards thanks to the parading of the feminist art history, was presented without any further explanations. There was not any attempt to properly contextualise and explain the complexities of the social roles played by Latin American women (artists). The curator did not delve into the modes of gender construction and instead pointed out at an ahistorical category of “women artists”: “[exhibiting the work of women artists together] emphasizes the unique nature of feminine expression”.<sup>36</sup> B elgica Rodr iguez, one of the catalogue’s contributors, insisted:

“The woman artist in Latin America, like those all around the world, generally differs from her male counterpart, in that her work has been associated more directly with an everyday existential experience, with the everyday where the cognitive arises as a fundamental problem. It is the definition of the object of desire, of aspirations in the light of a visible reality. It is not strange that the commitment of Tarsila (Brazilian landscape), of Marina N u ez del Prado (the Andes mountains and the condor), of Elba Damast (the house), or of Ana Mendieta (the land and the being), is (or has been) a direct confrontation with the visible world to turn it into a magical experience in which the interiority of ‘being’ and its relations with visible reality produces a creative connection of the artist’s associations with life”.<sup>37</sup>

For Rodr iguez, Latin American women artists, just like their male colleagues, exhibited a distinctive approach to art: what set them apart was their ability to connect their work to the rawness of everyday life. Women artists were closer to nature, even if those experiences were more or less cognitively mediated.

The white-cube aesthetic of the exhibition design and the complete absence of archival materials in the show were key in the curator’s project: to exhibit the works and let them speak for themselves, even if this allegedly unmediated presence of the artworks was indeed mediated by very general, even diffuse, concepts regarding women in art. The two unquestioned categories of “Latin American” and “women artists” were brought together to reinforce cultural stereotypes. Both subjects, Latin Americans and women, were perceived as closer to nature and far from the Euro-American rationality. Heidi Hinish, in her review for the *Woman’s Art Journal*, focused on the so-called “fantastic vein” present in many of the featured artists.<sup>38</sup>

The *extra* layer of meaning added by the focus on women did not alter, in Ram rez’s words, “the notion of the Latino subject as a primitive outcast or outsider inhabiting a space closer to nature and the preindustrial, premodern world than his or her European or North American colleagues”.<sup>39</sup> Women were the *other fantastic other*. As it happens, the influential show *Art of the*

---

36 Biller, “Latin American...”, p. 21.

37 B. Rodr iguez, “Artistas latinoamericanas 1915–1995”, *Art Nexus*, 1995, 17, p. 77.

38 Hinish, op. cit., p. 54.

39 Ram rez, “‘Beyond ‘The Fantastic’...”, p. 239.

*Fantastic* had only included five women artists: Tarsila do Amaral, Beatriz González, Frida Kahlo, Rocío Maldonado, and Tilsa Tsuchiya. Hence, there was plenty of room to explore the most fantastic group within the exoticized Latin American art idea.

The video documentary, made for the exhibition, reinforced the inevitable connection between Latin American art and nature, strengthened in the case of women artists. The voice-over spoke across footage of a rural area: "Each of the artists represented in the exhibition is influenced by the Latin American country of her birth or immigration. Therefore, in order to understand the artwork, it is important to comprehend the vast geographical variety south of the United States border and to realize the strength of Catholicism, of indigenous cultures, and of language". The catalogue spoke of a "continent with its endless plains, deserts, and majestic mountains" which may have influenced a *primordial* concern with nature and space.<sup>40</sup>

There is little room for the nuanced political readings advanced by theorists such as Margot Lacroix, one of the founding members of the editorial board of *Aquelarre*, a bilingual journal created in Vancouver in 1989.<sup>41</sup> In her 1990 article, Lacroix approached the topic of women artist in Latin America from a considered and respectful angle:

"First and foremost, no homogeneity of genre, practice or point of view is to be expected here. Differences in class, religion, ethnicity or language should not be allowed to be erased either; these categories are in incessant interaction and create the particular conditions affecting the cultural production of women in Latin America, within each country, and within specific economic and political situations. One historical element does however unite Latin American national realities. They share a long-standing and on-going struggle with the forces of colonialism, with its concomitants of foreign domination and dependence, and this has had deep ramifications for the cultural and artistic spheres".<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Lacroix suggested that political struggles, not links with nature, are central to understanding women's artistic ventures in Latin America. Topics like the relation with art centres, financial issues, social representations of femininity, and the double marginalisation of women artists from Latin America were critically assessed. Lacroix added: "The term 'Latin American woman artist' should therefore be seen as a historical tool, a point of departure; its usefulness does not lie in defining a particular aesthetic but in identifying, in an initial moment, sets of conditions, issues and concerns that may be helpful in addressing the works and lives of individual Latin American women

40 Biller, "Latin American...", p. 25.

41 M. Lacroix, "An Illegal Gathering of Witches", *Kinesis. News about Women that is not in the Dailies*, September 1989, p. 7.

42 M. Lacroix, "Mujer y Arte en la América Latina: Notas desde el Norte / Women and Art in Latin America: Notes from the North", *Aquelarre*, 1990, 4, p. 9.

artists at various points in time".<sup>43</sup> This subtlety is almost entirely missing from *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995*.

## A case of Tarsila: unravelling the fascination

The curator of *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* chose several women artists from the Brazilian art scene: Anita Malfatti, Tarsila do Amaral, Lygia Clark, Tomie Ohtake and Mira Schendel. The Brazilian examples from the first section could have guided the curator to question simple narratives connecting women and nature. The solid involvement of both Anita Malfatti (1889–1964) and Tarsila do Amaral with modernism and urban modernity could have destabilised the cliché connecting women and nature. Nonetheless, the clichés overlapped and strengthened the traditional equation of women and nature. The selected works reinforced a cultural stereotype. The five works representing Tarsila do Amaral were all dated between 1923 and 1929, undoubtedly the *canonical* years of the painter. They were preparatory sketches for *A negra* and *Antropofagia*, and the oils *Lagoa Santa*, *Sol poente* and *Urutu*.

Heidi Hinish, analysing the work *Urutu* in the *Woman's Art Journal* wrote: "In *Urutu*... archetypal nature unfolds before an austere landscape. [...] The artist successfully adapted modern European styles to her own cultural experiences..."<sup>44</sup> The reader is left to figure out what cultural experience the reviewer refers to. The *exotic nature* is undoubtedly a fate for Latin American artists, in general, and Latin American women artists simply cannot escape. In the review of the show *Art of the Fantastic*, Edward Sullivan himself had stated: "[...] these artists [Tarsila do Amaral and Armando Reverón] present fascinating examples of an exotic imagination".<sup>45</sup>

The inclusion of *Lagoa Santa* further expanded this idea. The painting reinforced the notion of a rural and uncontaminated Brazil. However, as Néstor García Canclini argued, in Latin American countries modernity and tradition coexist.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, as Ramírez already pointed out, works by Latin American artists that deal with the urban and cosmopolitan character of Latin American society were often simply left out of shows such as *Latin American Women Artists*.<sup>47</sup> This taste for the *rural* Tarsila was hardly a novelty. In 1945, for example, the show *Veinte artistas brasileños*, that travelled to Argentina and Uruguay, featured a similar choice.

---

43 Ibid., p. 10.

44 Hinish, op. cit., p. 54

45 See Sullivan, "Review...", p. 377.

46 N. García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, México, 1990.

47 Ramírez, "'Beyond 'The Fantastic'...", p. 239.

But this simplistic reading contradicted other dimensions of her work. Class and race, two key topics the artists dealt with, were erased. Works like *Operários*,<sup>48</sup> which featured urban workers prominently, were simply left out, as if the artist had literally stopped producing art after 1929. Recent analysis by Ana Paula Cavalcanti Simioni has shown how the artist “consistently chose to present herself an elegant, tidy woman dressed in the latest fashion from Paris (Paul Poiret), thus highlighting her cosmopolitan, white, elitist character and, finally, her beauty”.<sup>49</sup> In the more recent anthological show *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2017, some of the same clichés re-emerged, serving to prove how difficult it is to move away from established approaches and also how influential *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* was for the English-speaking art world.

In the 1995 catalogue, Biller declared that “Tarsila do Amaral’s use of Léger-inspired forms to describe the heritage of her native Brazil has been widely recognized and appreciated in Europe, and more recently in the United States”.<sup>50</sup> This statement can be used to chart the shifting reception and deeper understanding of Tarsila do Amaral in the American context in the past twenty years. In other words, what has changed and what remains of the rather simplistic statement by the show’s curator twenty-two years after *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* in the recent show devoted to Tarsila do Amaral in the Museum of Modern Art, *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil*, curated by Stephanie D’Alessandro and Luis Pérez-Oramas? The much more nuanced and careful reading of her life and works is the main difference, but the core of the analysis is largely based upon the same omissions.

However, the more recent catalogue does not incorporate a much-needed gendered analysis, particularly in connection to Tarsila do Amaral’s class and ethnicity. Instead of examining Tarsila do Amaral’s gender and social position, the authors repeat Aracy Amaral’s rather naïve statement from 1975: “As a woman, she always managed to do exactly what she wanted, even while always trying to keep up appearances”.<sup>51</sup> For instance, the curators point out that her self-portrait from 1924 offers “a fascinating example” of her “public persona”,<sup>52</sup> which would have deserved a more careful analysis in terms of gender and class. The construction of the “caipirinha” dressed by Paul Poiret,

48 Tarsila do Amaral, *Operários*, 1933, oil on canvas, 150 x 205 cm, Acervo Artístico-Cultural dos Palácios do Governo do Estado de São Paulo.

49 A.P. Cavalcanti Simioni, “Corpos expropriados: mulheres artistas e a questão do nu no modernismo”, in: *Imagen/Deseo. Placer, devoción y consumo en las artes*, eds. S. Dolinko, M. Marchesi, Buenos Aires, 2015, pp. 193–194.

50 Biller, “Latin American...”, p. 23.

51 S. D’Alessandro, L. Pérez-Oramas, eds., *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil*, New Haven, 2017, p. 19.

52 Ibid.



as Oswald de Andrade put it, needs to be reconsidered and studied to better understand Tarsila do Amaral's navigation within the artistic and social milieu in Brazil.

## By way of a conclusion

The curatorial essay, written by Geraldine Pollack Biller, emphasised the role of Latin American women artists as “documentalists”, that is to say, as allegedly objective witnesses of “historical, political and social life”.<sup>53</sup> However, this *recording function* converged with another characteristic: “The multiplicity of cultural influences (including the spirituality, myths, and rituals of the various belief systems that are part of daily life in much of Latin America) influenced their work”.<sup>54</sup> The religiousness of Latin America was never questioned and it reinforced stereotypes regarding the pristine state of Latin America. Spirituality appeared as a Latin American only experience, instead of a shared characteristic between Latin America and considerable portions of the entire world.

*Latin American Women Artists* was surely a ground-breaking show, displaying and appreciating so far ignored artworks in the American context. It is useful to recall the number of women artists of the show *Art of the Fantastic. Latin America, 1920–1987*, which were only five. However, it must be noted that it never questioned the categories upon which it was constructed. Neither a feminist nor a critical show, it sought to bring together works capable of showing “the unique nature of feminine expression and its importance in art history – in this case the history of Latin American art”,<sup>55</sup> in the words of Geraldine Pollack.

Charlotte Lowe, reviewing the show, wrote: “If a viewer comes with a stereotype of Latin American and women’s art, it may well be dispelled”.<sup>56</sup> Although the two last sections of the show helped to deconstruct the idea of Latin America as a land of colour and emotion, the first section and the way artists such as Tarsila do Amaral were presented reinforced the notion of a Third World as a colourful promise. Landscape, nature, and womanliness are part of the solidly established concept of Latin America.

The fact that the origins of Brazilian modernism in the 1920s were closely connected with two women artists was never analysed. The new social and cultural spaces open to women were simply left aside. Concepts related to gender studies or feminism approaches to art history were not used consistently throughout the catalogue. There were some mentions to the canon

---

53 Biller, “Latin American...”, p. 19.

54 Ibid., p. 23.

55 Ibid., p. 21.

56 Lowe, op. cit.

of art history as a male-defined arena,<sup>57</sup> but no further analysis was carried out. As a matter of fact, the few gendered remarks created the lasting impression of a whole area of the world, Latin America, where women, nature, and natural expression converged. Overall, *Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995* proved that an all-female show could actually reinforce patriarchal clichés, instead of helping to destabilise established narratives. The feminist discourse was erased: only the notion of an affirmative action towards women artists survived, that is to say, the idea that women artists had to be put back into art history.

Moreover, feminism (as an ideology, as a political movement, and as praxis) seemed to be something merely imported, for the show never even suggested either the vivid feminist movement that existed (and exists) in Latin America or the modernization of women's roles throughout Latin American history, for the territory was presented as a space outside of history: an exuberant *terra incognita* filled with wonders.

The deceptively simple category of “Latin American women artists” effectively erases and conceals the complexities of a region and of a particular group within this region, while it reinforces political and social hierarchies between those who are under scrutiny and those who are presenting them. Any radical experiences, whatever this elusive concept may represent, were suppressed in favour of traditional ideas, which positioned women in the realm of nature. The artists were presented in “ready-made frameworks of identity” in Ramírez’s words.<sup>58</sup>

Despite its silences and omissions, the exhibition revealed the curator’s sensitivity and the position imbued with tensions that she experienced. In the catalogue, Biller pointed out her “gringa” heritage and her privileged position over the geography represented in the exhibition: “I am admittedly and unapologetically a *gringa*, organizing this exhibition for a mainstream museum in the heartland of the United States”.<sup>59</sup> This declaration of principles and this awareness of the hegemonic space occupied reveal another possible legacy, not merely the conflictive appropriation of the artworks of the *other* and the repletion of clichés, of this historical exhibit, whose catalogue was exported to the South and constitutes to this day a mandatory reference.

## References

Albani de Carvalho, A.M., “A Exposição como Dispositivo na Arte Contemporânea: Conexões entre o Técnico e o Simbólico”, *Revista Museologia e Interdisciplinaridade*, 2012, 1, no. 2.

57 Biller, “Latin American ...”, p. 17.

58 M.C. Ramírez, “Brokering Identities”, in: *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. B.W. Ferguson, R. Greenberg, S. Nairne, London—New York, 2005, p. 23.

59 Biller, “Latin American...”, p. 19.

- Barnitz, J., "5 Women Artists", *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, 1975, 9, no. 14.
- Biller, G.P., "Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995", in: *Latin American Women Artists 1995–1995*, ed. G.P. Biller, Milwaukee, 1995.
- Biller, G.P., "Milwaukee. Latin Beauties", *Departures*, Milwaukee Art Museum, Research Center, March–April 1995.
- Biller, G.P., *New York Pop and Chicago Imagism of the 1960s: the Question of Affinities and Influences*, MA dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 1991.
- Cavalcanti Simioni, A.P., "Corpos expropriados: mulheres artistas e a questão do nu no modernismo", in: *Imagen/Deseo. Placer, devoción y consumo en las artes*, eds. S. Dolinko, M. Marchesi, Buenos Aires, 2015.
- D'Alessandro, S., Pérez–Oramas L., eds., *Tarsila do Amaral: Inventing Modern Art in Brazil*, New Haven, 2017.
- Eraso Jurado, M., "¿Qué es una mujer artista latinoamericana? 'Figuras algo soñadoras, fantásticas, y eróticas'", (*Pensamiento*), (*Palabra*) y (*Obra*), 2015, 14.
- Fajardo–Hill, C., "The Invisibility of Latin American Women Artists: Problematizing Art Historical and Curatorial Practices", in: *Radical Women: Latin American art, 1960–1–1985*, Los Angeles–Munich, 2017.
- Femminile, R., "Ausencia de la mujer en los momentos exaltadores de las manifestaciones creadoras masculinas", in: *Escupamos sobre Hegel y otros escritos sobre liberación femenina*, ed. C. Lonzi, Buenos Aires, 1978 [1971].
- García Canclini, N., *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, México, 1990.
- Glueck, G., "Art", *The Guide*, *The New York Times*, 10 October 1982.
- Goldman, S.M., "Six Women Artists of Mexico", *Woman's Art Journal*, 1983, 3, no. 2.
- Goldman, S.M., "The (Booming) Spirit of Latin America", in: S.M. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas. Art and Social Change in Latin America and The United States*, Chicago—London, 1994.
- Griffin, R., "Latin American Art: A Woman's View", in: R. Griffin, *Latin American Art: A Woman's View*, Miami, 1981.
- Hinish, H., "Latin American Women Artists, 1915–1995 essays by Geraldine P. Biller, Bélgica Rodríguez and Marina Pérez de Mendiola. Milwaukee Art Museum, 1995", *Woman's Art Journal*, 1997, 18, no. 1.
- Lacroix, M., "Mujer y Arte en la América Latina: Notas desde el Norte / Women and Art in Latin America: Notes from the North", *Aquelarre*, 1990, 4.
- Lowe, C., "Women Artists Ahow Dazzles", *Tucson Citizen*, 20 July 1995, <http://tucsoncitizen.com/morgue2/1995/07/20/193010-women-artists-show-dazzles/>.
- Mayayo, P., *Frida Kahlo. Contra el mito*, Madrid, 2008.
- Nemser, C., "Forum: Women in Art", *Arts Magazine*, 1971, 45, no. 4.
- Ortner, S.B., "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?", in: *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology 1968–2014*, ed. H. Robinson, Chichester, 2015 [1974].
- Ramírez, M.C., "'Beyond 'The Fantastic': Framing Identity in US Exhibitions of Latin American Art", in: *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. G. Mosquera, Cambridge, 1996.
- Ramírez, M.C., "Brokering Identities", in: *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. B.W. Ferguson, R. Greenberg, S. Nairne, London–New York, 2005.

- Richards, P., "Stilled Life with Flowers", *The Washington Post*, 2 March 1996, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1996/03/02/stilled-life-with-flowers/97b441b0-f737-4917-be16-0bbd29b29f0c/?utm\\_term=.9c4fca5f6cfb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1996/03/02/stilled-life-with-flowers/97b441b0-f737-4917-be16-0bbd29b29f0c/?utm_term=.9c4fca5f6cfb).
- Rodríguez, B., "Artistas latinoamericanas 1915–1995", *Art Nexus*, 1995, 17.
- Sullivan, E., *Arte latinoamericano del siglo XX*, Madrid, 1996.
- Sullivan, E.J., "Review: Art of the Fantastic", *Art Journal*, 1988, 47, no. 4.

*Talita Trizoli*

POST-DOCTORAL RESEARCHER AT THE INSTITUTE OF BRAZILIAN STUDIES  
FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO. FAPESP GRANT.  
ORCID 0000-0001-6508-2076

## The Feminist Agenda and the Brazilian Art System between the 1960s and the 1970s

### Abstract

The reception of second-wave feminist guidelines in the Brazilian artistic system has been a recurring theme of inquiry in feminist historiography because of its peculiarity: a country that propagated its international image as a place of delight and sexual experience, but crystallised in conservative and colonial values, in conjunction with a highly experimental artistic scene, but under the yoke of violence from a civil-military dictatorship. To show what kind of relationship was established between some of the cultural agents of the period and the feminist agenda that arrived in the Brazilian scene, this essay takes some case studies that point out the strategies and negotiations regarding feminism, even though those concerned were not militants.

**Keywords:** Latin America, feminism, Brazil, art system

### A very specific scene to “receive” the feminist word

On 14 April 1971, the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro saw the launch of the book *The Female Mystique*, by the American feminist journalist and activist Betty Friedan, which had recently been translated by Editora Vozes (directed by the editor and feminist Rose Marie Muraro).<sup>1</sup> First published in 1963 in the United States, Friedan’s study revealed a veritable epidemic of female dissatisfaction with the post-war North American conservative project. The so-called “American way of life” implied a return

---

1 Feminist editor and writer. Mostly connected to a libertarian feminist Christian militancy, Muraro was an important figure to non-institutional politics to women rights in Brazil.

of middle-class white women to the nuclear family model – and the “shock bomb” was such that the book, initially ignored, and then intellectually rejected by the (male) critics of the time, became a kind of “Bible” to second-wave feminism over the years.<sup>2</sup>

The eight years that separate the original publication from the translation is not something peculiar in the Brazilian editorial and cultural context, especially with regard to material of a feminist nature. The book *The Second Sex* by the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, for example, released in 1949 and having a direct influence on Friedan’s text, was only translated into Portuguese in 1960 by art critic Sergio Milliet. Both cases demonstrate the fragility of Brazilian publishing and the belated interest in the theme.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the considerable delay in translation, Friedan’s reception in Brazil for the launch of her book is of interest here, due to its symptomatic character as a political thermometer. The particularities of her reception will

2 “Since its publication, Friedan’s book has been castigated not only by antifeminists who describe it as anti-family, but by feminists and other liberal thinkers dismayed by, among other things, Friedan’s homophobia, her failure to take men to task for their complicity in the repression of women and her blindness to the experiences of women outside the white middle class, who labored in factories, secretarial berths and domestic service. More recently, feminist writers like Linda Hirshman (‘Get to Work’) and Leslie Bennetts (‘The Feminine Mistake’), alarmed by the (statistically questionable) trend of high-powered women leaving careers to return to the homes from which Friedan helped free them, have reclaimed her as radical muse”, R. Traister, “Mad Women”, *New York Times*, 23 January 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/books/review/Traister-t.html> [accessed 15 March 2022].

3 Joana Vieira Borges comments on the perspective of Brazilian research concerning Beauvoir’s book: “Despite being commonly mentioned in the speeches as one of the key readings carried out in this period of engagement with the feminist cause, some of the interviewees do not place *The Second Sex* as the most relevant reading, since they were experiencing other situations at the time of reading. Qualifying it as ‘sick’, ‘boring’, ‘cerebral’ and ‘too psychoanalytical’, certain readers did not attribute to Beauvoir’s text the status of a ‘historic landmark’ for the feminist movement. Some speeches presented the first impressions of reading *The Second Sex* as a difficult text to apprehend: some started reading and did not finish; others say they didn’t like it, but that as time passed, they returned to reading and felt ‘enchanted’; and there are still those who have denied any and all influence of the text on their lives. However, most insisted on recognizing the relevance, pioneering spirit and uniqueness of the author and the text for the international feminist debate. It is necessary to pay attention to the fact that not only intellectuals and researchers had access to Beauvoir’s arguments about the formation of female identity. Over time, and due digestion of the author’s extensive arguments throughout the two volumes, other women, both researchers and laypeople, made use of her speech, sometimes more faithfully, sometimes more distantly”, J.V. Borges, “Da (des)Construção do “Clássico: O Segundo Sexo e Mística Feminina no Brasil e na Argentina”, in: *Seminário Internacional Fazendo Gênero 10 (Anais Eletrônicos)*, Florianópolis, 2013, [http://www.fg2013.wwwc2017.eventos.dype.com.br/resources/anais/20/1381836121\\_ARQUIVO\\_joana-vieira-borges.pdf](http://www.fg2013.wwwc2017.eventos.dype.com.br/resources/anais/20/1381836121_ARQUIVO_joana-vieira-borges.pdf) [accessed 10 February 2022].

help us to understand the unique relationship between second-wave feminist agendas and the Brazilian artistic system<sup>4</sup> in the 1960s and 1970s, a period marked by both cultural effervescence and political violence.

It is important to note that the time of release of Friedan's work was during one of the most bloodthirsty periods of the civil-military dictatorship, established in Brazil on 31 March 1964 and ending only on 5 March 1985. Profoundly violent and reactionary, the policy of the civil-military regime was also disastrous from an economic point of view. It weakened the country's financial structures over the years with an immediate economic plan and "draining" of natural and monetary wealth, plunging the country into a situation of hunger and unequal concentration of income.<sup>5</sup> The year 1971 was General Emilio Garrastazu Médici's third year of term, a violent governance with censorship, imprisonment and torture of those resistant and disruptive to the regime, with methodological support from the North American government of Nixon – a period that took the nickname of "Years of Lead".

In this context, Brazilian feminism found a very specific shape.<sup>6</sup> The majority of feminist militants declared themselves as feminists while participating in the resistance against the military state, aligning themselves with left-wing organisations and connected with the progressive sectors of the Church, which was one of the most radical forces against the military regime – Rose Marie Muraro is an example of this.

Nevertheless, in the core of these left-wing movements, the general anguish and concern about the absence of a democratic state subjugated women's claims in favour of a political struggle focused on issues of a so called "greater urgency" – and feminist topics were painted as a bourgeois problem.<sup>7</sup>

---

4 On the use of the art system as a social category to understand the art world, see: N. Heinich, *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain. Sociologie des arts plastiques*, Paris, 1998; R. Moulin, *L'artiste, l'institution et le marché*, Paris, 1992; H. Becker, *Art Worlds*, Berkeley, 1982; P. Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art*, Paris, 1992.

5 For further information, see: C. Lessa, *A estratégia de desenvolvimento 1974-1976: sonho e fracasso*, UNICAMP. IE, 1998; J.P. Macarini, *A política econômica da ditadura militar no limiar do "milagre" brasileiro: 1967/69*, IE/UNICAMP, 2000, 99.

6 Professor Maria Lygia Quartim de Moraes comments on this particular period in a footnote: "In the seventies, it was agreed to distinguish two currents within the women's movement: the first of them would be that of socialist and/or Marxist feminists, for whom 'women's liberation' was closely linked to the emancipation of workers and the struggle for socialism. The second current, 'sexist' feminism, favoured the category of sex (or gender) as an analytical axis and flag of struggle. Roughly speaking, it can be said that in France, Italy and Brazil socialist feminism assumed hegemony while, in the United States, it is the 'sexist' current that assumes the forefront", M.L.Q. de Moraes, *Vinte anos de Feminismo, livre docente* thesis, Department of Sociology of the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences, State University of Campinas, 1996, p. 3.

7 As the problem of the pejorative perspective of the left movements to the feminist agenda is something that has already been investigated, not only in Brazilian history, but as an

But let's return to publishing. The translation by Muraro<sup>8</sup> included among its strategies a series of interviews and meetings, as well as the official launch<sup>9</sup> of the book in the two great economic and cultural capitals of the country at the time, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo.<sup>10</sup> What draws our attention in this

---

important subject in social studies, here are some references: H. Hartmann, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*, in: *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. L. Sargent, London, 1981, pp. 1–43; M. Cisne, *Feminismo e consciência de classe no Brasil*, São Paulo, 2015; C.R.J. Pinto, “Feminismo, história e poder”, *Revista de sociologia e política*, 2010, 18, no. 36, pp. 15–23; M. Rago, *Epistemologia feminista, gênero e história*, in: *Masculino, feminino, plural*, eds. J. Pedro, M. Grossi, Florianópolis, 1998; H.I.B. Saffioti, *A Mulher na Sociedade de Classes: mito e realidade*, Petrópolis, 1976.

- 8 “In 1971, Editora Vozes celebrated its seventieth anniversary, and the idea was to celebrate it with everything. [...] I wanted to invite either Norman Brown, who was very successful at the time, Michel Foucault, or else Betty Friedan. Mother Cristina, from São Paulo, gave me Betty Friedan’s book to read, and I liked it so much that the translation was ready. I spoke to her on the phone, and she offered to come just for the ticket, the stay and whatever happened, mainly [...]. *O Pasquim* did a preparatory interview with me. There were Glauber Rocha, Paulo Francis, Ziraldo and the whole gang. That’s when I realised what feminism really meant to men. I’m sure I ‘joined’ them, because they didn’t know anything about the links between women’s oppression and the economy... They only thought about the fear that the new women caused them. This was enough to get the attention of all the media. When Betty Friedan arrived, things exploded. Journalists climbed trees in front of the house where she was staying. [...] Those were the hardest times of the dictatorship. No matter how much I warned her that the things I said would compromise me and not her, she always said that she could say whatever she wanted because she was a free American citizen. And I’d be damned. [...] She spoke ill of the military and told Millôr Fernandes to fuck himself in a memorable interview with the macho men of *Pasquim*. When she left, not a stone was left unturned. She was very ugly and aggressive, and from then on, she became part of the Brazilian collective unconscious as the model of woman to those others, who wanted to remain feminine, should not imitate”, R.M. Muraro, *Os seis meses em que fui homem*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Rio de Janeiro, 1991, pp. 16–18.
- 9 Betty came to a double launch in the country: at the Museum of Modern Art, in Rio de Janeiro, and at the Mário de Andrade Municipal Library, in São Paulo [...] A busy schedule would complement her stay in Brazil. She met the women who marched in ‘64, for family, God and property, visited favelas, where she would meet 32-year-old grandmothers and women who supported their families alone, causing her to soon relate to the residents of black American communities. She met torturers, had lunch with big businessmen in the area of communication such as Roberto Civita (Grupo Abril) and Adolpho Bloch (Bloch Editores). With the latter, she became friends when she found out that the families were from the same place in Ukraine, A.R.F. Duarte, “Betty Friedan – morreu a feminista que estremeceu a América”, *Revista Estudos Feministas*, 2006, 14, no. 01, p. 291.
- 10 “In São Paulo, the launch took place on 16 April at the Mario de Andrade library, in the centre of the capital, around 6:30 pm. Before the autograph session, Friedan, who was staying at the old Hotel Jaraguá, opposite the library, received local journalists, and debated with Brazilian writers the themes of womanhood, namely Lygia Fagundes



myriad of events, over half a century ago, are the misogynistic rejections and disqualifications offered to both Friedan and Muraro, for years on end, mainly by the left-wing press, summarised by researcher Joana Vieira Borges as follows:

“When researching the newspapers *Jornal do Brasil*, *Correio da Manhã*, *Opinião* and *Diário de Notícias*, and issues of *Vêja* magazine, published between 1970 and 1985, we found a considerable number of references to Betty Friedan, especially in 1971. Often referred to as the ‘leader of American feminism’ or ‘feminism’s most important theoretician’, there are also a number of pejorative adjectives used to characterise her appearance and personality: ‘ugly’, ‘loose’, ‘aggressive’, ‘speaks in a loud voice’, ‘gets excited easily’, ‘arrogant’, ‘exaggerated’, ‘when she speaks, she gestures a lot, it seems she wants to fight’, ‘angry’, ‘sexually inappropriate’, ‘unfriendly’, and ‘infamous’ to name a few examples. If before the author’s visit periodicals limited themselves to associating her name with the organisation of a ‘sex strike’ and the ‘burning of bras’, scheduled for 26 August 1970 in the USA, after 1971, they began to follow her steps and statements and, most of the time, described her conception of feminist struggles and her appearance”.<sup>11</sup>

From this misogynistic critical reaction referring to Friedan’s passage through Brazil, the one offered by the newspaper *O Pasquim*<sup>12</sup> stands out. And not only because of the nature of the informative vehicle and its relevance among the leftist and counter-culture movements in Brazil, but also because of its level of mockery in relation to Friedan, exclusively – even though no woman was unharmed by the jokes, irony and provocation of the “boys” from *Pasquim*.

Let us remember at this point that humour is not just a device for leisure and enjoyment, but it is an indication of the social fissures of a society.<sup>13</sup> More

---

Telles, Maria de Lourdes Teixeira and Lourdes Bernardes”, “A líder prega apoio à greve”, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 16 April 1971, p. 16.

11 J.V.B., *Trajatórias e Leituras Feministas no Brasil e na Argentina (1960-1980)*, PhD thesis in history, Center for Philosophy and Human Sciences, Federal University of Santa Catarina, 2013, p. 08.

12 *O Pasquim* was an independent weekly publication, published between 1969 and 1991, founded by cartoonists Jaguar and Ziraldo, and journalists Tarso de Castro and Sérgio Cabral, and counted on its team figures such as journalists Paulo Francis and Ruy Castro, and cartoonists Henfill and Millôr Fernandes, to name just a few. It was initially a publication of a behavioural nature, addressing varied subjects and curiosities – however, with the tightening of censorship and the arrests carried out by the civil-military dictatorship, the weekly newspaper gradually became politicised, transforming itself into a symbol of resistance against state violence and opposition to democracy, M. Pinheiro, *Rato de Redação - Sig e a História do Pasquim*, São Paulo, 2022.

13 “The joke or witticism – even if the thought it contains is not tendentious, that is, serves merely theoretical intellectual interests – is actually never without bias; it pursues the second aim of helping the thought along by strengthening it [Vergrößerung] and securing it against rational criticism. Here again the joke reveals its original nature in its opposition to an inhibiting and restrictive power – in this case critical judgement”, S. Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by J. Crick, New York, 2003, p. 149.

than a strategy of political criticism, the intertwined content between sender and receiver in humour is an index of the values present at different contingencies, and is perpetuated as a memory, often traumatic.<sup>14</sup> Hildete Pereira, a feminist activist from the 1960s, in conversation with researcher Crescencio, recalls that “the great beginning of the indignation is over the heavy joke with Rose Marie Muraro, saying that she was ugly and all, having a scythe fight in a dark room, that was very unpleasant, it shocked us. But we didn’t have a political answer to that, regarding the issue of humour”.

The misogynistic episode between Friedan and *O Pasquim* denotes the nature of the problems faced by Brazilian feminist militancy. These adversities extend it to other authors of the genre, such as Rose Marie Muraro, Friedan’s interlocutor in Brazil, but also to Heloneida Studart, militant journalist from the left, feminist, politician and friend of Muraro and Carmen da Silva, columnist in the women’s magazine *Claudia*.<sup>15</sup> All of these authors are the ones that the Brazilian artistic class at the time consumed; therefore, the public discussion offered to them reflects the perspective of this class in relation to the feminist archetype.

## The archetype of the feminist in Brazilian version (some of many)

Muraro, for example, with her books *The Woman in the Construction of the Future World* and *The Sexual Liberation of the Woman*, from 1966 and 1971, respectively, discuss the changes in the consumer society and the new possible role of women. In addition to marking its historical place as one of the feminists’

14 “The joke will allow us to turn to good account those ridiculous features in our enemy that the presence of opposing obstacles would not let us utter aloud or consciously; again, that is, it will get around restrictions and open up sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible. It will, further, bribe the listener with his own gain in pleasure into taking our side without probing very far, just as on other occasions we ourselves, bribed by an innocuous joke, usually overestimate the content of a statement if it is wittily expressed. Our language has a saying, ‘to have the laugh on one’s side’, which hits the mark exactly”, Freud, op. cit., p. 123.

15 *Claudia* magazine from the Abril Publishing House is a Brazilian publication that, since 1961, is dedicated to female readers. The editions have been the object of feminist studies for decades, since it presents women’s issues of the times, in a mix of fashion, behaviour, health and eventually, feminism. See: D.S. Buitoni, *A mulher de papel: a representação da mulher pela imprensa feminina brasileira*, São Paulo, 2009; C.B. Pinsky, J.M. Pedro, eds., *Nova história das mulheres no Brasil*, São Paulo, 2012; M.P. Costa. *Entre sonhos e consumo: as representações femininas na Revista Claudia (1961-1985)*, MA thesis in history, Faculty of Sciences and Letters, Universidade Estadual Paulista, Assis, 2009.

key authors (occasionally also as an object of mockery<sup>16</sup> by both the conservative wing of society and the so-called progressive, left wing),<sup>17</sup> Muraro was able to negotiate her public image in a more fluid way, as the Brazilian researcher Anna Maria Barbará Pinheiro notes.

“The main points raised in ‘Women’s Sexual Liberation’ are exposed in the printed media, contributing to building of the image of ‘a feminist who is friendly to men’ [...] and ‘a feminist without ulterior motives’ [...]. It is worth noting that this image was often reinforced by Rose herself, according to the statement she gave to the Lux newspaper: ‘I think men are admirable, I always got along very well with them. I was married, very happily married, today I am separated, well separated... I like being a woman, being the mother of my five children: I like being flirted with’.<sup>18</sup>

Muraro’s speech – which today may sound strange to us in light of the unfolding concepts of womanhood, gender, desire and beauty – is extremely consistent with the current thinking of her Brazilian contemporaries in relation to feminist guidelines.<sup>19</sup> Even though there was a feeling of dissatisfaction

---

16 Still with the *Pasquim*, during an interview with Muraro prior to Friedan’s arrival, the author and her interlocutors (journalists Paulo Francis, Sergio Cabral and filmmaker Glauber Rocha) spoke about the Oedipus complex, and in the best example of the practice of interrupting female explanations, Muraro showed her displeasure, and received the following response from Glauber: “I think the problem with the interview is that you are in the middle of men wanting to take a very big man. You better stay as a woman and things will get better” (*O Pasquim*, 07 April 1971, 91, p. 04). Muraro was also the subject of parody by cartoonist Millôr Fernandes in issue 170 of 9 October 1972, p. 21, and mockery by the cartoonist Jaguar in issue 287 of 6 January 1975, p. 12, during an interview with actress Cidinha Campos. In issue 295 of 1 March 1975, in Elice Munerato’s review of the play by the aforementioned actress Cidinha, once again the names of Muraro, Friedan and Heloneida Studart are invoked as synonyms of “unloved feminists”. This attitude recurs once again, in Muraro’s interview in issue 623 of 10 June 1981, with Chico’s illustration that places her in a position of an ugly, second-rate woman. Interestingly, Heloneida Studart, who systematically collaborated with the weekly, was a lesser target for jokes

17 R. Soihet, “Preconceitos nas charges de O Pasquim: mulheres e a luta pelo controle do corpo”, *ArtCultura*, 2007, 9, no. 14, pp. 39–53.

18 A.M.B. Pinheiro, “O Feminismo Midiático de Rose Marie Muraro”, *Seminário Internacional Fazendo Gênero 11 & 13th Women’s Worlds Congress (Anais Eletrônicos)*, Florianópolis, 2017, p. 06.

19 In two journalistic fragments about feminist developments, with an interval of 8 years between them, it is possible to verify that, even though the guidelines are validated in the scope of social justice, there was the counterpart that feminists should maintain their femininity: “After the issues of international interest discussed during the Conference, that charity party was, in a way, like proof that women can be feminists and, at the same time, remain charmingly feminine”, *Correio da Manhã*, 25 June 1961, p. 03; “Many feminist militants are in fact violent and even seem to be repelling other women than congregating around a cause, hundreds learn karate, make violent pamphlets against ‘male chauvinism’”, *Correio da Manhã*, 27 November 1969, no pagination.

with the limited possibilities of existence (the “evil without a name”, as Friedan called it) and the trivialisation of gender violence, the socialisation of a traditional femininity was still a very strong driving force. It coordinated attempts to constrain women within an ideal model of femininity<sup>20</sup> – an aspect that allowed them to move socially and obtain certain privileges.

The hyper-valuation of female beauty as a primordial element of the sign “woman” for this generation<sup>21</sup> (but not only) was something systematically reproduced by Muraro when commenting about Friedan on several occasions, in a disastrous attempt to distance the archetypal figure of the feminist from adjectives such as ugly, badly loved, frustrated, etc. Such strategy is just one of the countless contradictions of this feminist generation with wide public prominence, in its effort to reach the various social strata with a female presence. I take as an exemplary case here the feminist production of Heloneida Studart, Muraro’s literary colleague at *Editora Vozes* (but also in other feminist projects, such as the Brazilian Women’s Centre).<sup>22</sup>

Studart, who was a writer and journalist, and later a politician, had three feminist essays published at the invitation of *Editora Vozes*: *Woman, Toy of Man*’ from 1969; *Woman, Object of Bed and Table*, from 1975; *Woman, to whom does your Body Belong*’ from 1989. The three books were editorial successes and became a kind of manual of a specific Brazilian feminism (white, middle-class, straight,

20 “The transformation caused by the times, by education, by modern life, is more in the mentality in the culture, in the ideas, in themselves, than in the ridiculous exteriorization of a one-eyed feminism. The woman remains a woman, a reason for enchantment and inspiration for the man, an ideal of purity and sweetness for the child, and must always act as such. Men love a very feminine woman. Just don’t confuse futility, *denguice* and lack of personality with femininity. It is up to her to curb exaggeration, to take care of harmony and delicacy in gestures, words, attitudes. I never get tired of repeating that, more important than beauty, than culture, than an elegant wardrobe, for a woman to be attractive, is to be a woman”, Clarice Lispector as Helen Palmer, *Correio da Manhã*, 19 February 1960; “This is yet another victory for feminism; a well-understood feminism, which finds full support, even from those who claim to be anti-feminists. Kind, smiling feminism, like a good fairy who puts the house in order and returns it perfect to its owner. Feminism that wins without the demands and without the aggressiveness so much to the liking of the disciples of the bellicose Mrs. Pankust...”, *Correio da Manhã*, 21 April 1963.

21 See: M. Zimmermann de Andrade, *Rebeldia pronta para o consumo: a construção da cultura juvenil no Brasil dos anos 1950-60*, PhD thesis (doctorate in politics, memory and city) – Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences, State University of Campinas, Campinas, 2016.

22 “Feminist association created in 1975, which operated until 1979, with leftist tendencies. The association was an articulator of important discussions on women’s rights, as well as a place of support for the female community in Rio de Janeiro, where its headquarters are located”, R. Soihet, F.C. Esteves, “O Centro da Mulher Brasileira (CMBRJ) e suas experiências nos anos 1970 e 1980”, in: *Revolução e democracia (1964...)*, eds. J. Ferreira, D.A. Reis, Rio de Janeiro, 2007.

and conciliatory<sup>23</sup> – it is important to emphasise it here),<sup>24</sup> even being applied in schools. Nonetheless, the tone and the content of phrases with imperative assertions mobilised by Studart ridiculed women already adapted and suited to the traditional model of femininity, that is, dedicated to home and family.

“Adapted from childhood to the home environment, the woman is busy all the time, without creating or producing. And the domestic environment is culturally very poor, not requiring the use of the mind. Intelligence that is not challenged and does not respond to challenge becomes dull and limited. Without being able to achieve the development that originates from production relations and social exchanges, the female IQ ends up suffering the same decrease that is seen in the IQ of miserable children... .

This is, in a way, the situation for women. In the world of crochet, dishtowels, unwashed diapers, without courses, without libraries, without seminars, without congresses, without any decision-making capacity, how could they stop being a little mentally weak?”<sup>25</sup>

Muraro was also not far from these paternalistic adjectives in relation to the “queens of the home”,<sup>26</sup> and both she and Studart had, throughout their

---

23 There are a considerable number of adjectives to classify the different and fragmental types of feminism in Brazil. The artist and researcher Roberta Barros, defined Brazilian feminist art as something “sweet” and “sneaky” (R. Barros, *Elogio ao toque ou como falar de arte feminista à brasileira*, Rio de Janeiro, 2016, p. 25). To the approach applied here, the expression “negotiable feminism” is more accurate to understand the complexity of the relationship between the art system and the feminist agenda in Brazil (T. Trizoli, *Trajatórias de Regina Vater: Por uma crítica feminista da arte brasileira*, MA thesis, University of São Paulo, Museum of Contemporary art, Program of Aesthetics and Art History, 2011; T. Trizoli, *Atravessamentos feministas: um panorama de mulheres artistas no Brasil dos anos 60/70*, PhD thesis, University of São Paulo, Faculty of Education, Program of Philosophy, 2018).

24 Concerning this synthesis on the part of the feminist movement in Brazil, I’m referring to the analyses of two major researchers on the subject, Céli Regina Maria Pinto and Rachel Soihet – Pinto uses the expression “well-behaved” and Soihet applies “tactical”. Both historians referred to a particular angle of the institutionalised feminism of the 1<sup>st</sup> wave, related to the figure of the militant and biologist Bertha Lutz, a Brazilian suffragist that operates through conciliatory negotiations between social groups that were deeply resistant to the feminist agenda, such as the Church and the Government. Bertha Lutz believed in the creation of one solo organisation that would be allowed to represent the voices of Brazilian women, one of the many aspects of her feminist militancy that was criticised in the years to come. See: M. Karawejczyk, “O Feminismo em Boa Marcha no Brasil! Bertha Lutz e a Conferência pelo Progresso Feminino”, *Revista Estudos Feministas*, 2018, 2, no. 26, pp. 1–17.

25 H. Studart, *Mulher, Objeto de Cama e Mesa*, Petrópolis, 1976, p. 40.

26 Muraro assigns and advises Brazilian women, after an arduous awareness of their devalued condition, the role of “Mother of the Nation”, constantly reaffirming the great capacity of female affection in the advent of the new Utopia due to its “natural” ability to care. In excerpts from the book: “Here, the role of women is, in our view, the most important: woman, mother of men, mother of the human race is, by definition, the one who keeps in herself everything that can, biologically, psychologically, serve

careers, an obvious difficulty in broadening their audience spectrum, mainly towards factory workers and women of colour. In this sense, Jaguar's provocation issued in 1981, in an interview shared with Alberto Dines,<sup>27</sup> Haroldo Zager<sup>28</sup> and Reinaldo Azevedo<sup>29</sup> at *Pasquim*, "Have you ever Managed to Attract a Maid?" is consistent, as it denotes the almost insurmountable fission of the class and race divide in the country – even though both Muraro and Studart believed that their speeches triggered other social classes.

"Haroldo Zager – Is the lower-class woman able to swell the ranks of feminism? Because the upper class is very involved in exacerbated consumerism.

Muraro – Only to the extent that feminism enters the class struggle [...]. Let's look at peasant women. They do the housework for free, saving the system some money, they grow their subsistence food, saving the system more money, and many of them also work on other crops, and for half the price of man. Only there are three types of surplus value. Can you imagine the fantastic capitalist accumulation that is on top of this work? I think that only when lower-class women become aware of this will the problem of capitalist accumulation, which is the basis of the class struggle, be reversed.

[...]

Haroldo – What is the reaction of working women to your intellectual discourse?

Muraro – I still don't intend to be accepted by the workers, I'm still trying to reach the outskirts of São Paulo to discuss with some women what they want. I won't say anything. I think they have greater capacity and intelligence than ours – what they don't have is information – and are capable of, based on their concrete situation, finding flags of struggle, in common or not with the middle class, capable of accelerating the process".<sup>30</sup>

And Studart, in turn, also asserts in the same newspaper on another occasion:

"Pasquim – Is the Brazilian feminist movement a middle-class thing?

Heloneida – It is still predominantly a debate of more conscious, middle-class women. The others – the majority – are chasing a plate of beans and meat for the family. But, slowly, a certain number of poor workers, housemaids, slum dwellers are starting to move and notice that they are doubly exploited. And that's good. The participation of women, the action of women, is definitive for the transformation of society. Incidentally, the right wing has always understood this. When they want to give the workers a blow, cut them off, they immediately turn to the women. Then, it comes the pot walk".<sup>31</sup>

---

for the transmission of the life, the preservation of the person and the species as such", R.M. Muraro, *A Mulher na Construção do Mundo Futuro*, Petrópolis, 1966, p. 70.

27 Alberto Dines was a Brazilian journalist, university professor, biographer and writer.

28 Haroldo Zager is a journalist, editor and graphic designer. He was editor of *O Pasquim*, *Última Hora*, *Tribuna da Imprensa*, among others. He presided over Rio de Janeiro's Official Press for 10 years.

29 Reinaldo Azevedo is a cartoonist, illustrator, writer and comedian.

30 *O Pasquim*, 10 June 1981, 623, p. 9.

31 *O Pasquim*, 9 October 1978, 488, p. 6.

More than pointing out the misconceptions of a first generation of Brazilian feminists with a presence at informative media, such notes aim to highlight the ambivalences present in the Brazilian female mentality of the middle class – the social spectrum to which the artistic agents of the time mostly belonged, be they artists, critics, curators or managers.

About the use of the term middle class as an important social distinction, placing artists and other cultural agents in this category provides common aspects that unify them, such as the use of college studies to move between classes, work related to the services and bureaucratic categories, access to consumer goods, place of birth and living. Even knowing that those elements vary as definitions of the middle class, as already pointed out by the sociologist Maria da Gloria Bonelli and the economist Marcio Pochmann, they are still used as elements of the conceptual definition of middle class, changing according to the author and methodology applied.

A brief look at Brazilian women artists easily highlights their class. They are young daughters of the mostly white families, with a traditional formal education, relative access to consumer goods and spheres of production and culture. Many gain access to the artistic environment either through an existing family connection with the medium, or via the authorisation/social tolerance of access to the artistic environment – due to its proximity to the idea of female “gifts” such as embroidery, sewing, miniature painting, demands for the tasteful decorative arrangement of the house, music as domestic entertainment, dance as a requirement of grace.

Considering these values, it makes sense that the main feminist interlocutor with the artistic class was not exactly the duo Muraro/Studart, or even Beauvoir/Friedan, but the columnist for a female magazine (*Claudia*) with a background in psychoanalysis: Carmen da Silva.

Born at the Rio Grande do Sul state, a region in Brazil that borders Argentina and Uruguay, she studied psychoanalysis with Jorge Weil and Diego Garcia Reinoso while living at Buenos Aires in her youth, where she also worked as journalist and writer (it’s also at this time that she read for the first time Simone de Beauvoir’s work, which would impact her writing).

She returned to Brazil in 1962, since her life in Argentina as a foreigner became difficult with the political turmoil. In 1963, living in Rio de Janeiro, she wrote a letter with her resume to the editor of *Claudia* magazine, Luís Carta. The magazine was a publication of the Abril Group Publishing house, circulating since 1961, and the editorial project, very close to North American model” magazines, presented a mix of moral advice and friendly narratives to Brazilian women – written by women, but “adjusted” by a man. Thomaz Souto Corrêa, formerly the magazine’s editor-in-chief, comments about the procedures and structure of the magazine in its early days:

“If you exclude the art department, which was all male, when I arrived at *Claudia*, the editorial secretary was Micheline, the main editor was Fortuna, a caricaturist. I got

the position of editor in chief and we used to joke, me and him, that he was his own boss and I was my own boss. And we did almost the entire magazine. The vast majority of collaborators were women. I used to say that we were the transformers of the material. We turned that huge production into journalism. And there was Luís Carta who was sensitive to the subject, he knew the Italian and American press as well. We had a magazine guide there, technically speaking. But the production came from women, and we transformed".<sup>32</sup>

The entry of Carmen had a very specific objective, which was to psycho-analyse perspectives on female problems that demanded cultural change. Strategic points at modern women's life were addressed by Carmen in a gentle way, aiming to adapt a new generation of women to the demands of capitalism (which would be their insertion as workforce), without departing from aspects of traditional femininity.

Carmen's column included "love consultations", where thousands of women wrote directly to her asking for advice. Published without interruption between 1963 and 1984, themes such as contraceptives, women working beyond the domestic sphere, the education of children, love relationships, emotional dependence and divorce. Those subjects at the time were taken in a different shape by the hands of Carmen, with a focus on subjectivity and female emancipation, in very colloquial and intimate language, together with psychological analysis.

As a profound critic of the model of "love clinic" that most female journalism applied (since it was written for non-specialists in the subject with no familiarity with women's issues and permeated with moralism and a generic optimism), Carmen used that structure to include feminist topics for readers already spooked by the stereotype of the angry, ugly feminist – a place that Friedan, Muraro and Studart occupied. The researcher Ana Rita Fonteles Duarte synthesised the profile of *Claudia's* readers, specially related to Carmen's columns:

"In her work on *Claudia*, Carmen closely observed reality and observed the passive behaviour of middle-class Brazilian women who wrote to her. On average, they were between 18 and 24 years old, and were married or wanted to be married, often 'accepting, with masochism, unions clearly destined for total failure'".<sup>33</sup>

## Cultural agents and the misunderstanding of feminism

It is precisely from this very complex social group, the so-called middle-class, that artists such as Anna Maria Maiolino, Wanda Pimentel, Iole de Freitas, Maria do Carmo Secco and Regina Vater belonged; therefore, it's very likely

<sup>32</sup> Duarte, op. cit., p. 56

<sup>33</sup> Duarte, op. cit., p. 61.



that they were influenced by the feminist topics touched by Carmen – which also be true for the art critics and curators Aracy Amaral and Maria Eugênia Franco, and the gallerists Raquel Arnaud and Luisa Strina, for example.

These particularities concerning the social class of the Brazilian women artists and cultural agents offer certain indications about their understanding of feminist issues, and their rejection of the term. Beyond an understanding that a feminist would be a non-feminine creature, with desirability discarded, there was also a worry concerning rejection, a fear of being reduced to the status of a “pamphleteer artist”. That condition extended beyond the studio, going through to the curatorial/art critic milieu. Mentions of feminist topics at their work, or worse, if they declared themselves to be feminists, would be a professional risk that they were not interested in taking.

The majority of the art critics of the time, male or female, did not consider themselves as feminists – however, that didn’t stop the discussion about the presence of feminism in art. Occasionally, some art critics made comments about female artists related to feminist, exhibitions, and even about the feminist issues in the art field, such as Sheila Leirner, Aracy Amaral, Frederico Moraes, Jayme Maurício, Roberto Pontual and Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda – but for pragmatic reasons, we are going to discuss here only the females.<sup>34</sup>

Sheila Leirner was an interesting case. Belonging to a Jewish family with deep roots in Brazilian art,<sup>35</sup> Leirner began her career as art critic at one of the biggest papers of the country, *O Estado de São Paulo*. Her columns, published

---

34 Both Frederico Moraes and Roberto Pontual had a couple of articles discussing feminism in the arts. I highlight here: F. Moraes, “Presença da mulher na arte brasileira”, *O Globo*, 8 March 1982; F. Moraes, “A mulher”, *O Globo*, 23 September 1976; J. Maurício, “Mulheres no Ibirapuera: 275 obras”, *Correio da Manhã*, 27 January 1961; R. Pontual, “Feminismo e Arte”, *Jornal do Brasil*, 03 December 1974.

35 “Born in 1948, in São Paulo, from the marriage between Giselda Leirner (Brazil, 1928–) and Abe (Louis Adams) – both from Jewish families who were refugees from the Holocaust, Sheila Adams Leirner spent her childhood and adolescence in the care of her grandparents’ mothers surrounded by an atmosphere of art collecting and contact with the São Paulo artistic circuit. Her grandfather, Isai Leirner (Poland/Brazil, 1903–1962), collaborated with the founding of MAM-SP, and her grandmother, Felícia Leirner (Poland/Brazil, 1904–1996), was a renowned sculptor, apprenticed to Victor Brecheret (Italy/Brazil, 1894–1955). [...] From a previous career as an art critic for *O Estado de São Paulo*, she visited artists’ studios, exhibitions and conferences and evaluated them in parallel with her theoretical perspectives. She entered into a debate of ideas that could be presented more autonomously. Leirner assumed the curatorship of two editions of the Biennial – the largest international event for the exhibition of modern and contemporary art in Latin America – inspiring a network of major events around the world. Such critical autonomy was curtailed by every structure and economic dependency that the institution conformed with”, T.M. de Souza, “Arte como Medida: aspectos da autoria na mediação de exposições de arte – a 18ª e 19ª Bienal de São Paulo”, XVII Brazilian Congress of Sociology, 20–23 July 2015, Porto Alegre (RS).

between 1975 and 2019, paid particular attention to Brazilian and canonical European art, in addition to commenting on Brazilian artists.

Around 1977, Leirner started a survey about the condition of women in the arts, mostly moved by what she called a “movement of untampered feminists” and “women artists conscious of the peculiar problems” related to their sex. With these two sentences, Leirner already showed an ambiguity that would shape her arguments on this subject. She sent five questions<sup>36</sup> to six colleagues, the artists Renina Katz, Maria Bonomi, Yolanda Mohalyi, and the art critics Jakob Klimtowitz, Aracy Amaral and Paulo Mendes de Almeida. Mainly, the answers to the questions were a mix of misunderstanding about feminism: a defence related to the quality of art in their formalistic core, followed by a condemnation of the artists that decided to work with feminist issues, and a perception that even with discrimination, prejudice about the female condition was not an issue for Brazilian women artists.

The inquiry resulted in the publication of two articles: *Feminine Art and Feminism* in the 13 February 1977 edition, and *Feminism in Brazilian Art: Critic’s Opinion* from 27 February 1977. In the first piece, Leirner presented a brief history of the relationship of feminism with the visual arts, focusing on the North America scene, commenting on Linda Nochlin, Lucy Lippard, Lawrence Alloway and some significant artists such as Annette Messager, Harmony Hammond, Rosalyn Drexler, together with Brazilians like Iole de Freitas, Wilma Martins and Yolanda Mohalyi, to illustrate her arguments.

It is evident in the article that Leirner wanted to introduce the problem in a didactical perspective, leaving the discussion of specific topics, such as the relevance to the local scene or the Brazilian critics at the next piece. At the end of the article, after discussing feminist organisations in the USA, feminist art and feminine art, stakeholders and the constituent elements of body art, Leirner presents her own definition of the contents of artworks related to feminism and women:

1 – Affirmations and claims of identity.

2 – Questions about sexuality, which include theses of dispossession of women as a sexual object, often against pornography.

3 – Criticism of living and working conditions.<sup>37</sup>

36 “Is there a specifically feminine art? What are female images? How do you see feminist art? Do you see attempts, in our country, by artists to define this new problem in their works? How do you see the dialogues and struggles between a woman artist and the scheme traditionally built by male creators in the plastic field? When analysing an artistic work, do you think it is relevant to know the gender of the artist? Have you encountered any difficulties in your career because you are a woman?”, S. Leirner, “Arte Feminina e Feminismo”, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 13 February 1977, p. 30.

37 Ibid.

In the second article, Leirner presents part of the responses to the five questions, and we can perceive in these answers resistance to the subject, especially related to question four, which questions the existence or not of feminist issues in Brazilian art:

“Paulo Mendes de Almeida is categorical: ‘In Brazil, it doesn’t exist. And by definition, I would be against feminist art. I don’t believe in political art’ [...]. Iolanda Mohalyi thinks that in Brazilian visual arts, there is no need for feminist movements ‘sometimes with exaggerated claims and unfortunately many times for purely commercial or promotional purposes’ [...]. Klimtowitz, in turn, assumes that feminist art is an area of struggle, claiming, ‘a struggle for autonomy’. For this reason, he recommends caution, ‘as it has often been derailed by the fight for the liberation of upper-middle-class women’”.<sup>38</sup>

In both articles, Leirner defends a confusing formalist perspective about the nature of art, imbued by an essentialist view about femininity, or as she says “the circumstances that are specific to women and that incontestably determine their creation”. Leirner believes that this particular position would be more coherent with the practice of art, even when she admits the inevitable presence of feminism in artworks. Even in a situation that would require an intersectional perspective, concerning the difficulty of agreement between black and white feminists in the USA, Leirner insists in her conclusion that culpability be attributed to the biological sex and does not consider any social implications:

“This situation is undoubtedly a consequence of the radicalism that characterises most female expressions. If, on the one hand, some activists do not consider art as a legitimate front of struggle, placing the aesthetic problem as secondary, on the other hand, feminist artists give away – as we will see later – too easily to the place of individual qualities to collective interests, in an attitude forced and therefore inadequate for common interests”.<sup>39</sup>

But among the declarations and comments given in response to Leirner’s questions, attention is drawn to Aracy Amaral’s responses, mainly due to the fact that the critic, curator and professor at FAU-USP wrote at least two articles later in response to Leirner’s enquiries.

If Leirner was the privileged daughter of a powerful Jewish family involved with art, Aracy Amaral’s family are not far from this profile. Beyond her sisters and brother, all involved in the art field,<sup>40</sup> and her mother, who was also an amateur painter, she had a cousin that sparkled in that familiar constellation: Tarsila do Amaral, the great modernist painter in the Brazilian scene.

---

38 S. Leirner, “Feminismo na arte brasileira: opinião da crítica”, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 27 February 1977, p. 27.

39 Leirner, “Arte Feminina...”, p. 30.

40 Antonio Henrique Amaral is an artist, Suzana Amaral is a moviemaker and director, Ana Maria Amaral is a theatre writer and director.

It is relevant to note that Tarsila and Aracy didn't have close contact through the years; they only became close when Aracy was already a journalist,<sup>41</sup> and was looking for a research topic for her master's degree – and it is essential to state that, if the general public knows the work and life of Tarsila do Amaral; it is because of Aracy's research and effort in building her public image, as she is one of the most relevant art critics, curators, professors and directors of cultural institutions in Brazil.

"About a Questionnaire by Sheila Leirner: is There a Specific Female Art?" is the first essay in response to Leirner, published in the collection *Art and Artistic Environment: Between the feijoada and the Cheeseburger* in 1983<sup>42</sup>, but written in 1977. Divided in two parts, and taking Leirner's question to structure her argument, Aracy approaches some of the positions defended by Sheila, such as an essentialist view about femininity, which is used to exemplify the nature of a feminine art. For her:

"[...] the feminine in the arts has a 'rancid' air of 'needle art, embroidery and decoration' (AMARAL, 1983, p. 254), the critic already highlights a particularly reticent relationship with the theme, where the conception of femininity is seen from a pejorative view of subjectivity, linked to the concepts of futility, fragility and inferiority – characteristics that were devalued at the time within a context of reformulation of work and affection relations under the aegis of capital; after all, let us not forget that one of the guidelines embraced by this contemporary generation of second-wave feminism was the insertion of women in the labour market, in a world monopolised by the logic of the masculine, and where often the negotiation conditions for entering these spaces occurred via a masculinisation of the self. Thus, in this Aracy Amaral text, the feminine is directly linked to a conception of sensitivity, of an intuitive, magical nature, not rationalised and not militant [...] Brazil due to the wide penetration of women in the local artistic scene, unlike other cultural centres".<sup>43</sup>

In the second essay, "Women at the Arts from 1993", Amaral resumes Leirner's inquiries, and highlights some names of female artists in Brazil dur-

41 "I knew that Tarsila belonged to a branch of the family, but not a branch that we had gotten along with. I knew she was from the same family. I mean, we are descended from one of Tarsila's uncles. So, it's a parallel thing. There was something familiar, and I admired her work from afar, although when I was a journalism student at Casper Líbero, I visited Tarsila at her house on Rua Caiubi. It was a dirt road, still unpaved. I took the tram and then walked down to her house, since, at that time, she was still living with Luiz Martins. That's when she showed me those amazing paintings she had. At that time, she still owned Brancusi, Delaunay and other artists that she later sold in the early 1950s to live in the apartment where she lived and died, on Rua Albuquerque Lins", A. Amaral, "Interview", *SESC Magazine*, April 2014, 202, [https://portal.sescsp.org.br/online/artigo/7445\\_aracy+amaral#/tagcloud=lista](https://portal.sescsp.org.br/online/artigo/7445_aracy+amaral#/tagcloud=lista) [accessed 10 June 2023].

42 A. Amaral, *Arte e Meio Artístico: entre a feijoada e o X-Burguer*, São Paulo, 1983.

43 T. Trizoli, "Um problema de gênero: Aracy Amaral e os ensaios sobre o feminino nas artes", 2nd International Symposium on Systemic Art Relations. *Art Beyond Art (Annals)*, Porto Alegre, 2020, p. 568.

ing the 1970s, but refrains from political and assertive definitions referring to feminism. As we can see in the fragment below, she still attaches herself to biological definitions on the representation of the feminine in the visual arts:

“In 1977, the critic Sheila Leirner carried out a poll on whether there is specifically female art. In my answers, I declared that, in fact, what seems to me to exist is a sum of characteristics of the feminine in art. Some artists show this feminine character, others do not. This ‘feminine’, for me, is linked to the delicacy of the woman’s sensitivity, in her condition as a promoter of life and, for this very reason, linked to nature more than her male companion, delicacy is implicit in her dealing with the fragility of the human being, a newborn son of her body, and whom she will protect for life”.<sup>44</sup>

The position of Amaral on the definitions of feminine art, feminism and their relevance to the Brazilian art system has not changed much through the years – even with the new propositions and perspectives about feminism in Brazilian society after 2015, the year of the *Feminist Spring* in the country. In an interview in 2016, while she comments about the recent efforts of black Brazilian artists to be recognised as professionals and their investigations into African ancestries, the interviewer compares those movements to the women struggle for recognition, to which she replied: “But here in Brazil, I don’t think we are concerned about that. Because there are so many female artists, there has never been this problem of space for women. In the United States there was. Our great artists are all women”.<sup>45</sup>

Even if Amaral guided herself to a more Marxist perspective than Leirner in her critical work, especially related to the social function of art in society, both share misconceptions regarding the potential of feminism in the arts and the misogynist structure of the field – and none consider themselves feminists. If two of the most prominent female art critics made such comments about feminism, how could some female artists be encouraged to pursue those topics?

Until recently, art historiography considered that the first art critic to debate in the public arena feminism and art in Brazil, while declaring herself as feminist, was Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda,<sup>46</sup> in literature and academia. She

---

44 A. Amaral, “A mulher nas artes”, *Textos do Trópico de Capricórnio. Artigos e Ensaios (1980-2005)*, V. 3: *Bienais e artistas contemporâneos no Brasil*, 2006, 34.

45 A. Amaral, “Vejo pouco grito na arte brasileira”, *Select Art*, 1 September 2017, <https://select.art.br/vejo-pouco-grito-na-arte-brasileira/> [accessed 1 July 2023].

46 Recently, Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda started calling herself Heloisa Teixeira. After years of keeping the name of her ex-husband, the lawyer and art gallerist Luiz Buarque de Hollanda, a member of the family of artists and intellectuals, the Buarque’s de Hollanda. Heloisa took back her mother’s family name, in order to rethink her subjective trajectory as a feminist. This stance finally clarified the researcher’s dubious stance, who for years left her family connection with the Buarque’s de Hollanda hanging in the air, mobilising it when it benefited her. With this, her origins from a family of doctors

is probably the most prominent female figure in the area of feminist cultural criticism in a more recent period, since her activity began in the mid-1980s and is still ongoing.<sup>47</sup>

As a cultural researcher, also involved in experimental and marginal poetry, Heloisa is one of the pioneers in feminist studies at the Brazilian academia, with study groups at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Together with her students, she conducted a survey on women in the arts sectors, which inspired the publications *Quase Catálogo 1* about women filmmakers, and *Quase Catálogo 2*, about visual artists in Rio de Janeiro. Hollanda comments on the presence of the feminist studies in academia as follows:

“What definitively distinguishes and distances feminist theories from post-structuralist thought is the feminist commitment to articulating the critique of the hegemony of the identical and the legitimacy of absolute and universal meanings with the historical processes of construction and representation of the category ‘woman’. Cutting-edge feminist thought is marked by the demand for a theoretical and methodological approach in which the question of women, like all questions of meaning, is systematically particularised, specified and historically located, opposing any and all perspectives. essentialist or ontological.”<sup>48</sup>

Beyond this, she has also ventured into the curatorial sphere, and together with the Brazilian curator Paulo Herkenhoff, she carried out a curatorial survey of Brazilian female artists in the exhibition *Manobras Radicais*<sup>49</sup> in 2006.

---

from the middle of São Paulo state became clear, as well as her easy access to financial resources, M. Fortuna, “Não vou morrer Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda”, diz uma das maiores pensadoras do feminismo brasileiro, que não quer mais ser reconhecida pelo sobrenome do marido”, *O globo*, 17 July 2023, <https://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/noticia/2023/07/17/nao-vou-morrer-heloisa-buarque-de-hollanda-diz-uma-das-maiores-pensadoras-do-feminismo-brasileiro-que-nao-quer-mais-ser-reconhecida-pelo-sobrenome-do-marido.ghtml> [accessed 5 June 2024].

47 “[...] still under pressure from the dictatorship, I worked with the resistance, or marginal, culture, so I felt particularly susceptible to women’s struggles. In 1982, before the movements for direct elections, I went to do a post-doctorate on the relationship between politics and culture at Columbia University, in the United States. Not three months had passed and the penny dropped. I discovered I was a feminist 7,666 kilometres from Brazil. My case was not the only one. Studies show that most so-called Third Wave feminists spent a period outside the country, either in exile, for studies or because of unfavourable circumstances of work and creation in Brazil during the lead years”, H.B. de Hollanda, *Explosão Feminista. Arte, Cultura, Política e Universidade*, São Paulo, 2018, p. 14.

48 H.B. de Hollanda, *Tendências e Impasses. O feminismo como crítica da cultura*, Rio de Janeiro, 1994, p. 9.

49 “The show was on display between 8 August and 15 October at the CCBB unit in São Paulo, and had little journalistic exposure, despite some paid advertisements and a brief television report covering the opening of the event – eventually, when a more analytical article appeared in the written press, it was immediately qualified in relation to the feminist agenda, excusing the show for such an omission, alleging ‘feminices’ and women’s

The project is the first art show in Brazil that put the word feminism in their curatorial stance and aimed to present a large variety of women artists in Brazil. Hollanda tells us in the exhibition catalogue that “the great legacy of feminism for the new generations was the privilege, previously denied to women, of expressing their anger. The art and literature of the 21st century is proof of this. Just as they discovered a strategy of radicalising this anger: they shouldn’t lose their tenderness”.<sup>50</sup>

Herkenhoff has long defended the thesis that women did not contribute to the plastic arts in Brazil, but constituted it – however, if the inclusive assertion of Herkenhoff is true, the curator does not develop it critically, leaving Hollanda in charge of formal and social investigations on the subject, whether in the applicability of feminism as a method of cultural criticism, or in the explanations in the exhibition catalogue.

Incidentally, it is worth pointing out that it was that exhibition that recently established a certain visibility to the process of erasing the names and productions of Brazilian women artists from the national art canon. Assuming this iconic position at national level, a fearless nomination of a feminist project, some aspects were highlighted at the curatorial essays, with explanations and provocations by the curators, as we can see in Hollanda’s assertion: “Post-feminism 2 > The great legacy of feminism for the new generations was the privilege, denied to women for millennia, of expressing their anger. > HBH”.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda was one of the few intellectuals at that time who re-elaborated her own perception about the feminist struggles and propositions through the years. If Leirner and Amaral got stuck in anachronical perspectives, Hollanda allowed herself to rethink and correct past conceptions:

“I listened, I was enchanted and wanted/want to record this moment. I am a third wave feminist. My way and my strategies are not what I see in the open scene. How am I going to speak for, or even about, this generation that took me by storm? Feminism today is not the same as it was in the 1980s. If at that time I was still discovering the differences between women, the intersectionality, the multiplicity of their oppression, of their demands, now the feminisms of difference have assumed, victoriously, their places of speaking, as one of the most legitimate disputes they have ahead of them [...]. Let the new feminists come and run me over, talk to me, tell me”.<sup>52</sup>

---

culpability for the effective absence of feminist topics in the artistic environment (Lavigne, 2006), thus maintaining the sad tradition of the Brazilian media regarding female and feminist events in the arts: silence! – or at least that was the journalistic perspective until 2015, when the issue became weaponised, to the point of crystallising into an economic and symbolic market niche”, T. Trizoli, “Febre Feminista: paradoxos das exposições de mulheres no Brasil”, *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte*, 2013, 7, no. 1, p. 172

50 H.B. de Hollanda, P. Herkenhoff, *Manobras Radicais*, CCBB, São Paulo, 2006, p. 101.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

52 H.B. de Hollanda, *Explosão Feminista. Arte, Cultura, Política e Universidade*, São Paulo, 2018, pp. 10–12.

These specific examples on the definition of femininity and feminism, expressed by Sheila Leirner and Aracy Amaral, make clear the kind of “damage” caused by the poor reception of feminism in Brazilian territory. Even in the case of two intellectuals, with training and access to enlightened and cultural circles, the ghost of the feminist figure as a frustrated and complaining creature took on such proportions in the popular mentality, that it made it difficult for an entire generation of cultural agents to understand the relevance of cultural criticism with a focus on feminism.

The final case of this article, the one of Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, is exemplary precisely because it shows the presence of a woman in the field of art criticism and curatorship, who does not fear naming herself a feminist. And that presence was only allowed because Hollanda appeared at a different moment in the reception of those propositions.

## References

- “A líder prega apoio à greve”, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 16 April 1971.
- “Abaixo o sexo”, *Correio da Manhã*, 27 November 1969.
- Amaral, A., “O cotidiano feminino transformado em arte”, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 04 November 1979.
- Amaral, A., *Arte e Meio Artístico: entre a feijoada e o X-Burguer*, São Paulo, 1983.
- Amaral, A., Herkenhoff, P., *Ultramodern: the Art of Contemporary Brazil*, Washington, 1993.
- Amaral, A., “A mulher nas artes”, *Textos do Trópico de Capricórnio. Artigos e Ensaios (1980-2005)*, V. 3: *Bienais e artistas contemporâneos no Brasil*, 2006, 34.
- Amaral, A., “Interview”, *SESC Magazine*, April 2014, 202, [https://portal.sescsp.org.br/online/artigo/7445\\_aracy+amaral#/tagcloud=lista](https://portal.sescsp.org.br/online/artigo/7445_aracy+amaral#/tagcloud=lista).
- Amaral, A., “Vejo pouco grito na arte brasileira”, *Select Art*, 1 September 2017, <https://select.art.br/vejo-pouco-grito-na-arte-brasileira/>.
- Barros, R., *Elogio ao toque ou como falar de arte feminista à brasileira*, Rio de Janeiro, 2016.
- Borges, J.V., “Da (des)Construção do ‘Clássico’: O Segundo Sexo e Mística Feminina no Brasil e na Argentina”, in: *Seminário Internacional Fazendo Gênero 10 (Anais Eletrônicos)*, Florianópolis, 2013, [http://www.fg2013.wwc2017.eventos.dype.com.br/resources/anais/20/1381836121\\_ARQUIVO\\_joana-vieira-borges.pdf](http://www.fg2013.wwc2017.eventos.dype.com.br/resources/anais/20/1381836121_ARQUIVO_joana-vieira-borges.pdf).
- Borges, J.V., *Trajétórias e Leituras Feministas no Brasil e na Argentina (1960-1980)*, MA thesis in history, Center for Philosophy and Human Sciences, Federal University of Santa Catarina, 2013.
- Buitoni, D.S., *A mulher de papel: a representação da mulher pela imprensa feminina brasileira*, São Paulo, 2009.
- Cisne, M., *Feminismo e consciência de classe no Brasil*, São Paulo, 2015.
- Costa, M.P., *Entre sonhos e consumo: as representações femininas na Revista Claudia (1964-1985)*, MA thesis in history, Faculty of Sciences and Letters, Universidade Estadual Paulista, Assis, 2009.
- Crescêncio, C.L., “Antifeminismo e ressentimento: as mulheres no O Pasquim”, *Seminário Internacional Fazendo Gênero 11 & 13th Women’s Worlds Congress*, Florianópolis, 2017.



- Duarte, A.R.F., “Betty Friedan – morre a feminista que estremeceu a América”, *Revista Estudos Feministas*, 2006, 14, no. 1.
- Fernandes, M., “Especulação, todas I”, *O Pasquim*, 9 October 1972, 170.
- Fernandes, M., Ziraldo, Jaguar, “Cidinha Campos no ar”, *O Pasquim*, 6 January 1975, 287.
- Fortuna, M., “‘Não vou morrer Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda’, diz uma das maiores pensadoras do feminismo brasileiro, que não quer mais ser reconhecida pelo sobrenome do marido”, *O Globo*, 17 July 2023, <https://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/noticia/2023/07/17/nao-vou-morrer-heloisa-buarque-de-hollanda-diz-uma-das-maiores-pensadoras-do-feminismo-brasileiro-que-nao-quer-mais-ser-reconhecida-pelo-sobrenome-do-marido.ghtml>.
- Freud, S., *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, translated by J. Crick, New York, 2003.
- Hartmann, H., *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*, in: *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. L. Sargent, London, 1981, pp. 1–43.
- “Heloneida Studart, nossa candidata a deputada estadual”, *O Pasquim*, 9 October 1978, 488.
- Hollanda, H.B. de, *Tendências e Impasses. O feminismo como crítica da cultura.*, Rio de Janeiro, 1994.
- Hollanda, H.B. de, *Impressões de viagem: CPC, vanguarda e desbunde*, São Paulo, 1981.
- Hollanda, H.B. de, Herkenhoff, P., *Manobras Radicais*, São Paulo, CCBB, 2006.
- Hollanda, H.B. de, *Explosão Feminista. Arte, Cultura, Política e Universidade*, São Paulo, 2018.
- Hollanda, H.B. de, *Pensamento feminista Brasileiro: formação e context*, Rio de Janeiro, 2019.
- Hollanda, H.B. de, *Pensamento feminista hoje: perspectivas decoloniais*, Rio de Janeiro, 2020.
- Hollanda, H.B. de, *Pensamento feminista hoje: sexualidades no Sul Global*, Rio de Janeiro, 2020.
- Karawejczyk, M., “O Feminismo em Boa Marcha no Brasil! Bertha Lutz e a Conferência pelo Progresso Feminino”, *Revista Estudos Feministas*, 2018, 2, no. 26, pp. 1–17.
- Leirner, S., “Arte Feminina e Feminismo”, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 13 February 1977.
- Leirner, S., “Feminismo na arte brasileira: opinião da crítica”, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 27 February 1977.
- Lessa, C., *A estratégia de desenvolvimento 1974-1976: sonho e fracasso*, UNICAMP. IE, 1998.
- Macarini, J.P., *A política econômica da ditadura militar no limiar do “milagre” brasileiro: 1967/69*, IE/UNICAMP, 2000, 99.
- Maurício, J., “Mulheres no Ibirapuera: 275 obras”, *Correio da Manhã*, Rio de Janeiro, 27 January 1961
- Moraes, M.L.Q. de, *Vinte anos de Feminismo, livre docente* thesis, Department of Sociology of the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences, State University of Campinas, 1996.
- Morais, F., “A mulher”, *O Globo*, 23 September 1976.
- Morais, F., “Presença da mulher na arte brasileira”, *O Globo*, 8 March 1982.
- Muraro, R.M., *A Mulher na Construção do Mundo Futuro*, Petrópolis, 1966.
- Muraro, R.M., *Os seis meses em que fui homem*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Rio de Janeiro, 1991.
- Muraro, R.M., *Memórias de uma mulher impossível*, Rio de Janeiro, 1999.
- “No clube da Luluzinha”, *O Pasquim*, 1 March 1975, 295.
- “O Pasquim (ainda com fama de machista) abre alas para Rose Marie Muraro”, *O Pasquim*, 10 June 1981, 623.

- “O Women’s Club recebe... Desfile de prêt-à-porter”, *Correio da Manhã*, 25 June 1961.
- Palmer, H. (alias Clarice Lispector), *Correio da Manhã*, 19 February 1960.
- Correio da Manhã*, 21 April 1963.
- Pinheiro, A.M.B., “O Feminismo Midiático de Rose Marie Muraro”, *Seminário Internacional Fazendo Gênero 11 & 13th Women’s Worlds Congress*, Florianópolis, 2017.
- Pinheiro, M., *Rato de Redação - Sig e a História do Pasquim*, São Paulo, 2022.
- Pinsky, C.B., Pedro J.M., eds., *Nova história das mulheres no Brasil*, São Paulo, 2012.
- Pinto, C.R.J., “Feminismo, história e poder”, *Revista de sociologia e política*, 2010, 18, no. 36, pp. 15–23.
- Pontual, R., “Feminismo e Arte”, *Jornal do Brasil*, 3 December 1974.
- Rago, M., “Epistemologia feminista, gênero e história”, in: *Masculino, feminino, plural*, eds. J. Pedro, M. Grossi, Florianópolis, 1998.
- “Rose Marie Muraro denuncia: Paulo Francis é híbrido”, *O Pasquim*, 7 April 1971, 91.
- Saffioti, H.I.B., *A Mulher na Sociedade de Classes: mito e realidade*, Petrópolis, 1976.
- Soihet, R., Esteves, F.C., “O Centro da Mulher Brasileira (CMBRJ) e suas experiências nos anos 1970 e 1980”, in: *Revolução e democracia (1964...)*, eds. J. Ferreira, D.A. Reis, Rio de Janeiro, 2007.
- Soihet, R., “Preconceitos nas charges de O Pasquim: mulheres e a luta pelo controle do corpo”, *ArtCultura*, 2007, 9, no. 14, pp. 39–53.
- Soihet, R., “Zombaria como arma antifeminista: instrumento conservador entre libertários”, *Revista Estudos Feministas*, 2005, 13, no. 3, pp. 591–611.
- Souza, T.M. de, “Arte como Medida: aspectos da autoria na mediação de exposições de arte – a 18ª e 19ª Bienal de São Paulo”, XVII Brazilian Congress of Sociology, 20–23 July 2015, Porto Alegre (RS).
- Studart, H., *Mulher, Objeto de Cama e Mesa*, Petrópolis, 1976.
- Traister, R., “Mad Women”, *New York Times*, 23 January 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/books/review/Traister-t.html>.
- Trizoli, T., *Trajetórias de Regina Vater: Por uma crítica feminista da arte brasileira*, MA thesis, University of São Paulo, Museum of Contemporary art, Program of Aesthetics and Art History, 2011.
- Trizoli, T., *Atravessamentos feministas: um panorama de mulheres artistas no Brasil dos anos 60/70*, PhD thesis, University of São Paulo, Faculty of Education, Program of Philosophy, 2018.
- Trizoli, T., “Um problema de gênero: Aracy Amaral e os ensaios sobre o feminino nas artes”, 2nd International Symposium on Systemic Art Relations. *Art Beyond Art (Annals)*, Porto Alegre, 2020
- Trizoli, T., “Febre Feminista: paradoxos das exposições de mulheres no Brasil”, *MODOS: Revista de História da Arte*, 2013, 7, no. 1.
- Zimmerman de Andrade, M., *Rebeldia pronta para o consumo: a construção da cultura juvenil no Brasil dos anos 1950-60. 2016*, PhD thesis (doctorate in politics, memory and city) – Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences, State University of Campinas, Campinas, 2016.

*Andrea Giunta*

CONSEJO NACIONAL DE INVESTIGACIONES CIENTÍFICAS Y TÉCNICAS, ARGENTINA

ORCID: 0000-0001-6773-6328

## From Rio de la Plata to the Extreme West: Feminist Historiographies of Art and Artistic Activism in Argentina and Chile

### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to employ a comparative approach that allows us to understand the approaches towards art historiography articulated in two countries of South America. Although women artists had organised themselves early on in societies, in women's exhibitions, and were one of the driving forces in art, when we look at how the art canon has been configured in these countries, we must move to the end of 20th century and the beginning of 21st to find consistent work that dissociates itself from dominant patriarchal perspectives.

In this article, I propose to approach this process comparatively, looking at two periods: first, the eighties-nineties and the introduction of gender studies; and second, the exhibitions, research and books produced, above all, since 2000. In both periods, I shall also consider the artistic activism that generated historiography. In the two cases studied, Argentina and Chile, the tension between democracy and dictatorship will also be considered as a relevant factor that has interrupted a process that had begun in the 1970s and would be resumed with the return of democracy.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Latin America, Argentina, Chile, dictatorship, post-dictatorship, art feminist historiography, comparativism

---

1 A partial and preliminary version of this text, focused on Argentine historiography of art, was published as "Historiography of Feminist Art in Argentina from the 1970 through Today", by AWARE: Archives of Women Artists. Archives and Exhibitions, 3 March 2024, [https://awarewomenartists.com/en/magazine/historiographies-de-lart-feministe-en-argentine-des-annees-1960-a-nos-jours/?from=search&fbclid=IwAR3dkoVjt3EdLAoKZOCrAeZ9Rdh9nevMT7PQ38oxYukNtEBuk\\_S0d\\_LOYDc](https://awarewomenartists.com/en/magazine/historiographies-de-lart-feministe-en-argentine-des-annees-1960-a-nos-jours/?from=search&fbclid=IwAR3dkoVjt3EdLAoKZOCrAeZ9Rdh9nevMT7PQ38oxYukNtEBuk_S0d_LOYDc) [accessed 15 March 2024].

## Introduction

The history of feminist art has been written from a predominantly Anglo-Saxon perspective. Such is the literature that dominates its history. However, outside the centres that have the power to disseminate their narratives in English, the lingua franca of contemporaneity, there have been many histories of feminist art in Latin America. Their history has been written in the last twenty years, giving rise to a historiography that accounts for the iconography that Latin American artists have produced since the second wave of feminism. Comparative histories make it possible to establish concepts, contexts, simultaneities, and differences. What is shared by the two national cases we will deal with in this article is the intersection between feminism as activism, as an intellectual movement, and a political context that conditioned its development based on the political history of the countries caused by dictatorship in Chile between 1973 and 1990 and in Argentina between 1976 and 1983.

What are the criteria from which we construct this comparative perspective? Comparativism has been developed in cultural studies and cultural history<sup>2</sup> and in art studies.<sup>3</sup> The extent to which they erode the specific in pursuit of the generalisations that can arise from comparison has been intensely discussed. The flip side is the focus on national history that erases simultaneous processes, between which there may even be points of contact. Our perspective argues that any comparison that considers regional and even global processes is enriched when the conceptual framework considers contact zones,<sup>4</sup> and simultaneities based on shared cultural perspectives.<sup>5</sup> In our case, the contact zones were articulated by Nelly Richard's lectures and books, while the shared cultural perspective that allows us to understand simultaneous processes is to be found in the experiences of the dictatorships in Chile and Argentina, in the international moment of theories on feminism and gender studies in the 1990s, and in the new emergence of feminist activism in the 21st century. Comparative studies of the art of Argentina and Chile have been carried out extensively in recent years<sup>6</sup> a development to which this article aims to contribute.

2 A. Gorelik et al., "Dossier. El comparativismo como problema", *Prismas. Revista de historia intelectual* 2004 ok, No. 8, pp. 121–243.

3 M.A. García, "Toward a Reappraisal of Comparative Studies: The Case of South American Modernism", *Grey Room*, Fall 2020, 81, pp. 72–101.

4 M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London–New York, 1992.

5 A. Giunta, *Contra el canon. El arte contemporáneo en un mundo sin centro*, Buenos Aires, 2020; A. Giunta, "Simultaneous Avant-Gardes and Horizontal Art Histories", in: *Horizontal Art Histories and Beyond. Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, eds. A. Jakubowska, M. Radomska, New York, 2023, p. 7.

6 S. Dolinko, A.M. Risko, S. Vidal Valenzuela (eds.), *Intercambios transandinos. Historias del arte entre Argentina y Chile*, Santiago de Chile, 2022.

## Argentina

### Introduction

When the feminist art movements in Latin America are analysed comparatively, the chronologies show that Argentinian artists got involved from the late 1960s onwards. They joined a climate of political activism with which, in some cases, they took part in what was called “double militancy” – in politics and in feminism – while they differed in others. In the Latin American context, left-wing activism understood that the feminist revolution took place within the framework of a generalised revolution.<sup>7</sup>

In the feminist group UFA (Unión Feminista Argentina), created in 1969 and active until 1973, we find artists such as the photographer Alicia D’Amico. The feminist and activist work of filmmaker María Luisa Bemberg also belongs to this period.<sup>8</sup> Her documentary films (*El mundo de la mujer*, 1972, and *Juguetes*, 1976) deconstructed the mandates of patriarchal society articulated by industry and education.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, artistic feminism expressed itself in Argentina with a clear program from the beginning of the second wave at the end of the 1960s. However, since the nineteenth century, it is women’s exhibitions, organised by women, that have been a way of making their work visible.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to what it may seem, women artists were very active during the first half of the twentieth century. They painted, wrote, exhibited, and organised exhibitions. However, they were not included in the various books in which history was written. In this sense, the history of these exhibitions is central to a feminist historiography of art.<sup>11</sup>

---

7 A. Giunta, “Mujeres entre activismos. Una aproximación comparativa al feminismo artístico en Argentina y Colombia”, *Caiana. Revista de Historia del Arte y Cultura Visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte (CAIA)*, 2014, No. 4, pp. 1–12.

8 M.L. Rosa, *Legados de libertad. El arte feminista en la efervescencia democrática*, Buenos Aires, 2014.

9 A. Giunta, *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano. Historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo*, Buenos Aires, 2018. Extended English translation published as *The Political Body. Stories on Art, Feminism, and Emancipation in Latin America*, Berkeley, 2023.

10 L. Malosetti Costa, “Una historia de fantasmas. Artistas plásticas de la generación del ochenta en Buenos Aires”, in: *El canon accidental. Mujeres artistas en Argentina (1890–1950)*, ed. G. Gluzman, Buenos Aires, 2021. Originally presented at the VI Conference on Women’s History and I Ibero–American Congress of Women and Gender Studies, Interdisciplinary Institute of Gender Studies, Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, University of Buenos Aires, 2–5 August 2000.

11 G. Gluzman, “Feminismos, educación, creatividad y libertad en la Buenos Aires post-dictatorial. El caso de Lugar de mujer”, *Caiana. Revista de Historia del Arte y Cultura Visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte (CAIA)*, 2021, No. 18, pp. 110–127, [https://caiana.caiana.com.ar/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/caiana-18D\\_-Gluzman\\_pdf-CORREGIDOFinal.pdf](https://caiana.caiana.com.ar/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/caiana-18D_-Gluzman_pdf-CORREGIDOFinal.pdf) [accessed 17 March 2024].

When art history took on the forms in which its normative narrative was constructed, a radical shift took place. This is when a feminist art history and historiography was proposed. What was left out? How were the matrices of taste constituted? To what extent do the themes of art history account for the patriarchal ways in which society is constructed?

In the history of Argentinean art, there was a clearly visible shift in 1990s. It was not on the fringes of the feminist movements that were reorganised with the return of democracy after 1983. Nor was it oblivious to the regional exchange in Latin America, from which an interdisciplinary area of gender studies was activated. The emergence of a history of art with a gender perspective was also linked to the agendas of the humanities (primarily history and literature), which established new topics that had an impact on art history studies. During these years, together with the women-only exhibitions curated by women, the established narratives of art history began to be dismantled, as did the perspectives from which the writing of art history, both in relation to the nineteenth century<sup>12</sup> and to the twentieth century,<sup>13</sup> were approached. This historiographical change is linked to the third wave of feminism, centred on dismantling narratives and processes of identity construction, deconstructing them, and unravelling the plots of colonial biological essentialism.

A second period can be distinguished in the 21st century. Since 2008, a series of articles,<sup>14</sup> books<sup>15</sup> and exhibitions with research and catalogues<sup>16</sup> have been published that document, analyse and reinterpret chapters of Argentine art. Exhibitions dedicated to the revision of women artists' work are increasing considerably. This historiographic period coincided with what is considered the fourth wave of feminism, characterised by the mass mobilisation that has occurred with the *niunamenos* movement since 2015 in Argentina – a movement in dialogue with Mexican activism against femicides in Ciudad Juárez, and also in Polish activism against the prohibition of legal abortion and calls for a women's strike. This period has seen extreme activism that paralleled the revisions of art history. Since the 2001 crisis in Argentina and in the context

12 L. Malosetti Costa, "El rapto de cautivas blancas: un aspecto erótico de la barbarie en la plástica rioplatense del siglo XIX", *Arte, historia e identidad en América: Visiones Comparativas*, eds. G. Curiel, R. González Mello, Zacatecas, 1994, pp. 297–314.

13 A. Giunta, "La mirada femenina y el discurso de la diferencia", *1er. Coloquio Latinoamericano de Estética y Crítica*, Buenos Aires, 3–5 November 1993, published in: R. M. Ravera, ed., *Los signos del arte*, Buenos Aires, 1999, pp. 11–15.

14 A. Giunta, "Género y feminismo. Perspectivas desde América Latina", *ExitBook*, 2009, No. 9, pp. 90–95.

15 Rosa, op. cit.; G. Gluzman, *Trazos invisibles. Mujeres artistas en Buenos Aires (1890–1923)*, Buenos Aires, 2016; Giunta, *Feminismo...*

16 C. Fajardo-Hill, A. Giunta, *Radical Women. Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, Munich, 2017 (Portuguese edition by Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil, 2018); L. Francisco, ed., *Tácticas luminosas: artistas mujeres en torno a la Galería del Rojas*, Buenos Aires, 2019; G. Gluzman, *El canon accidental. Mujeres artistas en Argentina (1890–1950)*, Buenos Aires, 2021.

of feminist activism, artistic collectives have also emerged and multiplied. In what follows, we shall focus on these last two periods.

## Historiography of the 1990s Reorganisation of feminist activism during the post-dictatorship period

The return to democracy brought new visibility to an activism that had been hidden or displaced during the dictatorship, along with the return of many cultural actors who had gone into exile. These included artists and writers like Ana Amado, Elsa Flores Ballesteros, Elda Cerrato or Marcia Schwartz, to name just a few.

It should also be noted that, in what is called *insilio* (the experience of those who stayed in the country during the dictatorship), feminist activity did not disappear. The word feminism was erased from the names of the groups and was replaced with the word woman or with the name of a prominent woman. These groups or associations included the Centro de Estudios Sociales de la Mujer (linked to the Frente de Izquierda Popular), the Asociación de Mujeres Argentinas (AMA), which later became the Asociación de Mujeres Alfonsina Storni (AMAS), and the Asociación Juana Manso in the city of Córdoba. During these years, the dynamics of study groups was also important. While militancy was prevented by the repressive system, they sought channels for keeping up with the trends and training.

With the defeat in the Falklands War and the end of dictatorship, new groups were founded, such as the Organización Feminista Argentina (OFA), Libera, Derechos Iguales para la Mujer Argentina (DIMA), Asociación de Trabajo y Estudio de la Mujer-25 de noviembre (ATEM) and Reunión de Mujeres. 1980 saw the first public demand for shared parental authority, which was legalised in 1985 – until then it had only belonged to the father. The central point of the feminist agenda in the post-dictatorship period was the struggle for the legalisation of abortion. This was already present in UFA in 1973, but democracy helped expand it.<sup>17</sup> On the march of 8 March 1984, flyers were distributed for the legalisation of abortion and four years later, the commission for the right to abortion was formed. In 1986, National Women's Meetings began, which allowed the incorporation of popular sectors.<sup>18</sup> In 1999, the Coordinating Committee for the Right to Abortion was formed. Starting with the white scarves of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the

---

17 M. Tarducci, "Escenas claves de la lucha por el derecho al aborto en Argentina", *Salud Colectiva*, 2018, 14, No. 3, [http://www.scielo.org.ar/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1851-82652018000300425](http://www.scielo.org.ar/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1851-82652018000300425) [accessed 15 March 2024].

18 G. Di Marco, "Los movimientos de mujeres en la Argentina y la emergencia del pueblo feminista", *Aljaba*, 2010, 14, [http://www.scielo.org.ar/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1669-57042010000100003](http://www.scielo.org.ar/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1669-57042010000100003) [accessed 17 March 2024].

campaign for the legalisation of abortion adopted the green scarf (symbolically connected with nature and life), which became a powerful visual sign from 2015 onwards.

### Reorganisation of the feminist culture

The first group linking women with culture was *Lugar de Mujer*, created in 1983 on the foundation of a previous conference on women's creativity.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the photographer Alicia D'Amico (who delivered a workshop on how to work on one's own image in relation to the construction of an identity), women painters, tapestry artists and experimental filmmakers (such as Narcisca Hirsch) exhibited or delivered workshops at *Lugar de Mujer*. In 1984, 8 March was celebrated with exhibitions by women artists organised by the Museo de Arte Moderno and the Museo Sívori in Buenos Aires. The historic march in which women celebrated the return of democracy was photographed by Alicia D'Amico, who also produced the book *Podría ser yo*, which offers a portrait of women's work.<sup>20</sup>

In the artistic field, exhibitions of women artists intensified from the 1980s onwards. In 1984, the Museum of Modern Art organised the exhibition *La mujer en el arte*. In 1986 and 1988, Monique Altschul organised the exhibitions *Mitominas I* and *II* held at the Centro Cultural Recoleta, Buenos Aires, and in 1986 and 1988 she delivered two more with contemporary artists reviewing the myths that condition female representations.<sup>21</sup> *La mujer en la plástica Argentina I*, an exhibition organised by the critic Rosa Faccaro (linked to *Lugar de mujer*), at the Centro Cultural Las Malvinas in 1988, was probably the first exhibition with historiographical research and practices in Argentina.<sup>22</sup> These exhibitions show that in the 1980s, feminism was expressed in art with exhibitions that sought to give visibility to artists erased from the dominant narratives. Unfortunately, none of these exhibitions had catalogues.

### Gender Perspectives and Art History

The return of democracy opened up a new field of academic research. Newly graduated female art historians entered the research grant system of the University of Buenos Aires and CONICET (National Research Council). This opened the door for research that developed a focus on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the 1990s, gender studies entered the academic field. Gender, rather than feminism, was the key word. Studies on the women captives of the indigenous

---

19 Gluzman, "Feminismos, educación y creatividad...".

20 Ibid.

21 Rosa, op. cit.

22 Gluzman, "Feminismos, educación y creatividad...".



malones in the 19th century<sup>23</sup> and on the literature that narrated them (the poem *La cautiva* by Esteban Echeverría, 1837, Tabaré, by Zorrilla de San Martín, 1888) were central. The study of representations of captive women implied a deconstructive perspective of art history.<sup>24</sup> This was not about revising the history of women artists. It was about understanding to what extent the place of women had been constructed from representations of culture made predominantly by men, concerning to what extent the history of civilization against barbarism had been shaped by literature and representations of white women abducted by Indians.

In addition to studies of history and literature, Griselda Pollock's work in art history was also important.<sup>25</sup> For Pollock, it is not just a matter of constructing a counter-narrative that rescues the place of women artists, but of considering to what extent the matrixes of patriarchy, as an ideology of representation, have shaped the histories of art and the construction of the notion of gender as difference. It is not just a matter of making a history of women's art, but of understanding the foundations of the narratives of art history.

Simultaneously, another line of thought was articulated from the transcordilleran exchange between Chile and Argentina. The Chilean theorist Nelly Richard is fundamental here. We shall analyse the exhibitions she curated and her books in the next section. Now we want to highlight that the effect that her lectures and publications had in Argentina was central. This includes her book *Femenino/Masculino*, whose impact is visible in the study of contemporary Argentinean art from a gender perspective.<sup>26</sup> The study of the work of Alicia Herrero and Graciela Sacco did not seek to rescue them as female artists, from a biological perspective, but to analyse the construction of female subjectivities in their work.<sup>27</sup> It sought to identify and analyse the effects of gender and the construction of a gaze. The reading of Craig Owens,<sup>28</sup> translated into Spanish in 1985,<sup>29</sup> was important for the understanding of these perspectives, as well as the translations of Jean Scott.<sup>30</sup>

---

23 C. Iglesia, J. Schwartzman, *Cautivas y Misioneros. Mitos blancos de la conquista*, Buenos Aires, 1987; C. Iglesia, "La mujer cautiva: cuerpo, mito y frontera", in: *Historia de las mujeres en Occidente*. Tomo 3. *Del Renacimiento a la Edad Moderna*, eds. G. Duby, M. Perrot, Madrid, 1992.

24 Malosetti Costa, "El rapto ...", pp. 297–314.

25 G. Pollock, *Vision & Difference. Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, London, 1988.

26 N. Richard, *Masculino / Femenino: prácticas de la diferencia y cultura democrática*, Santiago de Chile, 1993 (translated by Duke University Press, 2004)

27 Giunta, "La mirada femenina..."; A. Giunta, "Graciela Sacco: intervenciones del cuerpo/ impresiones luminosas", in: *Escrituras solares. La heliografía en el campo artístico*, ed. G. Sacco, Rosario, 1994, pp. 58–89.

28 C. Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism", in: *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. H. Foster, Seattle, 1983, pp. 57–83.

29 H. Foster, ed., *La posmodernidad*, Barcelona, 1985.

30 J. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis", *The American Historical Review*, 1988, 5, No. 91, pp. 1053–1075, doi:10.2307/1864376. JSTOR 1864376.

It is important to highlight that social sciences and gender studies were echoed in the formation of the Gender Studies Research Institute of the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature of the Universidad de Buenos Aires. The nucleus was formed in 1992 as the Interdisciplinary Area of Women's Studies (AIEM), with the participation of the Arts, Anthropology, Education, Philosophy, History, Classical Languages and Literature departments.

When it comes to exhibitions, they also showed a conceptual shift that involved gender perspectives. In 1994, three artists (Cristina Schiavi, Alicia Herrero and Ana López) produced a radical exhibition *Violaciones domésticas* (Domestic Violations) at the Espacio Giesso. In their work, they deconstructed gender in the domestic environment. Furthermore, in 1995 and 1996, curator Adriana Lauría organised two editions of the exhibition *Juego de Damas* (Game of Ladies, Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes Juan B. Castagnino, the Espacio Nave of the Teatro Auditorium in Mar del Plata and the CCR) and in 1997, Elena Oliveras curated *Tajos bajos* (Low Tacos, Centro Cultural Borges). The aim was to exhibit works by women artists while at the same time questioning heteronormative sexuality.

### Art, Feminism, and Postcrisis

The economic crisis that led to the resignation of the nation's president Fernando de la Rúa in 2001, the timing of which was dominated by the role of the IMF, provoked one of the most intense social upheavals in Argentina's history. The streets were flooded with demonstrations expressing distrust of politics. Its impact on art was expressed by the intensification of activism. This was a moment in which the artist's individual work was diluted in the collective.<sup>31</sup>

Feminist groups linked to social protest, activism, and feminism emerged. These groups serve as evidence to growing activism: *Mujeres Públicas* (Public Women), 2003; *Belleza y Felicidad Fiorito* (Beauty and Happiness Fiorito), 2003; *Serigrafistas Queer* (Queer Serigraphists), 2007; *Desesperadas por el ritmo* (Desperate for rhythm), 2014. These collectives took up the struggle for the legalisation of abortion, for the right to creativity for poor and excluded women, for forms of representation of queer aesthetics, for the equal right to representation of women in the art world.

The feminist movement has had a radical orientation in Latin America since 2015. On 3 June 2015, a massive demonstration against femicides in Argentina was organised under the name of *Ni una menos* (Not One Less), words taken from a poem by Susana Chávez in protest against the femicides of Guanajuato, Mexico. The author of the poem was assassinated in 2011. Demonstrations are repeated each year on that date and on 8 March. Since 2015, the word feminism has acquired a new legitimacy. It has coexisted with gender and even displaced it.

31 A. Giunta, *Poscrisis. Arte argentino después del 2001*, Buenos Aires, 2009.

Along with this intensification of feminist demonstrations, artistic collectives also multiplied: *Cromoactivismo* (Chromo-activism), 2016; *Nosotras Proponemos* (We Propose), 2017; or *La Lola Mora*, 2018. These collectives emphasise the political meaning of colour, the struggle for the rights of artists understood as workers, for the federalization of art feminism and for the recognition of women artists throughout the country and not only in its capital city, Buenos Aires.

From the historiographical point of view, a generation of art historians who took up feminist approaches in their theses emerged. A generation that became visible when their dissertations, focused on the analysis of the work of women artists in Argentina, were published.<sup>32</sup> On top of that, the exhibition *Radical Women. Latin American Art, 1960-1985* enhanced the visibility of more than a hundred artists from Latin America, many of them little-known.<sup>33</sup> Research for the exhibition began in 2010 and was initially objected to by both male and female curators for focusing only on female artists. The context of feminist activism, visible in the United States with the #the metoo movement, and the opposition to Donald Trump's misogyny, entirely changed the context of reception of this exhibition, from the expected negative reception into a highly positive one. This was visible in its impact on the Latin American and Argentinean scene, together with the effect of activism that directly affected the representation of women artists in awards, institutions, and galleries in Argentina.

Since 2018, the National Salon has introduced a clause of equal representation between women and men, both in the admission process and in the composition of the jury and the awarding of prizes. This change in the regulations was requested and activated by the feminist artistic group *Nosotras Proponemos*.<sup>34</sup> In 2021, under the directorship of Feda Baeza (transfeminist curator and director of Salas Nacionales de Exhibición), the Salon's regulations introduced percentages for trans and non-heteronormative identities. In the same year, an acquisition prize was created for female, binary and trans artists, to incorporate their works into the collections of national museums. Although women do not represent more than 20% at best in these museums, at least public policies have been developed to ensure that inequality is not reproduced.

The prominence of feminism, its presence in the streets, in public discourse, and in cultural life (artistic, editorial) has made it a visible target for the growth of the extreme right. The attack on feminism is a central point of their discursive strategies in the run-up to the elections held in Argentina in November 2023. Legal, free and safe abortion, legalised in December 2020,

---

32 Rosa, op. cit., and Gluzman, *Trazos invisibles*....

33 Fajardo-Hill, Giunta, op. cit.

34 S. Rottenberg, "Women Art Workers in Argentina Demand Gender Equality, and Museums Start to Listen", *Hyperallergic*, 3 September 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/431714/nosotras-proponemos-buenos-aires-international-womens-day/> [accessed 17 March 2024].

is one of the aims of these groups. Groups that arose from digital networks and from discourses of hate in which feminism is a focal point, have also centered on feminist artists and their works of art. The power of images has not lost its relevance in the new order being debated in the country.

## Chile

### Introduction

The popular mobilisation that led to the democratic socialist government of Salvador Allende (1970-1973) had an effect of “overflowing joy” in cultural production.<sup>35</sup> We can highlight, reflecting on those years, the testimony of the artist Cecilia Vicuña, when she declared that “There was a kind of erotic relationship of feeling the revolution and the passion for justice as something powerful, not a duty but a delight”.<sup>36</sup>

In 1971 she travelled to London and there she realised to what extent, for the intelligentsia, Chile was the hope of the planet, proposing a revolution without violence and without persecution of the opposition. The time of activity of Popular Unity was a period of multiple cultural forms, of experimentation, risk and institutional audacity. The legacy of those years can be seen in the urban mural movement of the Ramona Parra Brigades, or in the Solidarity Museum, conceived as world artists’ support for the government of Salvador Allende. The inauguration of the UNCTAD building (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, created in 1964) promoted interaction between the visual arts. The democratisation of books and culture was also sought through the massive and inexpensive editions of the Editorial Nacional Quimantú (1971–1973).

This scenario came to an end with the coup d’état that included the death of Salvador Allende on 11 September 1973. During these years, the struggle of women was inserted in the complete transformation of society and also in the specific women’s agenda. Let us remember that in 1972 the National Women’s Secretariat was created. But women’s organisations opposed to the Popular Unity government (such as Poder Femenino / Feminine Power) were also actively demonstrating with “cacerolazos” and were later praised by the Pinochet dictatorship. During the years of the dictatorship (and even after, until 2016), Pinochet’s wife Lucía Hiriart presided

35 See A. Dorfmann, interviewed by M. Vicuña, Center for the Humanities, Santiago de Chile, Diego Portales University, 2020, <https://www.centroparalashumanidadesudp.cl/ariel-dorfman-50-anos-cultura-en-la-unidad/> [accessed 17 March 2024].

36 See C. Vicuña, interviewed by C. Yañez, Center for the Humanities, Santiago de Chile, Diego Portales University, 2020, <https://www.centroparalashumanidadesudp.cl/cecilia-vicun%cc%83a-50-anos-cultura-en-la-unidad-popular/> [accessed 17 March 2024].

over CEMA Chile (CEntro de MAdres/Center of Mothers), dedicated to the welfare of poor women.

The state violence of the dictatorship (1973-1989), the disappeared, the dead and the imprisoned, provoked the organisation of women who resisted the dictatorship. Slowly, a cultural scene was organised that activated opposition strategies. The second wave of feminism in Chile was represented by organisations opposed to violence against women, which were linked to human rights organisations. One of the visual productions that expressed visual forms of resistance was articulated through the making of arpilleras, within the framework of the support of the Vicaría de la Solidaridad sponsored by the Catholic Church. These were sewn tapestries that visually narrated the social conditions during the dictatorship. The workshops that organised this activity sought to offer economic aid and emotional support for women with family members who were imprisoned, disappeared or were in exile.<sup>37</sup>

In 1975, the exhibition *La mujer en el arte* (Women in Art) promoted by the International Women's Year, whose international conference was held in Mexico City, was held at the Matta Hall of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago, Chile. The exhibition was co-organized by the National Women's Secretariat and the MNBA. Contemporary reviews reveal the censorship implicit in the exclusion of artists active in those years.<sup>38</sup>

## Feminism and gender perspectives since the 1980s and 1990s

In 1983, with the formation of MEMCH'83 (Movimiento Pro Emancipación de la Mujer Chilena),<sup>39</sup> and with the historical, political and discursive intervention represented by the activism of Julieta Kirkwood and the publication

---

37 M. Agosin, *Tapestries of Hope, Tears of Love; the Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974-1994*, University of New Mexico Press, 1996; J. Bryan-Wilson, *Fray. Art + Textile Politics*, Chicago, 2017.

38 On 29 June 2023, the exhibition *Women in Art 1975* opened at the MNBA in Santiago, Chile, curated by Gloria Cortés Aliaga (MNBA) and art historians Nicole González Herrera and Mariairis Flores Leiva, who critically reviewed the exhibition. It compared the previous research and the selection made by the museum's research team with the exhibition that finally took place. The differences were interpreted from the perspective of censorship that selected and excluded artists. This exhibition was curated by sculptor Lily Garafulic, together with Rosa Abarca (museum researcher), who worked hard on the show, along with a team consisting of Mercedes Gaju (coordinator of the National Women's Secretariat), Ángela Riesco (research assistant), Paz Romero (assistant coordinator) and Ernesto Muñoz (secretary coordinator). The exhibition included the works that were excluded in 1975 and the image of the young Mónica Briones, a painter and sculptor murdered during the dictatorship, the first documented case of a lesbophobic hate crime.

39 MEMCH'83 has its origin in the historical MEMCH that was born in 1935 and that won the right for women to vote, and also the right to abortion for therapeutic purposes and as a public health measure for women workers. This right was repealed in 1989, when the dictatorship, before stepping down, penalised it again.

of her book *Ser política en Chile. Las feministas y los partidos* (1985),<sup>40</sup> a feminist history of Chile was introduced by the academy and in dialogue with Latin American networks. Kirkwood belonged to the *Círculo de Estudios de la Mujer* (1979-1983), an association made up of 14 professional women. This group later gave rise to *Casa de la Mujer La Morada* and, later, to *Centro de Estudios de la Mujer* (CEM).

Nelly Richard, a French-educated critic who settled in Chile in the early 1970s, is linked to these intellectual groups and acknowledges the influence of Kirkwood's book. She recognizes the tension in them between those who, like her, focused action on poetics and aesthetics that explored art or writing, and the struggle of feminism understood as a social movement.<sup>41</sup> Richard was central to the articulation of culture and gender perspectives. She participated in the organisation of two important events: Congress of Latin American Women's Literature held in Santiago in 1987 and the exhibition *Women, Art and Periphery* at The Floating Curatorial Gallery at Women in Focus, in Vancouver, of which she was co-curator with artist Lotty Rosenberg and writer Diamela Eltit. Richard's text in the catalogue analysed the work of women painters and photographers as perceptions of tunnel vision, as off-centred and hollowed of meaning. With her curatorial intervention, she reinforced the political place of symbolic practices. Early on, she dismantled essentializing perspectives to focus on discursive power articulations that analyse the relationship between the feminine and the masculine.

Richard introduced the gender perspective in the analysis of works of art. Her book *Feminine/Masculine. Prácticas de la diferencia y cultura democrática* (1993) had, as I have already pointed out, an immediate echo in the writing on contemporary art from a gender perspective in Argentina. In this book, Richard addressed the need for a tactical feminism, capable of activating the critical potential of both the feminism of equality (which proposes that we advance in the political and social struggle to suppress inequalities) and that of difference. She proposed that separation that isolates women's culture as a separate culture which re-essentializes the absolute feminine by confirming polar identities be avoided. Richard called for an intervention that would employ strategic tactics that avoid unilateral positions to activate a complex perspective. In her writing on art, culture and feminism, she does not hesitate to use the term post-feminism, associated with the 1990s feminism.

Nelly Richard's writing and her lectures have made it possible to establish a transcordilleran contact zone. Since the end of the 1980s, she has been participating in art criticism conferences organised by the Argentine Association and the International Association of Art Criticism in Buenos Aires – conferences held at the CAyC, Center for Art and Communication created and

40 J. Kirkwood, *Ser política en Chile. Las feministas y los partidos*, Santiago de Chile, 1982.

41 N. Richard, *Crítica y política* (interviews made by A. Castillo and M. Valderrama), Santiago de Chile, 2013, p. 100.

directed by Jorge Glusberg, a central figure also in the articulation of contact zones between Latin America and Eastern Europe. Her action was also key in the organisation of the 1987 congress of women writers (promoted by Carmen Berenguer and with the collaboration of writer Diamela Eltit and poet Ida Vitale, to name a few). The Argentine intellectuals Josefina Ludmer and Beatriz Sarlo, who had experienced the dictatorship in Argentina and the democratic transition that began with the government of Raúl Alfonsín in 1983, participated in the congress. They were active parallel to Chilean women writers who developed their activity in the repressive context. The *Revista de Crítica Cultural* (Cultural Critic Journal) that Richard founded and directed between 1990 and 2008 created an intellectual network that addressed issues of visual arts, literary criticism, cultural criticism, feminism, gender studies, philosophy, aesthetics, Marxism, post-Marxism, postmodernism, democratic transition, post-dictatorship, and memory.<sup>42</sup>

### Histories of feminist art in the 21st century and artistic activism

Studies on female artists in Chile have a specific bibliography, which has also developed in the curatorial field, from the biography of sculptor Rebeca Matte<sup>43</sup>, to the histories of women artists in Chile in the first half of the 20th century<sup>44</sup>, to the review of the work of Catalina Parra<sup>45</sup> and Luz Donoso,<sup>46</sup> to the exhibitions at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago, Chile, curated by Gloria Cortés Aliaga ((*en*)clave masculino, 2016; *Desacatos. Feminine artistic practices. 1835-1938. MNBA Collection*, 2017; *Women in Art 1975*, 2023), to the author of the book *Modernas. Stories of women in Chilean art, 1900-1950* (2013). The exhibitions also include *Handle With Care* at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo-Quinta Normal that gathers contemporary expressions such as video, performance, and photography in 2007. This task of revision and rescue has a recent expression in the book *Women in the Visual Arts in Chile 2010-2020*, a 2021 initiative of the Ministry of Culture.

In Chile, the development of a feminist historiography and curatorship developed together with activism expressed in works that challenged the patriarchal power of the State, such as the series that Lotty Rosenfeld began

---

42 This journal is crucial for the analysis of Latin American post-dictatorship culture. It can be consulted at <https://americalee.cedinci.org/portfolio-items/revista-de-critica-cultural/> [accessed 17 March 2024].

43 I. Cruz de Amenábar, *Manos de mujer. Rebeca Matte y su época (1875-1929)*, Santiago, 2008.

44 G. Cortés Aliaga, *Modernas. Historias de mujeres en el arte chileno, 1900-1950*, Santiago, 2013.

45 P. Varas, *Catalina Parra. El fantasma político del arte*, Santiago de Chile, 2011.

46 P. Varas, *Luz Donoso. El Arte y la Acción en el Presente*, Santiago de Chile, 2019.

in 1979 with her urban intervention *A mile of crosses on the pavement* on Santiago de Chile's Manquehue Avenue, in which she crossed the lines of the pavement with a ribbon of the same width that configured crosses or + signs. These signs played a leading role in the final process of the dictatorship and were part of the No+ campaign (No more dictatorship, No more censorship, etc.). Chile also had gender activism developed from the late 1980s onwards, even during the dictatorship, by *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* (The Mares of the Apocalypse), a collective integrated by Pedro Lemebel and Francisco Casas. The performance in which they entered naked, on a horse, to re-found the University of Chile (1988) during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship is emblematic. They checked the masculinity of heroes on horseback. A topic that we will find again in contemporary feminist activism in Chile.

In a simultaneous process comparable to what is happening in Argentina, activist artistic feminism has been intense in Chile in the 21st century. In the historiographic field, it is also represented by the successive *Editaton* conferences held at the National Museum of Fine Arts, to incorporate biographies of women artists to Wikipedia. In the artistic field, there are numerous collectives that have achieved international impact: for example, *La Yeguada* collective, created by the artist Cheril Linett in 2017, in connection with the legacy of the Yeguas del Apocalipsis. In their urban performances, in which they invite both women and sexual dissidents to participate, they use nudity and a prosthetic ponytail as a symbolic disguise to confront the police forces and thus raise awareness of the relationship between femicides and punishment. In 2019, with the urban rebellion in Chile (Social Outbreak), they performed to denounce the police rapes during urban repression.<sup>47</sup>

In 2019, in the context of the Social Outbreak of October, the group *LAS-TESIS* was formed in Valparaiso (Martin and Shaw, 2021).<sup>48</sup> Their best-known performance is "A rapist on your way" which has been performed in 52 countries to date. (IMAGE 4) They confront the organisation of justice, the State, and the President of Chile. The lyrics (direct, powerful, and adaptable beyond Chile) have been understood and shared in various cities around the world.<sup>49</sup>

47 J.C. Vazquez, L. Vidal Yevenes, "Arte, Cuerpo y Denuncia, el uso del cuerpo como soporte crítico en el espacio público, una mirada desde las performances de la colectiva *La Yeguada Latinoamericana*," *Index, revista de arte contemporáneo*, 2019, No. 8, Dossier dedicated to Art and Activisms in Latin America, pp 152–159.

48 D. Martin, D. Shaw, "Chilean and Transnational Performances of Disobedience: LAS-TESIS and the Phenomenon of *Un violador en tu camino*", *Bulletin of Latin American Research. Journal of the Society for Latin American Studies*, November 2021, 40, No. 5, pp. 712–729, <https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.13215> [accessed 10 May 2024].

49 The text reads:

The patriarchy is a judge, who judges us to be born,  
and our punishment is the violence that you don't see.  
It is femicide. Immunity for my killer.  
It is disappearance. It is a violation.



## Conclusions

Artistic feminism has been articulated in Argentina since the 1970's through intellectual groups that have raised the agenda of second wave feminism. In Chile, the actions were represented by the formation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs during the government of Salvador Allende. Writing about women artists began in both countries in the 1980s. In Chile, it developed from Nelly Richard's critical writing. The exhibition held in Chile in 1975 on the occasion of the International Year of the Woman shows the framework of the discussion centred on the role of women as "spiritual rock of the Homeland", linked to the tasks of caring for the house and the family. The exhibition did not account for the agenda of the struggle for women's emancipation in second-wave feminism.

Theoretical instruments involving gender perspectives were introduced in the 1980s and 1990s in both these countries. In the context of the dictatorship, this is produced from opaque writing, which seeks to erode the discursive transparency identifiable by the censor. In Argentina, it is found in the framework of the return of democracy, linking intellectuals and artists returning from exile with those who had been inside the country during the dictatorship (insile). The reorganisation, now based on gender agendas, had an effect on academic discourse and on the formation of research centres at universities. Both in Chile and in Argentina singular and group histories on women artists and dissidence have multiplied in the 21st century. Books, exhibitions, and catalogues have enabled the emergence of documents, critical reviews, and rescues of works and bodies of works that had been marginalised in the histories of art written in each country. At the same time, exhibitions such as *Radical Women. Latin America, 1960-1885*, and the accompanying catalogue, have set the stage for comparative studies. Activism increased starting in 2015, from the shared cultural horizon that activated feminism in Latin America with the massive march held in Argentina in 2015 with the slogan *Ni una menos* (Not one less). Women artists have organised themselves in both countries into collectives and networks of collectives.

Was it the democracy-dictatorship relationship that regulated the debate on the social place of women, on their emancipation and on art made by women and dissidents? In principle, the comparison of these cases from the proposed moments has allowed us to believe that the debate has had comparable moments in both countries. The fundamental difference lies in the fact that these discourses were articulated as an additional form of resistance to the dictatorship in Chile, while in Argentina they were articulated as an additional strategy of democratic reorganisation. Another difference is quite crucial. While

---

And it wasn't her fault or where she was or how she dressed.

The rapist was you. The rapist is you.

The judges. The President.

*Translated by A. Giunta*

in Chile, as in much of Latin America, abortion is only legal under particular circumstances,<sup>50</sup> proof of its colonial legacy and the power of the Catholic religion in this continent, in Argentina it was legalised on 30 December 2020.<sup>51</sup> Added to these differences is the early creation of the Secretary of Women in Chile during the government of Salvador Allende – under the auspices of the Civil Organizations Division of the General Secretariat of Government, while in Argentina the first Sub Secretary for Women was appointed in 1987, as a continuation of the National Direction for Women and the Family created in 1983, whose existence was symbolic, since its structure was never approved. In 2019 the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity was created and then abolished in December 2023 by the elected extreme right president Javier Milei.

Beyond the framework provided by dictatorships and democracies, we note the articulation of feminism and gender studies that have been organised in internal history, beyond the political circumstances. This allows us to affirm that feminism and gender studies have been, between the 1970s and now, key terms that have allowed us to trace a shared cultural perspective that serves as a basis for the proposed comparison. The study of other cases will allow us to discuss in greater depth the moments highlighted in this article.

We find ourselves in a complex situation. On the one hand, there is an intense process of rewriting art histories in both countries: Argentina and Chile. Research linked to exhibitions and books published in the last two decades has made it possible to make the work of women artists visible and to study it. On the other hand, feminism is the object of attacks expressed on the Internet, with harassment and hate campaigns against women and feminism. Gender and feminism are keywords in the discourses of the alternative right.<sup>52</sup> For the moment, the solid historiographic and curatorial articulation allows us to think that this context will not affect the development of a complex art history that accounts for the art made by women artists since the 19th century in Latin America.

50 In Chile, Law No. 21030 (promulgated in September 2017) decriminalises voluntary interruption of pregnancy on three grounds: 1. Danger to the woman's life; 2. Lethal foetal inviability; 3. Pregnancy due to rape.

51 In Argentina, Law No. 27610 (promulgated in December 2020) establishes access to Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (IVE), and the obligation to provide comprehensive and free coverage. The law establishes that women and people with other gender identities with the capacity to conceive have the right to: a) decide to terminate the pregnancy in accordance with the provisions of the law; b) seek and access care for the termination of pregnancy in the health system services, in accordance with the provisions of the law; c) seek and receive post-abortion care in the health system services, without prejudice to the fact that the decision to abort had been contrary to the legally enabled cases in accordance with the law; d) prevent unintentional pregnancies through access to information, comprehensive sexual education and effective contraceptive methods.

52 P. Stefanoni, *¿La rebeldía se volvió de derecha?: Cómo el antiprogresismo y la anticorrección política están construyendo un nuevo sentido común (y por qué la izquierda debería tomarlos en serio)*, Buenos Aires, 2021.

## References

- Agosin, M., *Tapestries of Hope, Tears of Love; the Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974–1994*, University of New Mexico Press, 1996.
- Bryan–Wilson, J., *Fray. Art + Textile Politics*, Chicago, 2017.
- Cortés Aliaga, G., *Modernas. Historias de mujeres en el arte chileno, 1900–1950*, Santiago, 2013.
- Cruz de Amenábar, I., *Manos de mujer. Rebeca Matte y su época (1875–1929)*, Santiago, 2008.
- Dolinko, S., Risko, A.M., Vidal Valenzuela, S., eds., *Intercambios transandinos. Historias del arte entre Argentina y Chile*, Santiago de Chile, 2022.
- Fajardo–Hill, C., Giunta, A., *Radical Women. Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, Munich, 2017.
- Foster, H., ed., *La posmodernidad*, Barcelona, 1985.
- García, M.A. “Toward a Reappraisal of Comparative Studies: The Case of South American Modernism”, *Grey Room*, Fall 2020, 81.
- Giunta, A., “La mirada femenina y el discurso de la diferencia”, *1er. Coloquio Latinoamericano de Estética y Crítica*, Buenos Aires, 3–5 November 1993, published in: R. M. Ravera, ed., *Los signos del arte*, Buenos Aires, 1999,
- Giunta, A., “Graciela Sacco: intervenciones del cuerpo/impresiones luminosas”, en Graciela Sacco, *Escrituras solares. La heliografía en el campo artístico*, 1994.
- Giunta, A., “Género y feminismo. Perspectivas desde America Latina”, *ExitBook*, 2008, No. 9.
- Giunta, A., *Poscrisis. Arte argentino después del 2001*, Buenos Aires, 2009.
- Giunta, A., “Mujeres entre activismos. Una aproximación comparativa al feminismo artístico en Argentina y Colombia”, *Caiana. Revista de Historia del Arte y Cultura Visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte (CAIA)*, 2014, No. 4.
- Giunta, A., *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano. Historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo*, Buenos Aires, 2018. English extended translation published as *The Political Body. Stories on Art, Feminism, and Emancipation in Latin America*, UCPress, 2023.
- Giunta, A., *Contra el canon. El arte contemporáneo en un mundo sin centro*, Buenos Aires, 2020.
- Giunta, A., “Simultaneous Avant-Gardes and Horizontal Art Histories”, in: *Horizontal Art Histories and Beyond. Revising Peripheral Critical Practices*, eds. A. Jakubowska, M. Radomska, New York, 2023.
- Gluzman, G., *Trazos invisibles. Mujeres artistas en Buenos Aires (1890–1923)*, Buenos Aires, 2016.
- Gluzman, G., *El canon accidental. Mujeres artistas en Argentina (1890–1950)*, Buenos Aires, 2021.
- Gluzman, G., “Feminismos, educación, creatividad y libertad en la Buenos Aires posdictatorial. El caso de Lugar de mujer”, *Caiana. Revista de Historia del Arte y Cultura Visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte (CAIA)*, 2021, No. 18, [https://caiana.caiana.com.ar/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/caiana-18D\\_-Gluzman\\_pdf-CORREGIDOFinal.pdf](https://caiana.caiana.com.ar/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/caiana-18D_-Gluzman_pdf-CORREGIDOFinal.pdf).
- Gorelik, A., et al., “Dossier. El comparativismo como problema”, *Prismas. Revista de historia intelectual*, 2004, No. 8.

- Iglesia, C., Schwartzman, J., *Cautivas y Misioneros. Mitos blancos de la conquista*, Buenos Aires, 1987.
- Iglesia, C., “La mujer cautiva: cuerpo, mito y frontera”, in: *Historia de las mujeres en Occidente. Tomo 3 Del Renacimiento a la Edad Moderna*, eds. G. Duby, M. Perrot, Madrid, 1992.
- Lemus, F., ed., *Tácticas luminosas: artistas mujeres en torno a la Galería del Rojas*, Buenos Aires, 2019.
- Malosetti Costa, L., “El rapto de cautivas blancas: un aspecto erótico de la barbarie en la plástica rioplatense del siglo XIX”, *Arte, historia e identidad en América: Visiones Comparativas*, eds. G. Curiel, R. González Mello, Zacatecas, 1994.
- Malosetti Costa, L., “Una historia de fantasmas. Artistas plásticas de la generación del ochenta en Buenos Aires”, in: *El canon accidental. Mujeres artistas en Argentina (1890–1950)*, ed. G. Gluzman, Buenos Aires, 2021. Originally presented at the VI Conference on Women’s History and Ibero-American Congress of Women and Gender Studies, Interdisciplinary Institute of Gender Studies, Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, *University of Buenos Aires*, 2–5 August 2000.
- Martin, D., Shaw, D., “Chilean and Transnational Performances of Disobedience: LAS-TESSIS and the Phenomenon of *Un violador en tu camino*”, *Bulletin of Latin American Research. Journal of the Society for Latin American Studies*, November 2021, 40, No. 5, <https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.13215>.
- Pratt, M.L., *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London–New York, 1992.
- Owens, C., “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism”, in: *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. H. Foster, Seattle, 1983.
- Pollock, G., *Vision & Difference. Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, London, 1988.
- Richard, N., *Crítica y política* (interviews made by Alejandra Castillo and Miguel Valderama), Santiago de Chile, 2013.
- Richard, N., *Masculino / Femenino: prácticas de la diferencia y cultura democrática*, Santiago de Chile, 1993.
- Rosa, M.L., *Legados de libertad. El arte feminista en la efervescencia democrática*, Buenos Aires, 2014.
- Rottenberg, S., “Women Art Workers in Argentina Demand Gender Equality, and Museums Start to Listen”, *Hyperallergic*, 3 September 2018. <https://hyperallergic.com/431714/nosotras-proponemos-buenos-aires-international-womens-day/>.
- Scott, J., “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” in: *Gender and The Politics of History*, ed. J. Scott, New York, 1988.
- Tarducci, M., “Escenas claves de la lucha por el derecho al aborto en Argentina”, *Salud Colectiva*, 2018, No. 3, <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0820-0379>.
- Stefanoni, P., *¿La rebeldía se volvió de derecha?: Cómo el antiprogresismo y la anticorrección política están construyendo un nuevo sentido común (y por qué la izquierda tomarlos en serio)*, Buenos Aires, 2021.
- Varas, P., *Luz Donoso. El Arte y la Acción en el Presente*, Santiago de Chile, 2019.
- Varas, P., *Catalina Parra. El fantasma político del arte*, Santiago de Chile, 2011.
- Vazquez, J.C., Vidal Yevenes L., “Arte, Cuerpo y Denuncia, el uso del cuerpo como soporte crítico en el espacio público, una mirada desde las performances de la colectiva *La Yeguada Latinoamericana*,” *Index, revista de arte contemporáneo*, 2019, No. 8, Dossier dedicated to Art and Activisms in Latin America.

*Cecila Itzel Noriega Vega*

UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA METROPOLITANA, AZC, CYAD

ORCID 0000-0002-8991-935X

*Una Pardo Ibarra*

UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTÓNOMA DE MÉXICO

ORCID 0009-0002-2925-9262

## Notes to Continue Thinking about Feminist Artivism in Mexico

### Abstract

Despite the large number of feminist artistic practices in Mexico that clearly ascribe to women's rights and the fight against gender violence, there is a historiographical problem regarding the use of a term capable of accounting for the social impact of these practices. Therefore, one may suggest analysing the plurality of terms to understand the increasingly present use in Mexico in recent years of the term *feminist artivism*. We identify how the use of the term evokes a diversity of cultural agents that may or may not be linked to the world of art, which requires its own discussion so that we might understand the scope and limitations of these artistic practices and how we study them. One of the main problems is the development of feminist artivism in the context of neoliberalism and globalisation, where some artistic practices can be ascribed to this term but can end up contributing to mercantilist logic. Likewise, there are many subversive actions with aesthetic potential that this term omits, which force us to rethink artistic frameworks. Thereby, as a way of offering a term that seeks to account for the characteristics of current art, we propose incorporating the concept of feminist aesthetic-political practices. It is not our intention to offer an unequivocal and unstable category but rather to show the complexity that goes through the artistic and cultural practices that are positioned by feminism today. Finally, as far as methodology is concerned, we suggest writing based on situated knowledge and acknowledging the potential of oral history. Also, we try to give voice to a plurality of stories and experiences, from different disciplinary fields and to establish intergenerational dialogues, as an exercise in collaborative reflection, or accompanied thought, that allows us to raise the problem in its complexity.

**Keywords:** feminist artivism, Mexico, feminist aesthetic-political practice, historiography of art

## Naming the social impact of feminist art

Since the beginning of the 21st century, an explosion of feminist practices – circumscribed within the field of activism and its fight against gender violence – have emerged in Mexico and Latin America in general. When beginning an analysis of these productions, what is striking is the plurality of terms to depict the intention of feminist art to fight against gender violence. In the Mexican artistic field, some artists refer to their practices as “activism”, some as “social practices”, while others prefer to call their practices “feminist art”. Similarly, from the field of art history and curatorship in Mexico, the term *artivism* has also been used without a clear consensus on the scope and limitations of the term.

Proposing concepts is decisive, because these are tools of the intersubjective and imply transition from mere experience, from the field of subjective perception to a conceptualization that may enable analysis, understanding and naming reality. However, we start from the understanding that “[...] these are not fixed, but travel between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods and between geographically dispersed academic communities”.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding the proposal of concepts, it is a fact that when we were trying to define the character of feminist art’s social incidence, we found that multiple terms are used to account for this at different times. In this way, we are faced with the following questions: What terms have been used historically to describe the nature of feminist art’s social incidence? What are the causes and complexities of the plurality of the terms used? Can we propose a term that acknowledges the characteristics and new dynamics presented by feminist art?

To answer these questions, we propose a historiographical and historical journey using concepts that describe the nature of feminist art as a social struggle in Mexico. Likewise, we suggest that the lack of definition relates to multiple factors encompassing different historical moments, as well as to a plurality of media, strategies, and processes. Additionally, some practices may not have a strong social impact, and in a few cases their inclusion in the artistic system might in turn undermine their subversive potential. Finally, there are actions with an important political and aesthetic power but not circumscribed within the operational frameworks of the artistic, which forces us to question the guidelines behind the construction of art and expand the notions of the artistic. In this sense, to raise these reflections it has been useful for us to incorporate the notion of feminist aesthetic-political practices; with the interest of considering in a broad way the variety of creation strategies and places of enunciation that comprise the artistic and cultural productions that are framed in the feminist struggle. Also, this allows us to consider the complexity of the current dynamics in which they are immersed.

---

1 M. Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, Toronto, 2002, p. 31.

When trying to answer these questions, we are faced with an important historiographic gap in the sense that each artist, art historian or curator names their practices independently. For these reasons, as a methodological structure, we decided to focus on interviews with feminist artists Lorena Wolffer (1971–) and Mónica Mayer (1954–). Likewise, we established a dialogue through the “Discussion Artivism and Feminism”, carried out in collaboration with the Gender and Inclusion Program of the Universidad Iberoamericana (*Programa de Género e inclusión de la Universidad Iberoamericana*) *Hysteria! Magazine*<sup>2</sup> (*Revista Hysteria!*), and the *Network Disidenta*<sup>3</sup> (Red Disidenta), with the participation of art historian and curator Karen Cordero (1957–), researcher, curator and performer Julia Antivilo (1974–), artist and cultural manager Liz Misterio (1985–), artist Alejandra Aragón (1983–) and activist Cerrucha (1984–). The intention of this dialogue was to establish links between different fields and generations to conduct a collaborative reflection exercise to understand the complexity of the terms used (Fig. 1).

Our point of departure in writing this text is our experience in the history of art, curatorship, and artistic practice. We position ourselves on the basis of anti/decolonial transfeminism and understand the writing of this text as part of our political commitment to think together to open ourselves to the experience of a “we”, interested in imagining a community, inhabiting the differences, contradictions and blind spots that we embody, which academic writing barely makes visible. Likewise, we start from situated knowledge<sup>4</sup> as proposed by Donna Haraway, which postulates that how we produce knowledge is determined by our context and embodied experience.<sup>5</sup>

We also start from the understanding that feminist art is a political position regarding artistic work, which does not consist of a theme or a style, but rather understands it as a practice to contribute to a social and historical transformation of patriarchy, and how it has oppressed the lives of women and other subjects who are not white cisgender and heterosexual men. In relation to this, it is important to say that it is not possible to speak of one single

---

2 *Hysteria! Magazine* is a digital publication founded by Ivelin Buenrostro and Liz Misterio that, since 2013, has been dedicated to disseminating works of art and reflections that are made from feminism and sexual dissidence towards the politics of bodies, gender, and sexuality (<https://hysteria.mx/>).

3 The *Network Disidenta* is made up of the artist Cerrucha, Lorena Wolffer and the art historian María Laura Rosa and consists of a collective project that works as a platform for artistic and pedagogical experimentation online, located at the crossroads between feminist practices and digital methodologies (Disidenta, 2022, <https://www.disidenta.com>).

4 Donna Haraway is the most recognized proponent of the concept of situated knowledge, however, it is an epistemological critique that feminists have claimed since the 1980s with the contributions of different women authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Chela Sandoval, from Chicano thought.

5 D. Haraway, *Ciencia, cyborgs y mujeres. La reinención de la naturaleza*, Madrid, 2015, pp. 313–330.



**Fig. 1.** “Discussion Artivism and Feminism”, 21 March 2023, file of the Gender and Inclusion Program of the Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City

feminism, because we have different contexts and ways of embodying the various oppressions, and in that sense, is important to considered the diverse experience of women, which has led to the critical and vital need to develop other interpretive approaches – even rethinking what we understand as the political subject of feminism and its practices of struggle and resistance, as well as how they are conceptualised. As previously commented, the political commitment of feminist art is necessarily intertwined with feminist struggles in their broadest sense. For this reason, it is essential to insist on problematizing our understanding of feminist art today, its spaces and forms of circulation, as well as the related methods of teaching and historicizing; with the aim of updating its relevance in the production of practices and narratives that question, oppose and transform the modern/colonial, patriarchal/capitalist power structure.

## The background of feminist art since the 1970s, political militancy and activism

During the 1970s in Mexico, the feminist art developed in the context of the second wave of feminism, where the bodies of women subjected to submission became a place of subversion. During this time, seventies feminist art



was linked to political militancy since the artists in those years were feminists and militants. Militancy implied belonging to a group and more precisely to a political party. In Mexico, the 1968 movement, with the most critical point involving the massacre of students in Tlatelolco, was a decisive moment that caused a social, political and artistic reorganisation. Art could no longer be oblivious to what was happening. In this way, the 1970s are characterised by the emergence of artistic groups such as *Tepito Arte Acá*, *Proceso Pentágono*, *Grupo Suma*, *No Grupo*, which proposed a socially committed art with innovative and experimental proposals.

Many artists were active in various social and artistic groups. However, with the passage of time they recognized that only by acting autonomously would they be able to gain space. For these reasons, several artists made the decision to separate from political parties and various student movements, where gender discrimination was a constant. In this way, we can identify several feminist groups in Mexico such as the National Women's Movement (1973), (Movimiento Nacional de Mujeres), the National Women's Liberation Movement (1974) (El Movimiento de Liberación Nacional de la Mujer), the Feminist Women's Coalition (1976) (Coalición de mujeres feministas) and La Revolt (1975) (La Revuelta).<sup>6</sup> In these groups, feminist artists contributed their creativity and carried out multiple artistic and curatorial projects. In this way, during the seventies, the use of the term feminist art was also circumscribed within political militancy. In this sense, artistic productions sought to claim the rights of women. Julia Antivilo explains that "feminist art is an expression of the political art of the avant-garde of the 70s".<sup>7</sup> It is important to mention that the case of Mexico is exceptional, since there were early initiatives of feminist activism. For example, very early, Mónica Mayer – a Mexican feminist artist whose work is key in the evolution of Mexican art history – was linked to the International Women's Year in 1975 and to the developments of North American feminism. However, in the rest of Latin American countries we find ourselves in the absence of feminist artistic activism. This vacuum in Latin American countries was related to the complicated relationship between Marxism and feminism and to the repression of Latin American dictatorships.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Mónica Mayer has called her production feminist art without being ascribed to any other concept, although she links it to the demarcation from political militancy.

The link between feminist art and militancy gradually disappeared in the following decades. Mónica Mayer explains that around the 1990s and later, with the social and political transformations characterised by the processes

---

6 J. Antivilo, *Entre lo sagrado y lo profano se tejen rebeldías: arte feminista Latinoamericano*, Bogotá, 2015, p. 16.

7 Antivilo, op. cit., p. 63–64

8 A. Giunta, *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano, Historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo*, Mexico, 2019, p. 83.

of globalisation and the introduction of neoliberalism in Mexico, the term *political militancy* had run its course.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the transition to the term *activism* as a replacement for *militancy* was also related to the fact that on some occasions the grassroots work of the artists was visibly displaced by an artistic production that was financed by grants and national funds.<sup>10</sup> So, we find that the nineties constituted a complex moment culturally, also characterised by the emergence of alternative art spaces and the imminent development of performance. This is reflected in the inauguration of *Ex Teresa Arte Actual* in 1993 that – in opening a cultural, experimental, and alternative space – focused on non-object practices. Lorena Wolffer – a Mexican feminist artist and cultural activist – during the 1990s, was intensely productive in the field of performance, and later she began to organise participatory events in the public space to fight against gender violence. During that period, she called her actions participatory cultural interventions, to emphasise their collective and participatory nature.<sup>11</sup>

The participatory art idea did not emerge in the nineties but had been ongoing throughout the development of art in the 20th century; the first moment can be identified in the artistic avant-garde, in the first half of the 20th century, the second in the post-war period, and later in the 1990s. Regarding the latter, participatory art was strongly promoted by the rise of capitalism and the fall of the socialist bloc, where participatory art emerged with great force to repair the social wound caused by history.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, terms such as “community art”, “socially committed art” or “relational art” began to diverge. It is in this context that the term *participatory art* and its different equivalents became more recognised and the subject of dialogue in the Mexican cultural context.

Within this conceptual complexity on how to account for the character of social incidence in feminist art, from the 2000s the term *artivism* began to be introduced, which comes directly from urban art, situationism and graffiti art. This term began to be used generically to talk about artistic works with a strong social impact.<sup>13</sup> In this way, *artivism* arose with the clear objective of making artistic proposals that entail modifications and social transformations, to generate new narratives capable of changing pre-established codes and signs. This implies that art activists do not simply want to critique the

9 Interview with Mónica Mayer conducted by Una Pardo and Cecilia Noriega on 18 March 2023.

10 N. de la Rosa y A. Bojórquez, *¿Cuál es la herencia mexicana del arte de izquierda?*, Mexico City, 2023.

11 Interview with Lorena Wolffer by Una Pardo and Cecilia Noriega, 16 March 2023.

12 C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London, 2021, pp. 1–11.

13 E. Aladro-Vico, E. Jivkova-Semova, D. Bailey, “Artivismo: Un nuevo lenguaje educativo para la acción social transformadora”, *Comunicar: Revista Científica de Comunicación y Educación*, 2018, 57, pp. 9–18.

art system or the political and social conditions in which they operate, but rather to change these circumstances through art. Artivism seeped into the feminist arena and the denomination of feminist artivism began to emerge.

In this way, a generation of artists emerged, such as Cerrucha, who identifies her practice as activist. Cerrucha explains that artivism represents a non-place, a space between art and activism. Likewise, combining both concepts in the same word implies giving the same weight to both actions, recognizing their aesthetic and political value. The visual artist, cultural manager, and director of *Hysteria!* Magazine, Liz Misterio suggests that this term implies the need to consider a form of art operation outside the museum, with the intention of achieving a true transformation, although she acknowledges that this has also conditioned a certain depoliticisation of art.<sup>14</sup> *Feminist artivism* is framed with an increase in gender violence, but also with a mediatization and massification of protest, all characterised by the emergence of a generation associated with Internet and social networks, used as a means of political activism manifested by events such as *Vivas nos queremos* 2015, the *Me Too* movement, a feminist manifestations and graffiti in different monuments in Mexico City in 2019.

Despite the affiliation of several artists with the term *feminist artivism*, in the field of art, the use of *feminist artivism* has also come under question. Lorena Wolffer considers that the delimitations of artivism are ambiguous, and each practice has particularities, characteristics, and their own forms of operation, so it is difficult to categorise them under the same term. Currently, some artists have incorporated the term *social practice* to refer to their artistic productions, like an artistic strategy to make visible and denounce gender violence, that have an impact on social issues. In relation to this discussion on how to name these actions, the Disidenta Network, which fosters collaboration between artists, managers, historians, and curators, suggests incorporating the concept of “Social Practices” as in the international context of “social practice” or “socially engaged art”, where it is argued that social interaction is somehow art itself.

“This concept is incorporated into the field of feminist art to talk about projects that link art strategies and activism through artistic strategies of visibility, enunciation, and agency to transform specific contexts and problems; in this way it acknowledges that the artistic strategies are different and complex for each project and can consist of several stages; They also resort to a plurality of activities that involve workshops, meetings, performances and exhibitions. Likewise, the heterogeneity of the practices is recognized where the main thing is the collective process that is developed in each one of them, with the intention of social transformation”.<sup>15</sup>

---

14 Género e Inclusión IBERO, “Conversation ‘Artivism and Feminism’”, *YouTube*, 21 March 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LP08H18EDuA&t=3252s> [accessed 10 May 2023].

15 Disidenta, <https://www.disidenta.com> [accessed 15 March 2023].

These terms have been raised mainly by the artists themselves, who have named their work in this way. However, these terms have also been discussed in the scope of theory and curatorship. Art historian Karen Cordero says that *feminist activism* arises from the explicit recognition of creative practices, which form part of the social actions that highlight and protest the political problems facing feminism. Also, this concept arises from a desire to distance oneself from the artistic system and from the mechanisms of commodification, by going out into the public space, in many cases. Regarding this term, scholar and performance artist Julia Antivilo has also commented that “activism” combines art and activism, to synthesise both practices; it acknowledges that feminist art is recent and as political art it is under-recognized. In the 1990s, being a feminist did not imply being an activist; this transition occurred in the 2000s, when activism within the Latin American feminist movement was recognized and the importance of placing the body in the public space began to be questioned, circumscribed in a mass movement that makes it possible to think of other forms of action.

In the same way, it is possible to cite exhibitions circumscribed in the field of feminist activism such as the exhibition *¡Vivas estamos, estamos vivas!, Violentómetro Artivismo y género en la CdMx*, (We are alive, we are alive!, Violentómetro Artivism and Gender) which was presented in 2022 in the context of the *Festival Internacional Cervantino* (International Cervantino Festival) in the *Museo Regional de Guanajuato Alhóndiga de* (Guanajuato Regional Museum Alhóndiga de Granaditas). The exhibition was co-curated by Karen Cordero and Cecilia Noriega and sought to understand activism as the ability of art to influence gender issues; the exhibition proposed that an activist component has been present throughout the development of feminist art, establishing intergenerational dialogues. Likewise, it suggested understanding the action of activism as a fight against the different types of violence. The curatorship wanted the spectators to have an experience when touring the rooms; at the same time, that feminist collectives worked on campaigns to respond to local problems. In this way, the historical value of the action was recognized including through reactivations in collaboration with the collectives, we achieved a social impact.

Within this plurality of terms, what underlies is a lack of consensus for various reasons. The first is linked to its emergence in a specific context; we are not passive recipients who manage to have an objective and perspective view, but we are part of the processes in which we find ourselves and our approach is partially dependent on the context in which we live as well as our own experience.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, this plurality of terms lies in the great difference that exists in the practices and diversity of media and processes used, from performance, installation, graphic work, as well as digital resources and media. We must also consider transdisciplinary studies, which invite us to understand the complexity.

---

<sup>16</sup> Haraway, op. cit., pp. 313–330.

Another factor that makes it impossible to use a single term, lies in the political and social power of each one of these actions, which is very diverse. On some occasions, the practice gains traction, while on other occasions no real commitment is achieved. Its incidence is not only determined by the relevance of its formal and conceptual resources, but also by the visibility, infrastructure, circulation, development over time that generate conditions for the practice to repeat to any significant extent.

## Now a flowerpot: the issues of feminist artivism

It is useful to point out that for more than a decade now in Latin America the category of *feminist artivism* has gained traction and legitimacy, both in art historiography and in exhibition spaces as well as in the art market, a phenomenon circumscribed in a complex context marked by globalisation, massification and mediation of the feminist movement both regionally and worldwide. Nowadays in particular, as art critic and academic Katy Deepwell<sup>17</sup> reminds us, neoliberal logics and the massive trans-regional agendas of the UN have defined the feminist outpost in contemporary times, which is why, following Deepwell, we should ask ourselves how we situate ourselves in feminisms and to open what paths? In this case, in art history, what are we investigating? What for? How? With this, are we only settling for inclusion in the canon of art history of cis and trans women, sex-gender dissidences, and other marginalised subjects, thus helping to neutralise the critical and political spirit<sup>18</sup> of its incidence in the discipline itself and in the social sphere?

According to Invasorix,<sup>19</sup> their collective artwork is based on their experiences, precariousness, and power dynamics in their environments, among others. In their artwork “Full Body Workout: 10 Intergalactic Exercises for Ethical Feminist Artistic Dwellings”, the art collective questions the massification, mediation and commodification of feminist adherence:<sup>20</sup>

“Even decades ago, and before feminisms were in vogue on a planetary scale, many people intersected by their feminine gender, sexuality, race, class, different abilities, migratory status among others, have militated and resisted sustaining feminist struggles in their comings and goings.

---

17 K. Deepwell, *Narratives of Feminist Art In/Out of n.Paradoxa*, Online Seminar, *Narrating Art and Feminisms: Eastern Europe and Latin America*, 25 October 2021.

18 R. Segato, *Contra-Pedagogías de La Crueldad*, Buenos Aires, 2021.

19 Invasorix is an art collective formed since 2013, their work is interested in songs, videos and self-publishing, as a form of queer-feminist protest, currently formed by Liz Misterio, Nabil Yanai and Una Pardo – artists living and working in Mexico City.

20 “Full Body Workout:10 Intergalactic Exercises for Ethical Feminist Artistic Dwellings” was content thought for social networks (2020) that was rendered in a folding brochure and an audiovisual installation (2022) to problematize extractivist dynamics within artistic practices that are named as feminist.

Now as feminisms are fashionable, those who change their ideology like changing clothes turn around to look at the work that has been done for years within feminist struggles. *Turning around* to look has resulted in stealing their work without acknowledging or committing to feminist struggles; In voiding meaning and commercializing actions that were once germs of resistance. [...] Those who exploit, plagiarize, steal, co-opt in the name of feminist struggles are doing all the work of the white supremacist, capitalist, colonialist, monopolist patriarchy which robs us of our ideas, struggles, and the surplus value of our work”.<sup>21</sup>

The above issue invites us to consider that the term feminist *artivism* could be used and converted into a market niche, which in part has led many artistic practices to be labelled as feminist, when a decade ago in Latin America they implied the exclusion of the art field.<sup>22</sup>

For art historian Hans Belting, the globalisation of art has implied a crisis for the history of art as a narrative because it has challenged its modern linear and evolutionary understanding, and so Belting mentions:

“[...] participation in the art world does not require the old entrance ticket of formal novelty and purity, as proof of advanced art. It is rather the conscience that matters, preferably understood as a critical analysis of today’s most debated (or neglected) issues. Originality, once expected from the artist’s self-expression, has become a way to take position in contemporary issues. This also applies to the claim of identity other than Western that lives from an old resistance against modern hegemony. Inclusion and visibility are the new battle cries when artists from formerly neglected cultures enter the stage”.<sup>23</sup>

However, it seems to us that this apparent openness, diversity, locality/globality in artistic production – as well as the implications it may have for the history of art that Belting points out – again hides the hierarchies, inequalities and oppressions configured in this modern/colonial patriarchal/capitalist world-system, and ends up lubricating and updating Western abstract universalism.<sup>24</sup> So, it is the global market that dynamizes artistic production and its historicization, and limits participation to those who have concrete and adequate

---

21 Invasorix, “Full Body Workout: 10 Intergalactic Exercises for Ethical Feminist Artistic Dwellings”, *Instagram*, 21 June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBtyCGFjrPj/> [accessed 5 May 2023].

22 As an example, the online initiative *Hysteria! Magazine* arose in Mexico City in 2013 due to the lack of spaces that welcomed and gave visibility to feminist and sex-gender dissidence artistic practices that had no place in conventional art spaces, in the same sense it has been a space that given its characteristics has enabled for a decade the generation and strengthening of artistic/activist networks in the region.

23 H. Belting, “Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate”, in: *The Global Art World*, eds. H. Belting, A. Buddensieg, Ostfildern, 2009, pp. 38–73.

24 R. Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing Western Universalisms: Decolonial Transmodern Pluriversalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas”, in: *El giro decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*, eds. S. Castro-Gómez, R. Grosfoguel, Bogotá, 2007, pp. 63–78.

structural conditions, the participation of a few blurs or flattens the complexity of embodying the intertwining of different oppressions and occupying different places in the hierarchy of domination.

In this sense, the reflection of the feminist anthropologist Rita Laura Segato on the multicultural phase in which, after the Cold War, nation-states have turned and delineated their policies is useful. Segato proposes that multiculturalism is an expression of neoliberalism, as it processes and translates cultural, social and identity differences in order to assimilate to state functioning and maintain its patriarchal and colonial coherence, giving continuity to the universal paradigm of what she calls “the world of the One” or of “Man-Humanity”, thus Segato suggests that: “[...] [I]n anodyne and global multiculturalism, political identities are a processed, pasteurized adaptation of the world of the One, which cans them and transforms them into equalized types suitable for digestion. The radical difference of historical projects, of divergent welfare goals, is extinguished there”.<sup>25</sup>

In this sense, it is important to problematize and understand how our feminist artistic, curatorial, and historiographic practices can relate and respond to neoliberal dynamics. Some feminist artistic practices end up being accommodated and consolidated under the dynamics of tokenism and within the multicultural mercantile diversification products offered by the art world. So, it is even more valid to recall what Griselda Pollock already said in 1982:<sup>26</sup>

“[Feminist art practice and] feminist art history rejects the necessary confrontation with the dominant ideologies and practices of the discipline. Instead, feminists are content to incorporate women’s names into chronologies and to include women’s work in inventories of styles and movements. Certain liberal politics [in feminist art practice and] art history have allowed this inadvertent and additive feminism to arise, [...] the critical implications of feminism for art history as a whole have been stifled and have not been allowed to change what is understood as art history, nor how it is studied and thought about”.<sup>27</sup>

In the end, feminist approaches and practices would radically transform the colonial white capitalist patriarchal concept of art and therefore from its spaces and ways of being studied and narrated.<sup>28</sup> According to art historian Andrea Giunta, it is an emancipatory art whose counter-hegemonic radicality is also about the art system.<sup>29</sup>

---

25 R. Segato, *Contra-Pedagogías de la Crueldad*, Buenos Aires, 2021, p. 97.

26 G. Pollock, “Visión, Voz y Poder: Historias Feministas Del Arte y Marxismo”, in: *Crítica feminista en la teoría e historia del arte*, eds. K. Cordero Reiman, I. Sáenz, México City, 2007, pp. 45–79.

27 Ibid., p. 50.

28 Ibid.

29 A. Giunta, “Feminisms and Emancipation. Mónica Mayer: Radical Aesthetics and Latin American Simultaneities”, in: *When in Doubt... Ask: A Retrocollective Exhibit*, ed. E. Álvarez Romero, México City, 2016, pp. 84–99.

Of course, the question is not so simple because we deal all the time with the precariousness of our role as art and culture workers, as women and sex-gender dissidents in Latin America. The dynamics of precariousness and self-exploitation is the order of the day, and is about being able to live with dignity from what we do. But, in that sense, the feminist art project should also mean devising and developing strategies of alliance and mutual care that – as a politicised community – allows us not to depend only on the linkage of a few to the revenues that the field of art can offer.<sup>30</sup> The introduction of *feminist activism* within capitalist logic guarantees the resources, infrastructure and dissemination of these actions. However, there are important risks of its incursion, which may end up depriving it of critical potential and therefore of political impact. So, many proposals with the aim of reaching other audiences or having wide-ranging visibility can run the risk of trivialising their discourse and blurring the specificity and radicality of certain struggles.<sup>31</sup> According to Pollock, “‘art history’ cannot survive feminism because what art history as a discipline has

30 In this sense, initiatives such as the Red Disidenta, made up of artists, curators, managers and researchers of feminist social practice in Mexico, collaboratively seek to contribute to a regional exchange and dialogue in Latin America to confront the different forms of violence and reduce precariousness in the artistic field.

31 A related event to think about these issues is the intervention that took place on 20 May 2023, at the Colegio de San Ildefonso located in the Historic Center of the Mexican capital, where the French fashion design company Dior presented its latest collection *Dior Cruise 2024*. To raise awareness of violence against women, Mexican artist Elina Chauvet, known for her artwork *Zapatos Rojos* (Red Shoes) (2009), coordinated, towards the end of the runway, about twenty models wearing a series of white garments with handcrafted red embroidery with different messages, most of them different insults commonly directed at women, they also wore red Dior heels, while “Sin miedo” [Without fear], a song by singer-songwriter Vivir Quintana about the violence suffered by women, was played, which since 2020 has become an anthem of feminist protests. Is important to mention that *Zapatos Rojos* of Elina Chauvet is considered as feminist activism. With the intent of contributing to the discussion we are proposing, it seems to us that this event can account for the complexities that feminist artistic productions go through in terms of their massification, mediatisation and spectacularisation, and this invites us more specifically to ask ourselves about the meaning of feminist artistic practices. This event is interesting, not merely from the perspective that fashion scenarios can or cannot be a scenario of denunciation, but what this participation reveals, in addition to the neocolonial substrate in which they participate, is the superficiality in which certain strategies can fall, which end up working as a simulation, especially when in Mexico embroidery has been one of the most recognizable practices of feminist protest and against disappearance. And that leads us to question ourselves: are these spaces necessary as spokespersons? In what other ways, beyond the show, are they committing themselves to this problem? How does this intervention work as an exercise in translation (either from a social issue or from artistic strategies situated to a fashion scenario)? What was the priority? What and how are the aesthetic-political criteria that are being discarded and underestimated?, Ch. Dior, “The Dior Cruise 2024 Show”, *YouTube*, 20 May 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=um6Fp8-Xneg&ab\\_channel=ChristianDior](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=um6Fp8-Xneg&ab_channel=ChristianDior) [accessed 29 May 2023].



enacted and performatively iterated is a continuing production of a classed, raced, gendered and heteronormative representation of art contested structurally by feminism".<sup>32</sup> This disruptive statement shares with us an exercise of radical imagination since it calls us to a visionary positioning towards the future (or towards other pasts): How could it be the artistic, cultural and aesthetic practices of a feminist anti/de(s)colonial project? How would it be their spaces, their subjects, their narratives? Can we imagine them? In what way could we rehearse them?

The fractures that cross the feminist movement with the advance of conservative, neoliberal, punitive and fascist expressions, and projects are more and more evident. For us the scope of radical transformation of feminism can only be in the joint alliance of the anti/de(s)colonial and anti-capitalist struggle. In this sense, from our areas of work and our forms of struggle, a permanent self-critical exercise on what we have done and what we can do is indispensable. How do we define and narrate what we do? For what and for whom is it convenient? Why?

While everyone makes strategic use of the terms that allow them to underpin the meaning of their work, and this reflection on the terms we use is not intended to catalogue or contribute to the configuration of a linear narrative, it is relevant to understanding the scope and limitations that such terms have had in terms of giving meaning and specificity to our feminist practices in art and art history. What are we nurturing and blurring in their implementation? This is important because, as theorist and artist Simon O' Sullivan states, "a transformation in how we think about art necessarily alters the topology of how we think about ourselves and vice versa".<sup>33</sup>

We believe that a necessary task in this dialogue and (self-)critical reflection is related to the reproduction of dichotomous logics, which separately analyse aesthetic productions that are not enunciated from the field of art. We understand the latter as an area determined by a cultural system that tends towards professionalization and that generally separates what emerges from the art world and what happens externally. In this sense, the term *artivism* seems to be one which, as we pointed out, some artists like Cerrucha and feminist historians like Julia Antivilo (with academic trajectories in art) use to name and insist on the power of art to influence reality and contribute to social transformation. In this sense, the term seems to be a precision within the broad panorama that feminist art practice comprises and the way in which much of this enunciation has been shaped (accommodated) with its "thematic" character.

In turn, the term has been used by some activists who, without recognizing themselves in an artistic academic trajectory, find in it the expansive

---

32 G. Pollock, "Historia y Política. ¿Puede La Historia del Arte Sobrevivir al Feminismo?", in: *Feminisme, Art et Histoire de l'art.*, ed. Y. Michaud, Paris, 1994.

33 S. O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari. Thought Beyond Representation*, Chippenham-Eastbourne, 2006, p. 16.

possibility of challenging the classist mood of art and the artist, and of retaking art means and strategies such as murals, graphics, and performance, among others, which are circumscribed as forms of response to the different patriarchal violence. In this sense, researchers such as Natalia Eguiluz<sup>34</sup> have used the term to analyse and account for such activist practices in Mexico. However, it is also true that within these aesthetic repertoires that have constituted the struggle of women—not only now, since they have historically configured their radicalism and identity—<sup>35</sup> they have not been interested in defining themselves in relation to the field of art, since their priority lies in the urgency of responding to a concrete reality, and in the effectiveness that these forms of expression have in their specific contexts, both in personal and communal terms, as a way of agency in the face of a brutal and terrifying reality. To discuss whether this can be linked to the field of art is not a concern that articulates what they do, although we consider that their actions must question our actions, as people who work in culture and art. So, in the face of the question regarding what art does and, moreover, what we want feminist art to do, it is necessary to identify what understandings, ways of acting, and classist, colonial, racist, patriarchal, and capacitating divisions we continue to perpetuate in the analysis and creation of aesthetic repertoires for the struggle.

Another major problem that the term feminist activism faces is the inability that art history may have to account for productions that are not limited to the field of art, it is not without reason that much of the recent research in Mexico on feminist artistic and cultural practices comes from the social sciences. In this sense, approaches from visual culture, for example, have allowed challenging disciplinary frameworks to understand aesthetic, creative and feminist protest practices in a complex way. Feminist researcher Rían Lozano<sup>36</sup> focuses on graffiti painted during the feminist march of 16 August 2019 in Mexico City where the Monument to Independence (*Monumento a la Independencia*) was altered (Fig. 2) and the different physical and digital expressions made by the organised women from the Faculty of Architecture of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Facultad de Arquitectura de la Universidad Autónoma de México) in the strike that began on 22 March 2021 to demand educational spaces free of violence, to understand them, as the author proposes, as feminist gestures “that more than generating imaginaries, seek to squat, muddy, disorganize, dirty the existing ones and, with this, suspend the course

34 N. Eguiluz, “Tomar La Calle: Artivismo Contra La Violencia Femicida En México (2012-2019)”, PhD thesis, National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2022. [https://tesiunam.dgb.unam.mx/F/?func=find-b&find\\_code=WRD&request=Natalia+Eguiluz](https://tesiunam.dgb.unam.mx/F/?func=find-b&find_code=WRD&request=Natalia+Eguiluz) [accessed 05 March 2023].

35 Let us think of the pink cross that the mothers of women murdered in the 1990s in Ciudad Juarez contributed as an icon of struggle against femicide violence.

36 R. Lozano, “Desacompañada y sobrepuestas. Reescrituras y reconocimientos feministas”, in: *GRRRRR Género: Rabia, Ritmo, Ruido, Risa y Respons-habilidad*, ed. M. Belausteguigoitia Rius, Ciudad de México, 2022, pp. 169–179.



Fig. 2. Nirvana Paz, Victoria Alada II, Mexico City 2019, Nirvana Paz personal file.



Fig. 3. Pink Crosses placed in Lomas del Poleo Planta Alta in the place where eight bodies of women victims of femicide were found in 1996, Ciudad Juárez, 2022, Una Pardo Ibarra personal file.

of meaning produced from the politics of the dominant visual representation”.<sup>37</sup> It is worth mentioning that this type of intervention in heritage and the institution have unleashed a polemic on historical and patrimonial narratives and aesthetics. Therefore, the Monument to Independence (*Monumento a la Independencia*), which was inaugurated in 1910, presents a historical account of the heroes who had contributed to the nation, from a progressive and evolutionary vision, and was graffitied more than a century later with slogans such as “*Mexico feminicida*” (Mexico feminicide) or “*se va a caer*” (is going to fall), in a way that confronts two versions of history: on the one hand, the official historical acts and, on the other, the history of women. In this regard, they are actions that are not framed in the field of art, but which, of course, have qualities in the aesthetic realm, whose power and transgression force us to rethink the frameworks of the artistic.

So, it is essential to question how – in our artistic, historiographic, and curatorial practices – we continue to reproduce the myth of the creative genius, who possesses a sensibility capable of revealing and attending to things that the creative practices of ordinary people could not (Fig. 3).

## Towards other concepts

As we may see, there is a conceptual differentiation to name these artistic and cultural productions in the interest of accounting for the nature of their social impact. The diversity of terms that emerges responds to the complexity of historical dynamics, the different frameworks of action and places of enunciation, which are constantly changing.

On the other hand, the use of the term *feminist activism* seems to entail a certain ambiguity, even contradiction. This fact reveals discrepancies on the strategies and means used, which in turn account for both the specific contexts in which these practices emerge, as well as the social place occupied in the hierarchy of power by those who hold these practices and the material and symbolic access they entail. This situation again demonstrates tensions between art/life, academia/activism, theory/practice, which are a constant challenge for a transformative artistic practice.

This is why we use the concept of feminist aesthetic-political practices, to recognize the singularity of each process, that each practice has its own features, purposes and techniques that cannot be compared with any other, unlike *feminist activism* whose use has tended to homogenise and even trivialise a multiplicity of practices that show different ways of seeking social initiation.

In the same way, with the idea of feminist aesthetic-political practices we seek to open the reflection to a panorama of activist practices that in their

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

forms of protest articulate creative, symbolic, and aesthetic disruptions that exceed the institutional and academic codes of artistic practice. Likewise, the notion of “practices” emphasises the active component implied by the action and underlines the process. As opposed to the prevailing objectual connotation of art and the dissociation that it entails between the artist and what he or she produces. In this sense, even though the term of social practice accounts for the intention of incidence and the importance of participation and process, we find it fundamental to recognize that these feminist practices possess aesthetic qualities. Understanding that it is precisely there where their potential for social potential is found by creating tools and strategies of perception that seek the configuration of other sensibilities and that other fields of action cannot offer. The existence of aesthetic-affective qualities circumscribes these practices in a symbolic register to enable the questioning, denaturalization, and transformation of the structures of gender violence.

Likewise, we consider the feminist aesthetic practices as a political issue. Jacques Rancière explains that the essence of the political is dissent, which implies a confrontation of interests, where the aesthetic produces a reconfiguration of the *sensible*. In the same way, there is also a political component in the aesthetic, where art transforms the sensible, intervening in the division of the sensory experience.<sup>38</sup> However, we place ourselves in what is proposed by the scholar Nelly Richard who, unlike Rancière, is in opposition to the sole disruption of order caused by aesthetic action, and states that a time of consolidation, aggregation and integration is necessary. A more complex process is necessary, which enables art to give this power of social transformation.<sup>39</sup> Correspondingly, she explains that the political in art is limited to an area that critically reflects on the social environment, from its own organisation of meanings. In this way, there is an underlying rejection between the direct correspondence with art and social content, thus recognizing an intrinsic force that arises from the rearrangement that artistic production fosters.<sup>40</sup> What happens with current practices is a disruption of order, of symbolic structures, but they need to be processed, analysed, and given meaning to be translated into concrete social actions. In this sense the social incidence implies not only the mere correspondence between art and society, but also entails a series of critical processes and reflections that can be translated into a social impact. In this way, the use of this concept allows us to understand the dynamics, recognize other practices that are outside the canon and escape from the co-optation of the capitalist system by acknowledging the need for disruption from the political field.

---

38 J. Rancière, *Sobre políticas estéticas*, Barcelona, 2005, pp. 9–19.

39 N. Richard, *Crítica y Política*, Santiago de Chile, 2013, pp. 40–53

40 N. Richard, “Arte y política; lo político en el arte”, in: *Arte y política*, eds. P. Oyarzún, N. Richard, C. Zaldívar, Santiago de Chile, 2005, pp. 190–208.

## In conclusion

As we can see, the development of concepts is important to name and locate our work, especially since it allows us to articulate the specificity of our practice, given its context, and the meaning we try to give it. So, feminist artistic practices have strategically used different terms to manifest the subversive nature and social impact that motivates them, and for that reason, both concepts and practices must be questioned, transformed, and reinvented. However, we believe that we need to contribute to this discussion to identify our scope, limitations, and blind spots as a political collectivity.

It is difficult to find a term because what persists are interdisciplinary and undisciplined practices that break with the status of the artistic and other fields, whose evolution and development is conditioned by multiple factors. Likewise, the term *feminist activism* arises within a capitalist and globalising context, so that many actions may use the term with the intention of social vindication but end up circumscribing themselves in mercantilist logics. In this same sense, the term activism works at least in two ways, as a legitimising resource of the activist character of artistic practices circumscribed in some way to the professional and institutional field of art and on the other hand, as a strategy to visualise and position practices of social mobilisation that find, in the artistic media and in the aesthetic field, a subversive potential and a model of social agency. For these reasons it is important to question the frameworks that determine the artistic, but it is also necessary for a critical and self-reflexive review of our work within the field of art, which gives coherence to what we do. In this sense, with the use of the concept of feminist aesthetic-political practices we seek to give rise to the plurality of actions, techniques and processes, and different places of enunciation, while at the same time acknowledging their aesthetic-affective qualities and their ability to venture into the political, by dismantling symbolic structures they condition gender violence. Of course, this notion arises from our own experience in curating, theory, and artistic production, to respond to our work and the mechanisms by which art is involved in the social, so they work for our purposes and quest. In this way, rather than offering a closed term, it is an invitation to think about the problems of concepts, their transformations and the search for terms that explain and allow us to analyse the coordinates of artistic production.

## References

- Aladro-Vico, E., Jivkova-Semova, D., Bailey, O., "Activismo: Un nuevo lenguaje educativo para la acción social transformadora", *Comunicar: Revista Científica de Comunicación y Educación*, 2018, 57, pp. 9–18.

- Antivilo, J., *Entre lo sagrado y lo profano se tejen rebeldías: arte feminista Latinoamericano*, Bogotá, 2015 .
- Bal, M., *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, Toronto, 2002.
- Belting, H., "Contemporary Art as Global Art: A Critical Estimate", in: *The Global Art World. Audiences, Markets, and Museums*, eds. H. Belting, A. Buddensieg, Ostfildern, 2009, pp. 38–73.
- Bishop, C., *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London, 2022.
- De la Rosa, N., Bojórquez, A., *¿Cuál es la herencia mexicana del arte de izquierda?*, Mexico City, 2023.
- Deepwell, K., *Narratives of Feminist Art In/Out of n.Paradoxa, Online Seminar, Narrating Art and Feminisms: Eastern Europe and Latin America*, 25 October 2021.
- Dior, Ch., "The Dior Cruise 2024 Show", *YouTube*, 20 May 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=um6Fp8-Xneg&ab\\_channel=ChristianDior](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=um6Fp8-Xneg&ab_channel=ChristianDior).
- Disidenta, "Disidenta", <https://www.disidenta.com>.
- Eguiluz, N., "Tomar la calle: Artivismo contra la violencia feminicida en México (2012–2019)", PhD thesis, National Autonomous University of Mexico, 2022. [https://tesis-unam.dgb.unam.mx/F/?func=find-b&find\\_code=WRD&request=Natalia+Eguiluz](https://tesis-unam.dgb.unam.mx/F/?func=find-b&find_code=WRD&request=Natalia+Eguiluz).
- Género e Inclusión IBERO, "Conversation 'Artivism and Feminism'", *YouTube*, 21 March 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LP08H18EDuA&t=3252s>.
- Giunta, A., "Feminisms and Emancipation. Mónica Mayer: Radical Aesthetics and Latin American Simultaneities", in: *When in Doubt... Ask: A Retrocollective Exhibit*, ed. E. Álvarez Romero, Mexico City, 2016.
- Giunta, A., *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano, Historias de artistas que emanciparon el cuerpo*, Mexico City, 2019 .
- Grosfoguel, R., "Decolonizing Western Universalisms: Decolonial Transmodern Pluriversalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas", in: *El giro decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*, eds. S. Castro–Gómez, R. Grosfoguel, Bogota, 2007.
- Haraway, D., *Ciencia, cyborgs y mujeres. La reinención de la naturaleza*, Madrid, 2015.
- Interview with Lorena Wolffer by Una Pardo Ibarra and Cecilia Noriega Vega, 16 March 2023.
- Interview with Mónica Mayer by Una Pardo Ibarra and Cecilia Noriega Vega, 18 March 2023.
- Invasorix, "Full Body Workout: 10 Intergalactic Exercises for Ethical Feminist Artistic Swellings", *Instagram*, 21 June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBtyCGFjrPj/>.
- Lozano, R., "Desacompañada y sobrepuestas. Reescrituras y reconocimientos feministas", in: *GRRRRR Género: Rabia, Ritmo, Ruido, Risa y Respons-habilidad*, ed. M. Belau-steguigoitia Rius, Mexico City, 2022.
- O'Sullivan, S., *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari. Thought Beyond Representation*, Chippenham–Eastbourne, 2006.
- Pollock, G., "Historia y política. ¿Puede la historia del arte sobrevivir al feminismo?", in: *Feminisme, Art et Histoire de l'art.*, ed. Y. Michaud, Paris, 1994.
- Pollock, G., "Visión, voz y poder: historias feministas del arte y marxismo", in: *Crítica feminista en la teoría e historia del arte*, eds. K. Cordero Reiman, I. Sáenz, Mexico City, 2007.

Ranciere, J. R., *Sobre políticas estéticas*, Barcelona, 2005.

Richard, N., "Arte y política; lo político en el arte", in: *Arte y política*, eds. P. Oyarzún, N. Richard, C. Zaldívar, 2005, pp. 190– 208.

Richard, N., *Crítica y política*, Santiago de Chile, 2013.

Segato, R., *Contra-pedagogías de la crueldad*, Buenos Aires, 2021.



VARIA

*Kristian Handberg*

UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

ORCID: 0000-0002-0342-8585

## Touring Feminist Realism in Actually Existing Socialism: The Exhibitions and Travels of Danish Artist Dea Trier Mørch across the Iron Curtain, 1962–1989

### Abstract

Dea Trier Mørch (1941–2001) was a popular – and recently rediscovered – artist often associated with feminism and the formative years of the Danish Women’s Rights movement. Throughout her career, she worked and exhibited frequently in the Eastern Bloc countries, but the details of these activities and the reception of her work in this context is still a little known aspect of her life and work. The article will analyse the case of Trier Mørch as a Danish artist exhibiting in the communist bloc countries. From attending art academies in the 1960s (mainly in Poland and the USSR) to taking part of exhibitions both individually and as part of artist collective Røde Mor such as *Biennale der Ostseeländer* in Rostock and *Intergrafik* in East Berlin, the activities of Trier Mørch show encounters and interactions with the other art world of state socialism at various levels, such as conflicts and paradoxes, including on the issue of feminism and women’s rights in the different systems. Following an individual through larger structures like international exchanges and art diplomacy will also shed fresh light on the developments in international cultural relations in the Nordic-Baltic region and provide context for the artist’s commitment and positioning through a formative period in contemporary history.

**Keywords:** Danish art history, art and Women’s Rights, cultural exchange, cold war culture, poster art.

## A well-known artist on the fringe of art history

Artist and author Dea Trier Mørch (1941–2001) is a well-known name and at the same time a marginalised figure in Danish art. For instance, she is not mentioned in the most recent Danish art history and although being a best-selling author, she is not featured in a leading survey on Danish literature in the twentieth century – despite being part of the previous, 1982 edition.<sup>1</sup> When the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, one of the most prominent Danish art museums, presented the exhibition *Dea Trier Mørch – Into the World* in 2019, it was a minor rediscovery for the public. The exhibition introduced a younger audience to an artist presented as a “singular figure” in Danish graphic art and highlighted her work from 1967 to 1977 as having a “body-activist and feminist character” from birth scenes to political motifs.<sup>2</sup> The audience could also see a number of works from “Eastern Europe” and was briefly introduced to the travels and studies of the artists in Eastern European countries as formative of her work. However, it was not the aim of the exhibition to investigate the implications of actual socialism for the artist and no studies have hitherto been made on the topic. The travels and exhibitions of Trier Mørch constitute important material for understanding the artist’s career as well as artistic contact, cultural diplomatic relations and the complex feminist position in the Cold War context.

This article will investigate the activities of Trier Mørch in the state-socialist countries from the early 1960s to the system change in 1989. Through these years the artist had an unusual interaction with the art scenes in Poland, USSR, the GDR and other countries, acting as a visiting student, interlocutor, communist activist, post-communist dialogue-seeker, best-selling author and many more. Apart from being an important part of the artist’s biography, this trajectory presents an encounter with the socialist art world from a Danish perspective, and what might be seen as a feminist perspective: a profiled artist, outspoken on women’s rights, acting within the field of art politics and interacting with the systems at various levels.

My analysis is chronological in structure and examines three distinct phases: Poland in the 1960s, the GDR in the 1970s, and the Soviet Union in the 1980s. It will follow artistic production (and the exhibitions where it was presented) and other activities such as study, artist meetings, public debates, and organisational work. This partly biographical approach may shed light on the artist’s activities and the surrounding structures and not least the

1 P. Hornung, ed., *Ny Dansk Kunsthistorie*, Vol. 1–10, Copenhagen, 1996, and A.M. Mai, ed., *Danske digtere i det 20. Århundrede*, Copenhagen, 2000, whereas she is featured in the previous edition, T. Brostrøm, M. Winge, eds., *Danske digtere I det 20. århundrede I–V*, Vol. 5, Copenhagen, 1980–82, pp. 96–105.

2 M. Laurberg, *Dea Trier Mørch. Det grafiske værk*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2019, p. 4 [“et udpræget kropsaktivistisk og feministisk snit”].

interplay between individual artistic intentions and the possibilities (and difficulties) in the changing context of the Cold-War superstructure. The specific case of Dea Trier Mørch may also contribute to the growing studies on cultural exchanges and the actors involved, supplementing the traditional focus on governments and the superpower rivalry of the USA and the USSR. I shall use materials from the Danish context, including from the artist's archive,<sup>3</sup> and available materials from the state-socialist countries, especially Poland and the GDR. Despite the considerable archiving efforts of the artist herself, her collaborators, and the official institutions involved, documentation on the activities varies, both on the young artist from abroad and from the fact that many of the central institutions disappeared after 1989 or are inaccessible due to the current situation.<sup>4</sup> Research in art exchange between the Nordic countries and the Eastern Bloc has also been sparse until now, but new initiatives have started to cast light on the field and to fill in the gaps, to which this article can hopefully contribute.<sup>5</sup>

## Formative experiences: Contacts with Poland, 1962–1968

Dea Trier Mørch was born in Copenhagen during the WW2 occupation of Denmark and grew up in post-war Denmark with its rise of cultural institutions and new international connections. Her mother Ibi Trier Mørch (1910–1980) was an architect and designer, who played an important role in the promotion of Danish arts and crafts abroad through exhibitions and organisational work in Landsforeningen Dansk Kunsthåndværk; remarkably in her time, she raised her two children on her own without the involvement of the father. The family also had strong ties with the Danish Højskole environment at Vallekilde in Odsherred. Trier Mørch pursued a career as an artist and was enrolled

---

3 Dea Trier Mørch kept an archive of press clippings and materials from exhibitions posthumously submitted by her daughter Sara Trier to the Danish National Library. Similarly, Røde Mor collected an archive for the library. These artist-archives form a rich resource, even if it is under the control of the artist and does not necessarily cover all activities.

4 Materials from Russia have not been accessible after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

5 On cultural exchanges with Poland in particular (but not specifically on art) see M. Rosgaard, "Dansk kulturdiplomati over for Østblokken ca. 1960–1972", *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 2011, 111, No. 2, p. 495, on design exhibitions see Y. Karpova, "The Afterlife of Danish Modern: Design Exhibition in Moscow, 1969–70." *Art@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2, article 7, and on exhibitions of Cobra in the socialist countries see: K. Handberg: "Exhibiting Cobra across the Iron Curtain: Exhibition Diplomacy and Modernism as Ostpolitik across Borders in Northern Europe during the Cold War", *Art@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2, article 6.

at the Royal Danish Art Academy at the age of 16 in 1958. Shortly after, the first abstract – and autodidact – artist was inaugurated as a professor at the Academy, the former Cobra-member Egill Jacobsen (1910–1998), who became Trier Mørch’s teacher. From Jacobsen’s point of view, his teaching should be a platform for “independent minds” with a focus on the needs of the students and not be limited by categories such as figurative and abstract art. It should be an “academy” in the open sense rather than the “drawing class” it traditionally tended to be.<sup>6</sup> Trier Mørch would in retrospect express her dissatisfaction with the teaching at the academy, which highlighted artistic individualism and the purity of art outside of any political or social commitment. She did, however, make her debut as an exhibiting artist at *Kunstnernes Efterårsudstilling* [Artists’ Autumn Exhibition]<sup>7</sup> in 1961. The work was in an abstract style and bore the almost arch-typical title “Rektangulær konstruktion, komposition med cirkel” [Rectangular construction, composition with circle]. In the following years, Trier Mørch exhibited at another censored exhibition *Charlottenborg Forårsudstilling* [Charlottenborg Spring Exhibition] from 1962 to 1967, also with abstract works with lyrical titles such as “Værelset i søvne” [The Room in Sleep] (1962), “Tankespring” [Brainstorming] (1964) and “Den genfundne tid” [Time Regained – obviously a literary reference to Marcel Proust] (1964). These works were colourfully painted with heavy impasto – probably inspired by her teacher Jacobsen and typical of the abstract trends in Danish post-war art (Fig. 1).

During her institutional education, Trier Mørch became involved with the students’ union, where she acted as chairperson of the students’ council of the academy. This gave her the opportunity to participate in an international students’ conference in Gdańsk, in communist Poland in 1962.<sup>8</sup> The experience had a profound impact on the young art student: “Despite all the political difficulties, despite censorship and divisions between people, the posters on the walls were eloquent and strong – exactly as they should be! And the poets wrote and the painters painted, and it was a flourishing confusion of madness and talents and tiny theatres”.<sup>9</sup> Trier Mørch also emphasised the meeting with Polish theatre, like the student theatre CO TO whom she befriended and the year after she travelled to Opole to visit Jerzy Grotowski’s Theatre of 13 Rows.<sup>10</sup> These formative meetings happened in a climate of new openings of the “Polish thaw” in the late 1950s and early 1960s. A Danish newspaper reported on the “giant experiment” of reforms taken up by Gomulka forming a new attitude in the cultural field.<sup>11</sup> The Danish government also

6 P.M. Hornung, *Egill Jacobsen og hans tid*, book manuscript, 2023, pp. 152–154.

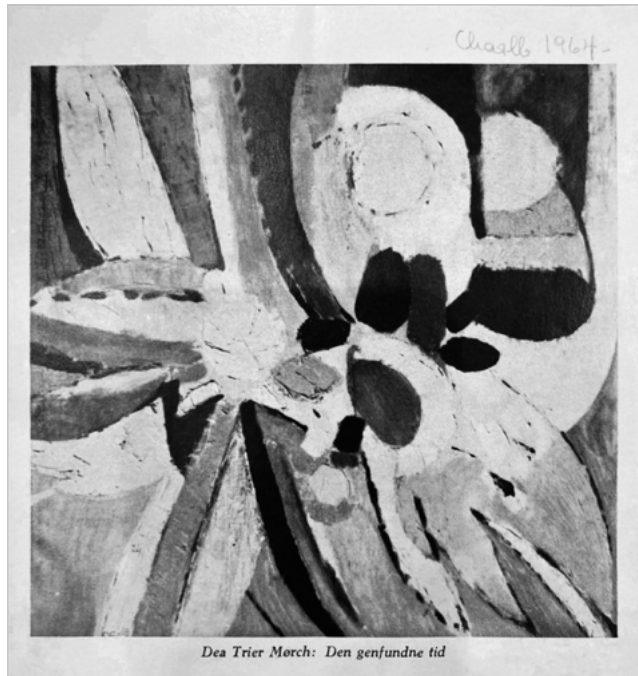
7 *Kunstnernes Efterårsudstilling* is a censored exhibition at Den Frie Udstillingsbygning, the house of the artist’s associations, running since 1915.

8 Presented as a “Polish-Scandinavian conference of culture for students” in Gdańsk in 1962.

9 Portrait article on Dea Trier Mørch in *Woman’s Journal Advocate*, October 1986.

10 Dea Trier Mørch, exhibition pamphlet, Gdańsk 1968.

11 E. Steffensen, “Har Gomulka en kulturpolitik?”, *Information*, 25 February 1958.



**Fig. 1.** Dea Trier Mørch,  
“Den Genfundne tid”, 1964.  
From the catalogue  
of Kunstnernes  
Efterårsudstilling 1965.

followed the events in Poland with interest and Prime Minister H.C. Hansen expressed to his NATO colleagues in 1957 that liberal tendencies in Poland were prominent and that cultural exchanges with the country should be encouraged to stimulate them further.<sup>12</sup> Against this background, cooperative endeavours were undertaken between Denmark and Poland around 1960 and developed through the 1960s. As a result, a Cultural Exchange Agreement was signed by the Danish and Polish foreign ministries in 1961 as a formal channel of exchange in science, education and culture. The agreement made student exchanges possible, opening the door for Danish students to Polish universities. This opportunity was barely used by many, but in 1964 Trier Mørch applied to study in Warsaw at the Painting School of the Arts Academy and was accepted as a guest by the Polish Ministry of Culture. Trier Mørch went to Poland to study and continued her stay in Cracow in 1965. After more than a year in Poland, she continued with study visits to the academy in Belgrade Yugoslavia (1966), the academy in Leningrad, USSR (1966–67) and Prague, Czechoslovakia (1967), while also making shorter trips to other Eastern Bloc countries. For this unusual itinerary she made sure to refer to the former stays when applying for the next destination. It is worth noting that Trier

---

12 Telegram dated 25 February 1957 to Danato. Mentioned in a note on the exchange with Poland by Undervisningsministeriet, 1 February 1958. 41. Dan Pol 2. Blandede Kommission. UM Gruppeordnede Sager 1945–1972.

Mørch's education in the state socialist countries did not happen through political contacts in communist organisations. Rather, she used the new structures of diplomatic exchange and contacted as much of the art world as she could, primarily younger artist environments. She commented on her impressions of the different countries: "Of course, differences and contrasts caught my attention, but nonetheless I constantly felt the same strong will to better human conditions, an urge that for me manifested itself under the common banner of socialism" (this was expressed for her exhibition in Poland in 1968 and should be viewed within that officially sanctioned context).<sup>13</sup> As a sign of their rarity, her travels caught the attention of the Danish public and a newspaper interviewed her before her departure for Leningrad under the headline "On artistic education in Soviet Russia".<sup>14</sup> In the interview, she emphasised that little was known about art in the Soviet Union and that she looked forward to discovering traditions like icon painting, "billeddigtning" ["Image poetry"] and the meeting with younger Soviet artists.

During these educational stays and travels, the artist did not just play the role of an observer. In Poland, she had already actively involved herself in official networking tasks for Danish-Polish exchange. In January 1965, she sent a report on the conditions of practising artists in Poland to the Danish Ministry of Culture, seemingly on her own initiative. There she described the circumstances of Polish artists as materially difficult and with an "unsatisfied need for contacts". There were, however, "excellent culture conferences and international festivals", where "Denmark ought to participate". And accordingly, she "urged the Ministry of Culture, the Academy of Fine Arts, the artists' organisations and the galleries to investigate the possibilities for and then organise Polish art exhibitions in Denmark" and offered to establish contacts.<sup>15</sup> As one outcome, the Polish artist Alexander Kobzdej (1920–1972) (her professor at the art academy in Warsaw) participated as a guest exhibitor at *Kunstnernes Efterårsudstilling* in Copenhagen 1965, where Trier Mørch wrote an introduction to his work in the catalogue. At the same exhibition, Trier Mørch herself showed for the first time a motif from her travels with the painting "Vinter i Ulica Asfaltowa Warszawa" [Winter in Ulica Asfaltowa, Warsaw] – a small step towards a figurative style in a half-abstract depiction of the street.

Polish-Danish exchange had an upsurge in 1965, not least through two larger Danish exhibitions in Poland. First, an exhibition of Danish arts and crafts

13 Dea Trier Mørch, exhibition pamphlet, Gdańsk 1968: ["Naturligvis fangede forskelle og modsætninger min opmærksomhed, men ikke desto mindre følte jeg konstant den samme stærke strøm af vilje til at forbedre menneskets skæbne, en viljestrøm, der for mig manifesterede sig under det almindelige navn socialisme"].

14 "På kunstopdragelse i Sovjetunionen", *Berlingske Tidende*, 30 September 1966.

15 D. Trier Mørch, *Rapport til Kulturministeriet vedrørende udøvende kunstneres kår i Polen*, 2 January 1965, Danish National Archives (41. Dan Pol 2. Blandede Kommission. UM Gruppeordnede Sager 1945–1972).

was organised in Warsaw.<sup>16</sup> It was a remarkable success with over 100,000 visitors and Dea Trier Mørch was involved in the project, as seen in the article “A Day at the Danish Arts and Crafts Exhibition”, which she wrote in the journal *Dansk Kunsthåndværk*.<sup>17</sup> Her mother Ibi Trier Mørch was chair of the organising Foreningen Dansk Kunsthåndværk at the time and Dea apparently worked as the daily host of the exhibition. The article describes her observation of the visitors queuing up from the morning, their interest in Danish design, and the visit of Icelandic and Norwegian fellow exchange art students in the evening, where they threw a party and switched the Carl Nielsen music on the turntable with a rock n’ roll record in the exhibition after closing time. The article concludes that the exhibition was a great success, also in terms of “social and political aspects” hard to understand for the Danes. The Poles would always read between the lines and no matter what they knew about Denmark previously, felt that Denmark is a country where one has time, money, energy and opportunity in an amount unknown to themselves.<sup>18</sup> This reading was probably well matched with the goals of the Danish organisers.

Later the same year, a larger solo exhibition of Egill Jacobsen – the previously-mentioned Trier Mørch’s academy teacher – was exhibited in Warsaw and Cracow. Again, it was an outcome of the cultural exchange agreement, where the Danish Ministry of Culture had already mentioned the opportunity of Jacobsen’s exhibition in 1962.<sup>19</sup> In Warsaw the exhibition took place at the Zachęta gallery, the most prominent exhibition venue and the headquarters of the Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych (CBWA) – the national agency for art exhibitions in socialist Poland.<sup>20</sup> It was a retrospective of Jacobsen’s oeuvre from the Cobra era to the present, selected by the artist, who was also present at the hanging in Warsaw. Such a presentation of a Western artist was rare, even during the 1960s thaw and was also the first solo exhibition for the Danish cultural exchange. On Jacobsen’s initiative, a group of students from the Danish art academy were to be given the opportunity to travel to Poland to learn about Polish art. This came to fruition when six students visited Warsaw and Cracow in November. Trier Mørch acted as host for the students in Cracow.<sup>21</sup>

These semi-official tasks show that Trier Mørch was active in collaborations with the Danish authorities. Her stay in Poland was not primarily

---

16 The Danish Design exhibition, Warsaw, 29 March to 27 April 1965. Organised by Foreningen Dansk Kunsthåndværk as part of the Danish-Polish Cultural Exchange Agreement.

17 “En dag på Dansk Kunsthåndværks udstilling i Warszawa”, *Danst Kunsthåndværk*, 1965, No. 1, pp. 11–13.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 13: [“Ligeegyldigt hvad de vidste om Danmark i forvejen, så mærker de nu, at det er et land, hvor man har tid, råd, energi og mulighed i en for dem ukendt udstrækning”].

19 “Program for Kulturelt og videnskabeligt samarbejde mellem Kongeriget Danmark og Den polske Folkerepublik 1.4. 1962–31.3. 1964”, Danish National Archives, 41. Dan Pol 2. Blandede Kommission. UM Gruppeordnede Sager 1945–1972.

20 The activities of the CBWA at Zachęta are the topic of *Ikonotheka* 26, 2016.

21 Christine Scherfig, one of the students, has been interviewed for my research.



politically motivated, but it was rather driven by her interest in Polish art and life in a time of transition. In notes from an interview from 1971, Trier Mørch looks back on her time in Poland, which from her first visit as a 20-year old affected her like “a shock” and “a drug” as “it was harrowing, dynamic, strange and at the same time familiar, a fantastic situation. I felt attracted by the hardness and the rawness [...] to learn and get to know the life-struggle”.<sup>22</sup> She had, however, become aware that it was a specific epoch, which had come to an end by the late 1960s. At the time of her first visits at the beginning of the 1960s, “the cultural situation in Eastern Europe was more free than it had been for a long time [...] it was primarily in Poland that this freedom manifested itself”.<sup>23</sup> However, this freedom had stopped due to the political situation and by the end of the 1960s a “new Stalinism had sadly occurred. But a new thaw can happen”.<sup>24</sup> So there was sympathy with the Polish art scene, but a clear distance towards the political rulers and the dictated course.

Her attachment to the Polish art scene in the 1960s manifested itself in two significant outcomes. First, she was given a solo exhibition in Gdańsk in 1968 organised by the association Gdańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Sztuki [Gdańsk Society for the Friends of Art]. The exhibition consisted of 25 works, many from her recent travels and probably graphic works, like the portrait of a young man in a fur hat in front of the Winter Palace from her recent time in Leningrad depicted in a small pamphlet produced for the exhibition. A short bio, a portrait and an introduction introduced the artist and highlighted her first meeting with Poland and the continuous contact with and interest in this country. Apart from the pamphlet, few details are available on the exhibition and its reception, which was her first solo presentation and happened in the town of her formative meeting with Poland (Fig. 2).

Then, in 1970, Trier Mørch published her book *Polen* [Poland] as a travelogue with several illustrations. It followed up on *Sorgmunter Socialisme* pub-

22 Manuscript for the interview with Gunnar Jespersen, partly published as “Jeg tror ikke på den fri kunst”, *Berlingske Tidende*, 3.01.1971. Papers of Dea Trier Mørch, Royal Danish Library [“Det var et chok. Polen påvirkede mig som et euforiserende stof. Det var stærkt oprivende, dynamisk, fremmed og alligevel kendt, en fantastisk situation. Jeg følte mig tiltrukket af hårdheden og råheden i de lande. I Østeuropa er det vigtigt at lære livskampen at kende”].

23 Ibid.

“[Jeg mærkede, at det var en periode, der var forbi. Derfor havde en et mere nostalgisk præg. Det var en periode, der var forbi i Polen. Jeg mærkede, at det ikke stod så godt til som det gjorde i årene 1956–66. Dengang var tingene i opbrud og blomstring. Der er flere forklaringer. I begyndelsen af 1960’erne var den kulturelle situation i Østeuropa mere fri end den havde været i lange tider. [...] Det var i første række i Polen, at denne frihed manifesterede sig”].

24 Ibid. [“I slutningen af 1960’erne var der desværre indtrådt en ny-stalinisme. Men der kan godt senere ske en optøning”].



Fig. 2. Exhibition pamphlet, Gdańsk 1968. Royal Danish Library.

lished in 1968 in a similar form, which had depicted her time in Leningrad and encounters with everyday Soviet life and the art academy.<sup>25</sup> Both books emphasise her own perspective as a fascinated, but also foreign observer, and empathetic depictions of the people's everyday life and struggles – especially the women, like in the poetry-image “Historien om en russisk pige. Et ikon fra det 20. Århundrede” [The story of a Russian girl: An icon from the 20<sup>th</sup> century] with a series of scenes from the life of a war widow (Fig. 3).

*Sorgmunter Socialisme* was well received in Denmark and even made into a TV-film,<sup>26</sup> and the same was the case with *Polen*. Artistic reports from the other side of the Iron Curtain were rare in Denmark and prominent intellectuals like author Klaus Rifbjerg applauded her as a “reporter on a sentimental journey”.<sup>27</sup> Another reviewer characterised the book as follows: “This is a Poland seen by an artist with all senses wide open for the things, the atmosphere, the people. One finds no analyses, but images with great depth. The book

25 D. Trier Mørch: *Sorgmunter Socialisme: Sovjettiske raderinger*, Copenhagen, 1968, and *Polen*, Copenhagen, 1970.

26 A 30-minute film was produced for Danish national broadcast DR combining graphic images and film footage, including her Røde Mor colleagues acting as Russians. *Aktuelt*, 4 November 1969.

27 K. Rifbjerg, “Fra Polen”, *Politiken*, 31 November 1970.

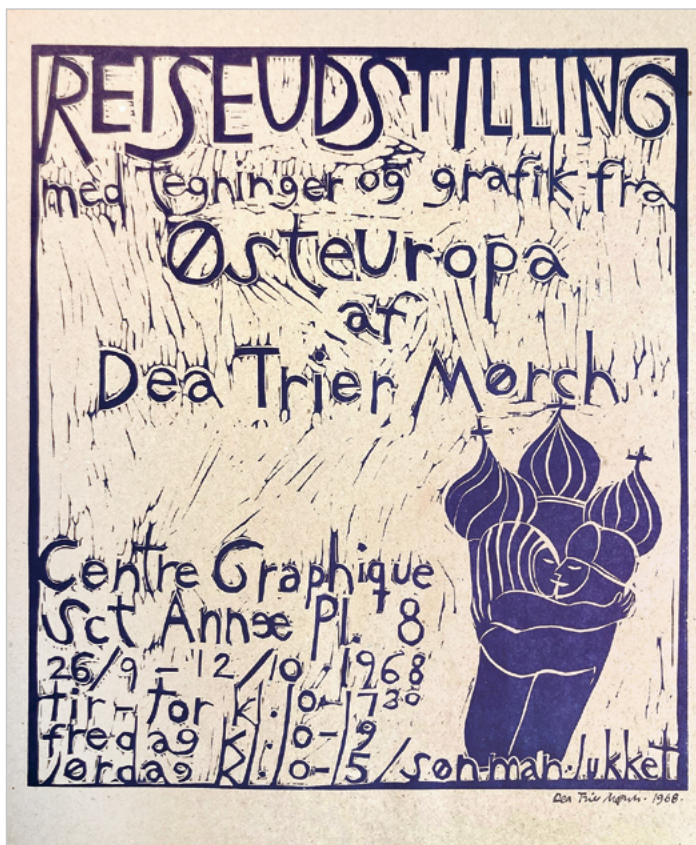


Fig. 3. Dea Trier Mørch, “Historien om en russisk pige. Et ikon fra det 10. århundrede”. From *Sorgmunter Socialisme*, 1967.

is a poem”.<sup>28</sup> In the larger perspective, the book appears as a testimony to Trier Mørch’s decade with contacts in Poland, which corresponded with the “Polish thaw” and its upsurge in artistic activities, including the cultural exchanges between Denmark and Poland, where we can see that the artist played an active role. The works from her stays in the socialist countries were exhibited in a small gallery exhibition in Copenhagen in 1968 marking a distinct phase in the artist’s career<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 8).

28 K. Holst, “Polske Billeder”, *Information*, 2 December 1970 [“Det er et Polen set af en kunstner med alle sanser susende åbne for tingene, stemningerne, folkene. Man finder ingen analyser, men billeder med dybdevirkning. Bogen er et digt”].

29 *Rejseudstilling med tegninger og grafik fra Østeuropa af Dea Trier Mørch*, Centre Graphique, Sct. Annæ Plads 8, 26 September to 12 October 1968.



**Fig. 8.** Poster from the exhibition of works from Eastern Europe by Trier Mørch in 1968. Archives of Dea Trier Mørch by courtesy of the family.

## Collective works: Trier Mørch and Røde Mor in the GDR, 1967–1980

Shortly after her return to Denmark, Trier Mørch co-founded the political art collective Røde Mor (Red Mother) in 1969. The group of 13 young artists – Danes except for one Japanese artist Yukari Ochiai (1937–) whom Trier Mørch had met at the art academy in Leningrad – were committed to the cause of creating “political, proletarian art” working with collective art forms in posters, graphical works, painting, music, song-writing, poetry, photo, film and sound.<sup>30</sup> Røde Mor would become an essential part of the Danish cultural scene in the 1970s, both through their widely distributed graphic works and

<sup>30</sup> The aims of Røde Mor were declared in a manifesto and the journal *Røde Mor*, 1970, 1.

the rock-theatre group Røde Mor Rock Cirkus.<sup>31</sup> The visual works included drawings, comics, posters and graphical sheets and series, often published as posters and books, fitting with the lino-cuts that were now Trier Mørch's main medium. A preferred form was the collective image, where several members contributed with various elements, often combining the case-specific message with more associative, symbolic images.

Their frequent manifestos explained the motivation for forming the group as a “despair over the general situation of the arts in Denmark”, where in the capitalist society the artist is isolated and forced to sell their works to the upper class and their institutions alienated from the working class, whereas art should be “individualistic, rich in experiment and above all purified from political content”.<sup>32</sup> However the revolts and international protest movements of 1968 forced artists to leave their ivory towers and understand the cultural background of the people. Røde Mor would thus “turn their backs on the formalistic, meaningless, multinational art meant for the upper classes” and towards inspiration in the social-realism of the twenties and thirties, while also “[t]he arts of the socialist countries had been a source of inspiration to us for a long time, an inspiration which grew from day to day”.<sup>33</sup> Which arts of the socialist countries this refers to is not specified – was it the official socialist realism, applied art, or specific genres like Polish poster art?

Interestingly, an article in the Polish design journal *Projekt* presented the work of Røde Mor in 1972 (Fig. 4). Their practice was here seen as an exponent of the new phenomenon of the “poor poster”, where in “a conscious resignation from the refined technologies of print, the come-back to the elementary forms of visual communication defines the attitude of artists who map out other, non-commercial, and even beyond-aesthetic aims”.<sup>34</sup> The tendency had become visible at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Poster Biennale in Warsaw in Poland the same year (Trier Mørch or Røde Mor did not participate here) as artists’ attempt to take control over the production and distribution in self-chosen “graphic poverty”.<sup>35</sup>

However, the genre was especially prominent in Western countries, where “poor” graphic art was an expression of protest against the values of a bourgeois society and the need for interference of art in social life. The practice in Denmark was particularly highlighted in the following description:

“In Denmark, known for its placidity, youth collectives have been set up that are preoccupied with the creation and popularisation of political art,

31 Røde Mor organised itself in two sections, the graphical art group and the orchestra in the early 1970s.

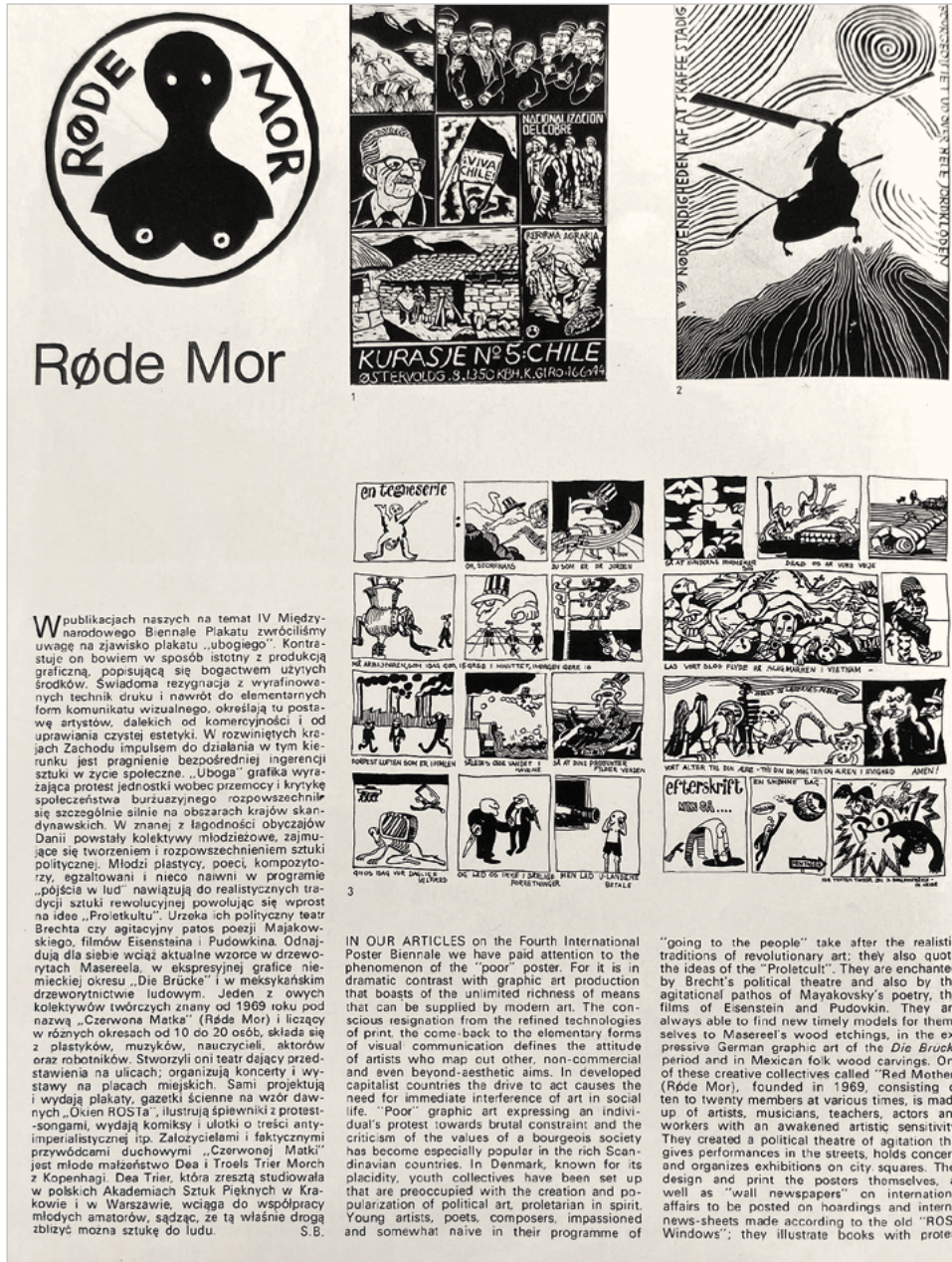
32 Manifesto distributed in the mid-1970s and translated into English, German and Russian. Papers of Dea Trier Mørch, Royal Danish Library.

33 Ibid.

34 N.N., “Røde Mor”, *Projekt*, 1972, 90, pp. 62–63.

35 *Projekt*, 1972, 88, p. 17.





W publikacjach naszych na temat IV Międzynarodowego Biennale Plakatu zwróciliśmy uwagę na zjawisko plakatu „ubogiego”. Konstruuje on bowiem w sposób istotny z produkcją graficzną, popuszczając się bogactwem użytych środków. Świadoma rezygnacja z wyrafinowanych technik druku i nawet do elementarnych form komunikatu wizualnego, określają tu postawę artystów, dalekich od komercyjności i od uprawiania czystej estetyki. W rozwiniętych krajach Zachodu impulsem do działania w tym kierunku jest pragnienie bezpośredniej ingerencji sztuki w życie społeczne. „Uboga” grafika wyrażająca protest jednostki wobec przemocy i krytykę społeczeństwa burżuazyjnego rozpowszechniła się szczególnie silnie na obszarach krajów skandynawskich. W znanej z łagodności obyczajów Danii powstały kolektywy młodzieżowe, zajmujące się tworzeniem i rozpowszechnianiem sztuki politycznej. Młodzi plastycy, poeci, kompozytorzy, egzaltowani i nieco naiwni w programie „pójścia w lud” nawiązują do realistycznych tradycji sztuki rewolucyjnej powołując się wprost na idee „Proletkultu”. Urzeka ich polityczny teatr Brechta czy agitacyjny patos poezji Majakowskiego, filmów Eisensteina i Pudovkina. Odnajdują dla siebie wciąż aktualne wzorce w drzeworytach Masereela, w ekspresyjnej grafice niemieckiego okresu „Die Brücke” i w meksykańskim drzeworytnictwie ludowym. Jeden z owych kolektywów twórczych znany od 1969 roku pod nazwą „Czerwona Matka” (Røde Mor) i liczący w różnych okresach od 10 do 20 osób, składa się z artystów, muzyków, nauczycieli, aktorów oraz robotników. Stworzyli oni teatr dający przedstawienia na ulicach; organizują koncerty i wystawy na placach miejskich. Sami projektują i wydają plakaty, gazetki ścienne na wzór dawnych „Óken ROST’a”, ilustrują śpiewniki i protestosongami, wydają komiksy i ulotki o treści antyimperialistycznej itp. Założycielami i faktycznymi przywódcami duchowymi „Czerwonej Matki” jest młode małżeństwo Dea i Troels Trier Mørch z Kopenhagi. Dea Trier, która zresztą studiowała w polskiej Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie i w Warszawie, wciąga do współpracy młodych amatorów, sądząc, że tą właśnie drogą zbliżyć można sztukę do ludu. S.B.

IN OUR ARTICLES on the Fourth International Poster Biennale we have paid attention to the phenomenon of the “poor” poster. For it is in dramatic contrast with graphic art production that boasts of the unlimited richness of means that can be supplied by modern art. The conscious resignation from the refined technologies of print, the come-back to the elementary forms of visual communication defines the attitude of artists who map out other, non-commercial and even beyond-aesthetic aims. In developed capitalist countries the drive to act causes the need for immediate interference of art in social life. “Poor” graphic art expressing an individual’s protest towards brutal constraint and the criticism of the values of a bourgeois society has become especially popular in the rich Scandinavian countries. In Denmark, known for its placidity, youth collectives have been set up that are preoccupied with the creation and popularization of political art, proletarian in spirit. Young artists, poets, composers, impassioned and somewhat naive in their programme of

“going to the people” take after the realistic traditions of revolutionary art; they also quote the ideas of the “Proletcult”. They are enchanted by Brecht’s political theatre and also by the agitational pathos of Mayakovsky’s poetry, the films of Eisenstein and Pudovkin. They are always able to find new timely models for themselves to Masereel’s wood etchings, in the expressive German graphic art of the *Die Brücke* period and in Mexican folk wood carvings. One of these creative collectives called “Red Mother (Røde Mor), founded in 1969, consisting of ten to twenty members at various times, is made up of artists, musicians, teachers, actors and workers with an awakened artistic sensitivity. They created a political theatre of agitation that gives performances in the streets, holds concert and organizes exhibitions on city squares. The design and print the posters themselves, as well as “wall newspapers” on international affairs to be posted on hoardings and internal news-sheets made according to the old “ROS Windows”; they illustrate books with protest

Fig. 4. Røde Mor in *Projekt*, 1972

proletarian in spirit. Young artists, poets, composers, impassioned and somewhat naïve in their programme of ‘going to the people’ take after the realistic traditions of revolutionary art; they also quote the ideas of the ‘Proletcult’.<sup>36</sup> One of these creative collectives was Røde Mor. After an introduction to their work and principles, special attention was given to Trier Mørch and her partner: “The young couple Dea and Troels Trier Mørch are the founders and real spiritual leaders of the ‘Red Mother’. Dea Trier, who *nota bene* has studied in Poland at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow and Warsaw, is full of enthusiasm and elemental temperament and she encourages young amateurs to cooperate. She thinks that this is the way to bring art closer to the people”.<sup>37</sup> This indicates a special interest in Trier Mørch in the Polish context, even though the exact reason for the article is unknown. The “poor poster” was obviously a product of the Western counterculture after 1968, where it had been inspired by the Polish Poster Movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which the Danish artists were much aware of as an experimental form of everyday design.

The activities of Røde Mor mainly took place in a Danish context focused on local publics and topics, from workers’ struggles and women’s rights to solidarity with decolonial struggles. There were fewer travels and stays abroad, even though a collective study trip to China in 1973–74 was planned, but in the end not undertaken.<sup>38</sup> Instead, Røde Mor and Trier Mørch would be exhibited in the GDR. As part of their stated political practice, Trier Mørch joined DKP, the Danish Communist Party, in 1972. In the light of the artist’s antipathy for the party authorities in Poland and the Soviet Union and their restrictive acts in 1968, this appears to be a surprising decision – both regarding the hard “normalisation” course of the regimes in the socialist states after the end of the Prague Spring and the generally doctrinaire and Moscow-loyal stand of the Danish DKP. The reasons were probably mostly related to an aim to belong to a workers’ party and make a statement in the Danish context.

In 1967 Trier Mørch had been invited to exhibit among the Danish artists at the *II. Biennale der Ostseeländer* in Rostock, GDR. This exhibition was the first to carry the “Biennale” moniker in Northern Europe as an ambitious project of the GDR to establish an international art exhibition with participation from non-socialists abroad from the Nordic countries and socialist states around the Baltic Sea. The “Baltic Biennial” was part of the *Ostseewochen* festival, a strategic attempt at creating interaction with the Nordic countries to stimulate international diplomatic recognition of the GDR state.<sup>39</sup> From its

---

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 At first, Dea Trier Mørch and Troels Trier showed interest in visiting China in 1973 and contacted Selskabet for kulturel forbindelse med Kina. It was delayed, as it was decided to plan the tour for the whole Røde Mor group in 1974. However, this did not happen.

39 For more on the background of *Biennale der Ostseeländer* and *Ostseewochen* see: E. Neumann, *Die Biennale der Ostseeländer – außen- und kulturpolitische Dimensionen der größten*

first inauguration in 1965, it was promoted as “Sammelpunkt für realistische Kräfte” [A centre for realist forces in art], but with freedom of choice for the participating artists for each country. As Denmark did not recognize the GDR state, no official contacts could be held with the country, so instead of the usual channels for international exhibitions (active with Poland, for instance), individual artists and their network were in charge of the Danish participation. This included realist painter Victor Brockdorff (1911–1992) and political cartoonist Herluf Bidstrup (1912–1988), who were members of the exhibition’s international committee and well connected with the art world in the GDR. They invited a selection of Danish artists for each Biennale – a difficult task as interaction with the GDR at the time was still controversial. For the second Biennale in 1967 some younger artists were invited intentionally, including Trier Mørch. She accepted the invitation and showed four smaller paintings, including “Winter in Warsaw” (1965) and “Balkan” (1966) from her recent travels, which had not included the GDR. The same year, she also exhibited at the Corner exhibition in Copenhagen, where her graphical works from her stay in Leningrad were shown and caught attention, just before the publication of the book the following year.

After a few years, Trier Mørch again participated in the *Biennale der Ostseestaaten*<sup>40</sup> in 1973, this time both as a solo artist and as part of the Røde Mor collective. In her own name, she presented a series of illustrations for Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*. Issued as a large-format book in 1969 (commented upon by a reviewer as a luxury product for the few),<sup>41</sup> the illustrations depicted contemporary issues like the anti-imperialist struggle in the Vietnam War and Black Panther protests against Marx’s text from 1848. Shown in the GDR, these images were well-received in the official art journal *Bildende Kunst* as “the surprise of this Biennial”. The “admirable linocut series [...] provides exciting evidence of the undiminished, burning relevance of the 125-year-old script. Today’s events are reflected line by line. The imagery combines the documentary and universal with the subjective, with graphic freshness and the appeal of the moment”.<sup>42</sup> There was also praise for Røde Mor’s graphics –

---

*Internationalen Kunstaussstellung der DDR*, PhD Dissertation, Technisches Universität Berlin, 2022.

40 The slight title change was made in 1969 to highlight the focus on nation states to which the GDR wanted to belong.

41 Ø. Hjort: “Hvad Marx og Engels ikke drømte om”, *Information*, 27 November 1969.

42 H. Raum: “Wie realistisch ist die Biennale?”, *Bildende Kunst*, 1973, 10, pp. 470–480:

[“Die Überraschung dieser Biennale ist die Grafik, vor allem Dea Trier Morchs grossartige Linolschnittserie zum Kommunistischen Manifest und die Plakate der Gruppe Røde Mor (Rote Mutter). Die kämpferische Grafik der Generation von Jörn Matthiasen, Herluf Bidstrup, und Palle Nielsen wird von einem kräftigen Nachwuchs weitergeführt. Trier Morchs Zyklus belegt in spannungsvoller Weise die ungeschmälerte, brennende Aktualität der 125 Jahre alte Schrift. Zeile für Zeile werden die heutige Geschehen widerspiegelt. Die Bildsprache verbindet das dokumentarische und Allgemeingültige



this kind of collective was an unknown form in the GDR and Trier Mørch had to explain clearly to Brockdorff for the catalogue: “We will absolutely prefer to be anonymous and only appear as a *collective*, i.e. without artist names”.<sup>43</sup>

It was planned that Trier Mørch and members of Røde Mor should attend the opening in Rostock, but this was delayed for a later visit to another event, where they were also invited to exhibit: The *Intergrafik* exhibition of graphic and poster art in East Berlin. *Intergrafik* was another international exhibition in the otherwise closed GDR art world founded in 1965 by the national artist’s association Verband Bildende Künstler as an international forum of “engagierte Kunst” [committed art].<sup>44</sup> A wide range of countries were invited to participate, from the socialist countries as well as from the non-socialist abroad in the West and from Asia, Africa and Latin America, including a larger group of Vietnamese artists from the socialist Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The multinationalism of the exhibition would obviously serve the goal of presenting an image of the GDR as purveyor of international solidarity instead of restrictive isolation. Denmark participated from the second *Intergrafik* exhibition in 1967 onwards, where invitations for selected graphic artists were sent directly from the VBK. In 1973 the exhibition included around 50 countries “for peace, friendship and anti-imperialist solidarity”<sup>45</sup> also to correspond with the 10th World Festival for Youth and Students in East Berlin – a mega-event attracting thousands of visitors from abroad and a kind of “Red Woodstock” for GDR youths, symbolising a moment of extended cultural freedom. The exhibition was installed in the Altes Museum, where available photo documentation shows the work of Trier Mørch clearly visible with the soldier portrait from the illustration of the Communist Manifesto, here as a single poster in black-and-white (Fig. 5). Thus, a prominent spot was given to the Danish artist, who was present with topical works in the series “Vietnam” and “Cuba” (1969). Røde Mor was also exhibited with three works credited as “Solidarity with Chile” (1971), “Solidarity with Freedom Fighters in Africa” (1971) and “Working Struggles”.<sup>46</sup> Corresponding with the World Youth Festival and the international current for activist art, *Intergrafik* 73 was planned to sharpen its “committed” profile and connect further with

---

mit dem Subjektiven, mit grafischer Frische und dem Reiz des Momentanen. Auch die Gemeinschaftsarbeiten der acht sozialistischen Grafiker von Rode Mor haben diese Spannung. Hinzu kommt die Fähigkeit, ein Bündel von politischen Grundtema des Plakates ausgehender Bildgedanken in einer verdichteten grafischen Gesamtform zu fassen, die die schnelle Erfassung als Ganzes ebenso ermöglicht, wie das Ablesen als Bilderbogen”].

43 Letter from Dea Trier Mørch to Victor Brockdorff dated 14 March 1973, Archives of Victor Brockdorff, courtesy of Hans-Henrik Brockdorff [“Vi vil absolut helst være anonyme og kun optræde som *kollektiv*, dvs. helst uden at nævne kunstnernavne”].

44 *Intergrafik*, exhibition catalogue, Verband Bildende Künstler, Berlin, 1965.

45 *Intergrafik* 73, exhibition catalogue, Verband Bildende Künstler, Berlin, 1973 [“Für Frieden, Freundschaft und Antiimperialistischen Solidarität”].

46 The other participating Danish artists were Palle From and Jørgen C. Rasmussen.

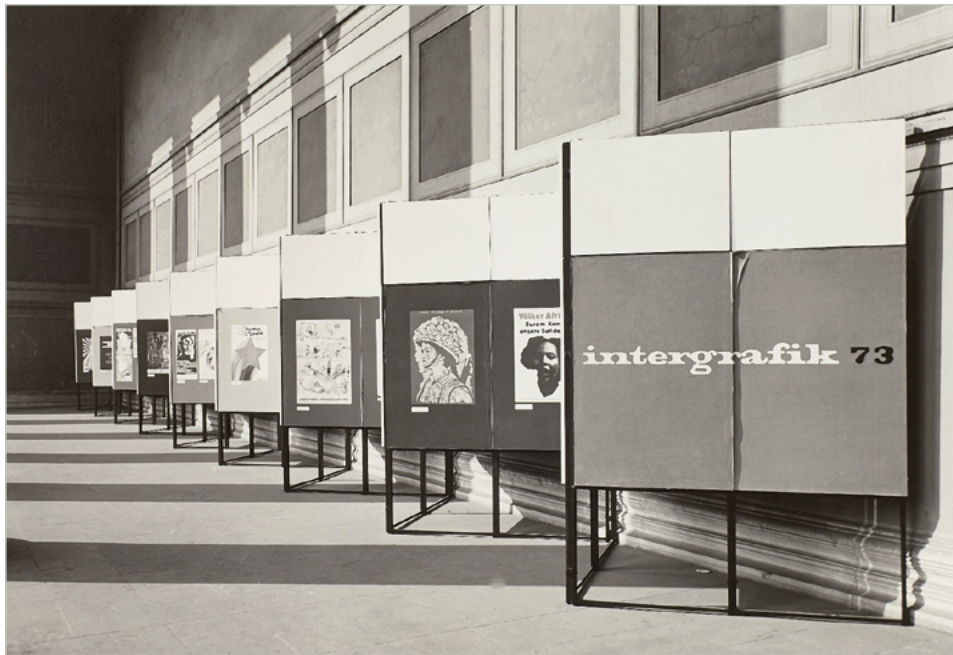


Fig. 5. “Intergrafik 73”, *Europeana*.

“progressive forces all around the world”.<sup>47</sup> This should highlight new combatting political art forms besides the traditional graphical arts formats previously predominant at *Intergrafik*, including political posters, activist graphic, photo montages, leaflets, caricatures, wall newspapers – experimental forms of political graphic arts that, however, should be delimited from “anarchist-bourgeois solutions”.<sup>48</sup> The invitation of “progressive groups” was central in this aim and “Rote Mutter” was specifically mentioned in the planning and was invited with the help from the organisers of the Ostseebiennale, indicating Rostock as an entrance point to the GDR for Danish artists.<sup>49</sup> The *Intergrafik* exhibi-

47 Report from the 1<sup>st</sup> planning meeting of *Intergrafik 73* (1<sup>st</sup> draft), Verband Bildende Künstler, Berlin, 1972. Archive of the Berlin Academy of Arts (1252 – 1972/73). [“IG73 soll ihr kämpferischer, bekenntnishafter Charakter weiter profiliert und die einzigartige politische Möglichkeit genutzt werden, sie noch enger mit dem Kampf der progressiven Kräfte in der ganzen Weltz u verbinden, als Ausdruck der Sammlungsbewegung und Friedensmanifestation der mit den Kämpfen ihrer Völker eng verbunden ist”].

48 Ibid. [“Neben den traditionellen Formen der Grafik soll der besonders kämpferische politische Charakter der INTERGRAFIK durch die Ausnahme von politisichen plakaten, den verschiedenen Formen der Aktionsgrafik, wie Flugblätter, Fotomontagen, Karikaturen, Wandzeitungsgrafik u.a. zum ausdrück gebracht werden”].

49 Ibid. [“Was die Teilnahme von fortschrittlichen Gruppen aus dem Ostseeraum betrifft, wie z.B. Gruppe ‘Rote Mutter’, Dänemark, u.a. so sollten die Organisatoren der

tion also included a program of artist meetings billed as the “Klub Intergrafik” and a solidarity bazar, where works were sold to raise money for a children’s hospital in Vietnam. It is uncertain to what extent Trier Mørch and Røde Mor participated in these events for *Intergrafik 73*, but interest had been raised for their work in the GDR, which would lead to further appearances. It was also planned that the Røde Mor Rock Cirkus should have performed at the World Youth Festival, which did not happen for unknown reasons.<sup>50</sup>

The *Biennale der Ostseestaaten* in 1975 again featured the work of Trier Mørch, this time with a graphic series illustrating Pablo Neruda’s *Canto General* in 10 images. Chilean poet and politician Neruda had an officially promoted iconic position in the GDR and protests against the military coup in 1973 was a major topic in GDR public life and culture. This is visible in the book *Chile: Gesang und Bericht* (1975), collecting contributions from artists and authors, including Trier Mørch and Røde Mor, each with one image.<sup>51</sup> In the Rostock exhibition, the ambition of presenting as a collective was abandoned this time, maybe conflicting with the practice in Rostock centred on individual artworks as a meeting ground. Instead, Røde Mor participant Thomas Kruse (1943–) appeared as an individual artist alongside Trier Mørch. The two graphic artists also participated at the following *Intergrafik* in 1976.<sup>52</sup> This time Trier Mørch showed seven linocuts, including “Freedom”, the image of the construction of the Statue of Liberty in New York as a symbol of power rather than liberation.

*Intergrafik 76* included 60 countries and again highlighted “anti-imperialist solidarity” and the importance of “progressive artists” from around the world. Press coverage again noticed Trier Mørch, both in words and illustrations, stimulated by the presence of the artist for the activities of the exhibition. Trier Mørch travelled to the artists’ meeting and solidarity bazar together with Thomas Kruse and Yukari Ochiai. The artists’ meeting in Club Intergrafik included a debate entitled “Problems of political graphic art in the West-European Countries” with presentations by the West-German group Tendenzen and by Trier Mørch.<sup>53</sup> The manuscript of Mørch’s presentation is preserved and, like their founding manifesto, starts with an analysis of the conditions

---

Ostseebiennale beauftragt werden, in Vorbereitung der Biennale 1973 gleichzeitig die INTERGRAFIK mit vorzubereiten”].

50 The Library and Archives of the Labour Movement, Copenhagen (Box 2801 – The Danish Festival Committee 1972–73, by secretary John Poulsen).

51 T. Billhardt, V. Braun, W. Bräunig, P. Dessau et al., eds., *Chile: Gesang und Bericht*, Halle, 1975. In here: D. Trier Mørch, “Indianer, Chile”, p. 16 and Røde Mor, p. 162 (Danish artist Jørgen C. Rasmussen also contributed with the work with “Zuschauer”, p. 240).

52 *Intergrafik* appeared as a somewhat irregular triennale happening in 1965, 1967, 1970, 1973, 1976, 1980, 1983 and 1987 (an *Intergrafik 90* was in planning for 1990).

53 “Die Rolle den politischen Grafik in westeuropäischen Ländern”, *Club Intergrafik*, Verbandsräume, Liebknechtstrasse 11, 7 November 1976. Program from the archives of Thomas Kruse.



Fig. 6. “Zum Beispiel ‘Rote Mutter’”, *Neue Berliner Illustrierte Magazin*, 1976.

of the artist in the capitalist society and then describes how Røde Mor operates in a different way, highlighting collective works and collective critical discussion in the production and evaluation.<sup>54</sup> This practice also included artists’ participation in *Intergrafik*, as discussed on the basis of meeting with Røde Mor back in Denmark, where both the exhibition and the artists’ meeting was seen as “successful, leading to many new contacts”, even if the primary aim was to make “socialist images” or “tell stories”.<sup>55</sup>

In the GDR press, Trier Mørch stood out as a remarkable artist. An article in the magazine *Neue Berliner Illustrierte* on *Intergrafik* and the solidarity bazar was called “For example ‘Red Mother’” and introduced Dea as a mother to three children with her husband, who was also an artist in the collective. “We formed this group, because we wanted to create art that is directly applicable to class struggle”, the artist said<sup>56</sup> (Fig. 6).

The official art journal *Bildende Kunst* highlighted Trier Mørch in the coverage of *Intergrafik 76*, introducing her as an “artist and class struggle fighter”, whose works make one realise the “core of Western European class struggle”.<sup>57</sup>

54 “Zur der Politischen Grafik in den westeuropäischen Ländern”, manuscript, 1976, the archives of Thomas Kruse.

55 Report from Røde Mor Basismøde, 24 November 1976. Papers of Røde Mor, Royal Danish Library.

56 “Zum Beispiel ‘Rote Mutter’”, *Neue Berliner Illustrierte*, 1976, 48: “Wir gründeten dieser Gruppe, weil wir Kunst schaffen wollen, die im Klassenkampf unmittelbar anwendbar ist”.

57 N. Stratmann, “Westeuropäischer Künstler af der Intergrafik 76”, *Bildende Kunst*, 1977, 1, pp. 11–14 [“Wenn man die Arbeit der 35jährigen Kopenhagener Künstlerin und Klassenkämpferin Dea Trier Mørch, ihres genossen Thomas Kruse und ihrer – zeitweilig

“The lino posters of ‘Røde Mor’ have a lot of love in them, believable joy. Because they are really sure of what they are doing, their laughter has a genuine sound, and a clear view is created that perceives moments and details in the midst of the turmoil that testify to the humanity of the fighters”, the applauding critic stated.<sup>58</sup> As another sign of their resonance, *Bildende Kunst* also published the talk by Dea Trier Mørch from the *Internationale Künstlertreff* on the practice of Røde Mor.<sup>59</sup>

The analysis report on *Intergrafik* from the VBK also described Røde Mor as a highlight of the solidarity bazar, which took place in the prominent and official frames of the newly-built Palast der Republik.<sup>60</sup> The report also offered a longer reflection on the form of Røde Mor and its specific potential for *Intergrafik*. It was recommended that the works of Røde Mor be presented in an even more lively form together with the rock circus and other contextual materials, also because the works could appear too crude or amateurish to the GDR audience.<sup>61</sup> This remarkable discussion shows the great potential GDR art organisations saw in Røde Mor, but also how their practice of the “poor poster” stood out against the more conventional formats favoured in the GDR. Even though the rock circus would never perform in the GDR or any other socialist country, Røde Mor and Trier Mørch had become prominent names in the GDR, mainly through the international, official exhibitions *Biennale der*

---

in Kanada lebenden – japanische Kollegin Yuhari Ochiai betrachtet, wenn man ihre bis zu zwölfteiligen politischen Drucke abliest, erfährt man die Kernpunkte der westeuropäischen Klassekämpfe”].

58 Ibid, p. 12 [“Die Linolplakate der ‘Røde Mor’ haben viel Liebe in sich, glaubwürdige Freude. Weil sie ihrer Sache wirklich sicher sind, hat ihr Lachen den echten Klang, entsteht ein freier Blick, der mitten im Getümmel Momente, Details wahrnimmt, die von der Humanität der Kämpfer werbend Zeugnis geben”].

59 D. Trier Mørch: “Das Künstlerkollektiv ‘Røde Mor’ (Rote Mutter) in Dänemark”, *Bildende Kunst*, 1977, 4, pp. 199–202.

60 “Analyse Intergrafik 76”, Verband Bildende Künstler, Berlin, 1977. Archive of the Academy of Arts.

61 [“Die Gruppe Rote Mutter zeigt Linolschriftfolgen zu bestimmten aktuellen politischen Probleme Dänemarks oder zur internationalen Solidarität. Wenn man das Programm der Roten Mutter beim Künstlertreffen erlebt hat, bekommen diese Arbeiten eine andere Funktion, eine Teilfunktion im Aktionsprogramm der Roten Mutter mit ihrem Rock-Zirkus, einer Agit-prop nicht unähnlichen Veranstaltungsform, die Mittel des Zirkus des Teatro Buffo, der Show, der Beat – und Rockmusik für agitatorische Zwecke der Gewerkschaften in der KP und andere fortschrittlicher Parteien und Organisationen umfunktioniert. Löst man diese Arbeit aus ihrem Gesamtzusammenhang, (Abdruck auf Plakaten, Einbeziehung in diese Veranstaltungen) dann zeigen sie letztlich ein künstlerisches Niveau unserer durchschnittlichen Laienzirkel. Man sollte zukünftig diese besondere Funktion der ‘Roten Mutter’ in der Intergrafik anschaulich machen, eventuell mit Hilfe von Fotoreien und auch musikalische Einlagen usw. Das belebt die Ausstellung und ist zugleich der Sache der Intergrafik dienlich, das Forum aller fortschrittlichen Kräfte in der Grafik zu sein. Versichtet man darauf, wird uns der Vorwurf nicht erspart bleiben, dass die qualitätsmassstabe der Intergrafik manchmal zu niedrig angesetzt werden”].

*Ostseeländer* and *Intergrafik*. Trier Mørch was also asked by the VBK for artist recommendations for the following *Intergrafik* – a sign of exchange, even though she was never part of any official GDR organisations. Apart from the exhibitions and their affiliated events, Trier Mørch did not stay in the GDR and had no artistic collaborations with GDR artists. Instead, Røde Mor had their closest international collaboration with political realist art groups in West Germany, mainly the artist group and the *Tendenzen* journal, which was in itself a forum for left-political realist art and often reported on art and exhibitions from the GDR.<sup>62</sup> Works of Røde Mor appeared in *Tendenzen*, for instance on the back cover of issue 108/109 in 1976 showing that the Danish group belonged to the Western European network of committed realist art in the 1970s.

After being absent in 1977, Trier Mørch exhibited at *Biennale der Ostseeländer* again in 1979. This time the works were illustrations from the book *Vinterbørn* (English edition *Winter's Child*, 1986). Published in Danish in 1976, it was a big breakthrough in the Danish public with its description of a maternity ward and the experiences of a group of women before and after childbirth. The theme of underexposed women experiences in society had been present in Trier Mørch's work before, including in the *Sorgmunter Socialisme* and *Polen* travelogues, but was now the main topic. 1975 was declared International Women's Year by the United Nations leading to a series of events corresponding with the active years of the Women's Liberation Movement. From the Danish side, Røde Mor artist Yukari Ochiai had produced a poster entitled "Kvinder er den halve verden" [Women are the half of the World] with a series of images of working women from all over the world, which became widely distributed and an iconic image of the era.<sup>63</sup> Like her previous books, *Vinterbørn* was illustrated by linocut images, which became as known as the book itself with their sincere depictions of pregnancy and childbirth. A series of these images were shown at the 8<sup>th</sup> *Biennale der Ostseeländer* in 1979 fitting with the theme of that year being the UN International Year of the Child, also marked at the Biennale. The novel was published in the GDR in 1979 as *Winterkinder* and an article in *Neues Deutschland* claimed that "every fourth Dane" had read the book by the socialist author.<sup>64</sup> *Intergrafik 80* featured Trier Mørch with three of the linocuts from *Vinterbørn*. This would be the last appearance of Trier Mørch in the GDR. At this point, Røde Mor had stopped as a collective in 1978, so the high hopes of a revitalised proletkult via the Dan-

---

62 It has been revealed that *Tendenzen* received financial support from GDR authorities, Neumann, op. cit., p. 211.

63 The poster was originally produced for Danmarks Demokratiske Kvindeforbund founded in 1948 as part of the *Fédération Démocratique Internationales des Femmes*. Despite having no official ties, the organisation was seen as affiliated with communist politics.

64 "Jeder vierte Däne las das Buch 'Winterkinder', *Neues Deutschland*, 11 April 1979. The book was published as *Winterkinder*, Rostock 1979.





**Fig. 7.** Dea Trier Mørch and Thomas Kruse at *Intergrafik* 1976. Archives of Røde Mor. Royal Danish Library.

ish group in the GDR could not be pursued further. The contact between Dea Trier Mørch and the GDR was characterised by frequent participation in the most important exhibitions and following recognition here. It was probably both the focus on anti-imperialism and political art outside of the capitalist art world that motivated the contact. Contrary to the previous interaction with Poland and the USSR, Trier Mørch did not stay in the GDR for longer periods and gave no accounts on her observations. There are no comments on significant events, like the expatriation of Wolf Biermann right at the time of the visit to *Intergrafik* in 1976.

The issue of women's rights was complicated in the socialist states. Marxist-Leninist politics generally prioritised class struggle over gender and Stalin had already notoriously declared the women's issue in the Soviet Union as solved in the 1930s. In the post-war era, the socialist countries occasionally played a proactive role in international women rights, and were associated with gender equality in some ways.<sup>65</sup> In the West, the communist-led Women's

<sup>65</sup> See F. de Haan: "The Global Left-Feminist 1960s. From Copenhagen to Moscow and New York", in: *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation Building*, eds. C. Jian et al., New York, 2018, pp. 230–242.

International Democracy Foundation (WIDF) founded in 1945 was active, for instance with a congress in Copenhagen 1953 – it was for this organisation that Ochiai produced her iconic poster in 1975 with women being half of the world and Trier Mørch also collaborated with WIDF. In the GDR, the official policy was that women's rights were not necessary as communism had granted equality in all aspects of life. The realities at the exhibitions looked different: at the national 7. *Kunstaussstellung der DDR* in Dresden 1972–73, only 53 of 350 artists were women and at *Intergrafik 73* 23 artists exhibited for the GDR with only 2 women and 2 out of 12 at *Intergrafik 76* (Fig. 7).

## Inside and Outside of the USSR, 1979–1991

While participating in the Røde Mor activities and having started her career as an author, Trier Mørch also exhibited as a solo artist in Denmark, for instance at the Corner exhibition. This led to her participation in a Corner group exhibition in the USSR in 1979. Through Brockdorff's contacts, who was active in the friendship society Landsforeningen Danmark-Sovjetunionen, the association had been invited to exhibit in Leningrad and Riga in 1979. Previously, some Soviet artists had been invited guests at the Corner exhibitions in Copenhagen, including a larger group from the Soviet Academy of the Arts in 1977. The exhibition of Corner in Leningrad took place in the Museum of the Academy of Arts in February 1979 and featured over 20 Danish artists. It was the first exhibition of contemporary (realist) Danish art in the Soviet Union and attracted considerable attention with media coverage in *Pravda* and *Sovjetskaja Kultura*. A pamphlet reproducing a selection of the art works as postcards was also in high demand. Extraordinarily, Corner organised a group trip for its members to the Soviet Union (Leningrad and Novgorod) and to the opening of the exhibition.<sup>66</sup> After the show in Leningrad, the exhibition was also shown in Riga, at the Museum of Foreign Art, in an abridged form with 12 painters and three sculptors. The exhibited works manifested various forms of realism from artists active since the 1930s like Karl Bovin (1907–1985), Victor Brockdorff and Hans Scherfig (1905–1979), to the younger figurative artists of the 1970s generation such as Henning Andersen (1944–2023), Jørgen Buch (1943–2021), Jørgen C. Rasmussen (1943–2000), Jørgen Tang Holbek (1942–) and Dea Trier Mørch and Røde Mor – they had all also exhibited in Rostock and the non-members of Corner Buch and Trier Mørch were also invited by Brockdorff because they had studied in Leningrad and could thus strengthen the local interest in the exhibition. Trier Mørch was represented with two linocuts including illustrations from her recent novel *Kastaniealléen*

---

<sup>66</sup> The trip was organised in collaboration with the friendship society Landsforeningen Danmark-Sovjetunionen. It is unknown if Dea Trier Mørch participated in this trip to her former hometown.



(1978), while Røde Mor was present through images from their recent decoration of Byggefagenes Hus (House of Construction Work) with contemporary workers of various functions. This was described in detail in an article on Danish art and an exhibition in the major Soviet art magazine *Iskusstvo*.<sup>67</sup> In accordance with Soviet art politics, the practice of Røde Mor was described as: “The critical orientation and the struggle for justice are the guiding principles of Røde Mor – a collective, who has a special position in modern Danish art”.<sup>68</sup> This was one of the last exhibitions while the group was active and their collective production had already ended. The exhibition was the largest presentation of Danish art in the Soviet Union. Centred on Corner, it presented a portrait of Danish art similar to the exhibitions in Rostock of realists from different generations.

Events were, however, put in motion in the 1980s, also affecting Trier Mørch’s relation to communism and the state socialist regimes. In 1982, she declared her departure from the communist party – an event which made the news as she had been a prominent communist artist along with authors such as Martin Andersen Nexø, Hans Kirk, and Hans Scherfig.<sup>69</sup> The reason for her decision was not directly declared, but the day before her departure she had published the essay “Kunstner og kommunist” [Artist and Communist] in the non-communist leftist newspaper *Information*. Here she revisited her inspirations and convictions throughout her career, not least in the communist art worlds. She stated that the “the abrasive style of the late sixties and early seventies is not of any use anymore – neither for the movement nor for ourselves”.<sup>70</sup> Western communists also needed to break with the party doctrine and acknowledge the situation of system critics in the state-socialist societies and stopped automatically viewing dissidents as enemies of socialism.<sup>71</sup> This was controversial in the Moscow-loyal Danish communist party and a clear indication that she had grown out of being an artist and communist in their way. It was not said, but the situation in Poland with the repression of Solidarity and martial law could have been the turning point, considering Trier Mørch’s earlier dedication to Poland.

Trier Mørch mainly worked as an author in the 1980s, maybe in an attempt to avoid the agitation style. The position of an author also became her platform to take part in the growing scene of dialogue meetings with Soviet authors and intellectuals. The First Literature Conference for Danish and Soviet Authors was organised at Aarhus University in 1985 in a collaboration

67 *Iskusstvo*, 1981, 3, pp. 53–59.

68 Ibid. Translation courtesy of Hans Østergaard Pedersen.

69 “Dea Trier Mørch har meldt sig ud af DKP”, *Information*, 7 April 1982.

70 D. Trier Mørch, “Kunstner og kommunist”, *Information*, 29 March 1982 [“Parolestilen fra slutningen af 60erne op til midten af 70erne er ikke brugbar længere – hverken for bevægelsen eller for os selv”].

71 Ibid. [“Kommunister i Vesteuropa skal væk fra den opfattelse, at en såkaldt dissident straks er en fjende af socialismen”].

between the Soviet Writer's Union and the departments of literature and Slavic studies at the University. The meeting was reported as having been planned for a long time and had the theme of "Literature and Ethics in the Modern World".<sup>72</sup> Trier Mørch was on the panel of Danish authors along with Klaus Rifbjerg and Tage Skou Hansen, while guest authors from the Soviet Union included Daniil Granin, Vasil Bykov, Feliks Kusnetsov, Oleg Sjestinskij and Valentina Morosova. The discussion was described as a cautious opening avoiding controversial issues in the "official" article by the Danish Soviet Friendship Society. In return, the Danish authors were invited to a conference in Moscow in 1987 with the theme of "The problems of modern civilization in literature and politics". According to the transcription notes from the debate, the speech by Trier Mørch ended with the statement "Women are half of the world". In the following debate, Trier Mørch asked the author Feliks Kusnetsov about the relationship between men and women in Soviet society. The author replied that "you think this is a big problem in our society. 50–60 years ago we had our great struggle for equality – with demands for the emancipation of women. We still have problems, but I hope that love proves stronger than the problems".<sup>73</sup> The Soviet author thus repeated the view of gender issues as solved by communism and that traditional "love" within the family was the answer rather than public debate, while Trier Mørch tried to pursue issues of women's roles and rights, even if the will to answer was limited.

After these conferences a public symposium took place at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art north of Copenhagen as a major meeting of Soviet authors, Soviet authors in exile, and their Danish colleagues with the following theme: "The role of the creative intelligentsia in the reform process in the Soviet Union and its future perspectives". The organisers now included another Danish university, Sydjysk Universitet (now the University of Southern Denmark) with their Center for East-West Research, Thorkil Kristensen Instituttet TKI (Center for Øst-Vest Forskning).<sup>74</sup> Trier Mørch was not featured as a speaker, but participated in the meeting, which was described as "one of its kind" that brought together the Soviet scene and the exiles and "organised on a Danish initiative" as an opportunity arising from glasnost.<sup>75</sup> Yet another conference in the dialogue came in 1989 with the Danish-Soviet writer and scientist conference on "Literature and Politics" with Trier Mørch

---

72 J.P. Lund Nielsen, "Som nypløjet jord", *Fakta om Sovjetunionen*, July/August 1985, 7–8, pp. 58–59.

73 Transcription notes, 18 March 1985. Papers of Dea Trier Mørch, Royal Danish Library.

74 Thorkil Kristensen Instituttet TKI (Center for Øst-Vest Forskning) was a research centre established at the University Centre of Southern Jutland in 1978 on the initiative of economist Thorkil Kristensen. The focus was research in the economic, social and cultural development in the East and Central European countries and exchange activities. The centre, which was the only one of its kind in Denmark, existed until the late 1990s.

75 J. Kerte, "Russisk på Louisiana", *Politiken*, 3 March 1988.

as panellist.<sup>76</sup> These series of events were an important part of the pre-1989 events as contacts between Denmark and the Soviet cultural sphere outside of the framework of the friendship societies or directly political organisations. The commitment of Dea Trier Mørch in this cause constitutes another phase in her interaction with the state socialist art world, switching from communist and artist in the 1970s to a more critical, yet dialogue-seeking position.

In 1987 Trier Mørch gave an interview under the title “The desert walk of suspicion might be over”.<sup>77</sup> There was no prediction of the fall of the Iron Curtain, but a cautious optimism on the bettering of the relationship with the communist bloc. She was asked to look back on her stays in Poland and the USSR and said “[I] had tried to face the realities of the world, when I was in Leningrad. I was both very attracted to and scared by the Soviet society”.<sup>78</sup>

After the actual fall of the Soviet bloc and throughout the transition phase following the end of the Cold War, Trier Mørch took part in international collaborations with Chile and Cuba, while also co-working with European and Israeli artists in the Ex Dania project.<sup>79</sup> After 1989 she commented less on her encounters with the state-socialist societies – with her experiences she could have delivered an insightful status as memoir and commentary in retrospect. In this respect, they stand as an unfinished chapter, also since until now there have been no studies of the activities and the framework around them.

## Conclusion

Few artists of her generation had such an entangled interaction with the state-socialist countries and so vividly expressed her reactions upon encountering the art world there. As shown in this article, the connection took place in three distinct phases starting with her first curious travels in the Thaw-era Poland, continuing in the seventies as a communist and artist with many exhibitions in the GDR, and then a more revisionist stance as debating author in the 1980s. This is visible through her travels, stays and, not least, her exhibitions, as well as quasi-diplomatic activities, organisational work, and participation in public debate. The itinerary from the early 1960s to the end of the Cold War corresponds with general developments such as the burgeoning détente

76 Danish–Soviet writer and researcher conference on the theme “Literature and Politics”, Sandbjerg Estate and Copenhagen, 23–29 July 1989.

77 “Mistænksomhedens ørkenvandring er måske ved at være forbi”, *Information*, 9–10 May 1987.

78 Ibid. [“Jeg prøvede at se virkeligheden i øjnene, da jeg var i Leningrad. Jeg blev både meget tiltrukket og meget skræmt af det sovjetiske”].

79 Ex Dania included Yukari Ochiai, Greenlandic artists Aka Høegh and her children Sara and Thomas Trier, among others. The group made projects in Israeli Kibbutz and in Rundetaarn, Copenhagen 1995, where the two Romanian artists Dinu Mendrea and Sandu Mendrea participated as guests.

and the initiatives that followed in its wake such as cultural exchange agreements, which was the primary basis for the travels of Trier Mørch. However, there were also personal choices – sometimes surprising in retrospect – such as joining the Moscow-loyal DKP not long after the Prague Spring, which she obviously supported. The question of feminism across the Iron Curtain also arose. The life and identity of women is a central and recurring theme in Trier Mørch's work, both in her travel books as an external observer and her novels such as *Winter's Child* in a more embodied way, securing her a position as an icon in Danish women's rights literature. Her own relationship to the women's rights movement was complex, as during its most prolific years she followed her conviction as a communist more than a women's liberation activist and stated that she was not a feminist, but a communist and humanist, wherein women and men were equal – even if her works pointed clearly towards a commitment to the issues. On this background, the understanding of Trier Mørch and feminism across the curtain could be further explored through studies of the distribution and reception of her literary works such as *Winterkinder* in the GDR and other socialist countries and the organisations and institutions active in cross-curtain cultural exchanges.

## References

- Billhardt, T., Braun, V., Bräunig, W., Dessau, P. et al., eds., *Chile: Gesang und Bericht*, Halle, 1975.
- Jian, Ch. et al., *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation Building*, New York, 2018.
- Kerte, J., "Russisk på Louisiana", *Politiken*, 3 March 1988.
- Laurberg, M., *Dea Trier Mørch. Det grafiske værk*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2019.
- Handberg, K., "Exhibiting Cobra across the Iron Curtain: Exhibition Diplomacy and Modernism as Ostpolitik across Borders in Northern Europe during the Cold War", *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2, article 6.
- Hornung, P.M., *Egill Jacobsen og hans tid*, book manuscript, 2023.
- Intergrafik*, exhibition catalogue, Verband Bildende Künstler, Berlin 1965.
- Intergrafik 73*, exhibition catalogue, Verband Bildende Künstler, Berlin 1973.
- Karpova, Y., "The Afterlife of Danish Modern: Design Exhibition in Moscow, 1969–70". *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2, article 7.
- Neumann, E., *Die Biennale der Ostseeländer – außen- und kulturpolitische Dimensionen der größten Internationalen Kunstausstellung der DDR*, Ph.d. Dissertation, Technisches Universität Berlin, 2022.
- Trier Mørch, D., *Sorgmunter Socialisme: Sovjettiske raderinger*, Copenhagen, 1968.
- Trier Mørch, D., *Polen*, Copenhagen, 1970.
- Rostgaard, M., "Dansk kulturdiplomati over for Østblokken ca. 1960–1972", *Historisk Tidsskrift*, 2011, 111, no. 2.

*Camilla Larsson*

SÖDERTÖRN UNIVERSITY

[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0009-0002-3535-192X](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3535-192X)

# Entangled History between Semi-Peripheries: Magdalena Abakanowicz's Fibre Art on the Swedish Art Scene circa 1970<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article examines what role Sweden, as a presumed periphery in Northeastern Europe, played at the turn of the 1960s when Magdalena Abakanowicz and her fellow Polish artists working in fibre material broke new ground moving away from traditional tapestry by working with complex three-dimensional forms. Using the method of a history of crossing, *histoire croisée*, the article shows how exhibitions with Abakanowicz's fibre art served many interests at the time, the artist's own creative development and international career, Swedish art institutions eager to display current experiments in soft environments, the burgeoning Swedish cultural policymaking, and larger structures of cultural diplomacy. The article thus proposes to understand the relation between Sweden and Poland as two semi-peripheries, where the dominant narrative of modern art stemming from Western centres influencing the rest was, in many ways, circumvented.

**Keywords:** Magdalena Abakanowicz, fibre art, Swedish exhibition history, entangled history, cultural diplomacy

The biography of Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930–2017) reveals a rich history of exhibitions and travelling all over the world.<sup>2</sup> From 1967, she

---

1 The research for this article has been funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.

2 For an extensive biography compiled by J. Dally see *Magdalena Abakanowicz. Fate and Art. Monologue*, ed. P. Gribaudo, 2nd ed., Milan, 2020, pp. 234–245.

regularly exhibited in Sweden, in group exhibitions, solo presentations, and, unusually, as a foreign artist she also received a public commission in 1971. Considering that her artworks were large-scale sculptures and experimental installations made on site and requiring infrastructure from curators and institutions, it raises questions about the role of events in Sweden in Abakanowicz's artistic practice, the nature of her network, and the reception of art critics. In addition, from the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, exhibition titles, catalogue essays, newspaper notices, interviews and reviews have framed the art with headings that refer to the nation state. Formulations from newspaper notices and reviews such as "Polish tapestries", "Polish world art [...]", or "world-famous Polish shows [...]" were common.<sup>3</sup> This leads to further questions about how to understand the contacts between the Polish artist and the Swedish art scene, which were established at a time when Europe was seemingly divided into an Eastern and Western bloc. The national framework does not only have geopolitical connotations but it is also active in the narration of art history. From a Swedish perspective, Paris was the undeniable centre during modernism and beyond, which raises further questions about how the cross-border contacts between Poland and Sweden, two countries on the edge of Europe, can be understood.<sup>4</sup>

This article explores Magdalena Abakanowicz's exhibition history in Sweden with emphasis on the first three survey exhibitions she took part in and her first three solo presentations, all made around 1970. These events are important to research because she was most active in the area at that time, and it will therefore give new insights into her early period working in organic fibre materials. This unexplored history of Abakanowicz will add to current research raising questions of artistic milieus, collaborations, and the artist's position on a larger international art scene, challenging the prevailing narrative of Abakanowicz as a single author creating an aesthetic revolution.<sup>5</sup>

3 "Polsk världskonst till konsthallen" [Polish World Art to the Kunsthalle], *Arbetet*, 12 December 1966; M. Stensman, "Polska gobelänger" [Polish Tapestries], *Arbetet*, 25 January 1967; C. Duke, "Världsberömd polska visar textilsulptur" [World-famous Polish Shows Textile Sculptures], *Länstidningen Södertälje*, February 1970.

4 J. Sjöholm Skrubbe, "Routes and Ruptures. Swedish Artistic Mobility in the Early Twentieth Century", *Art@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2, p. 21–22.

5 R. Boger, *Magdalena Abakanowicz og Norge: Stilskaper eller frigjørende forbilde? En drøftelse av Abakanowicz' betydning for norsk tekstilkunst 1960–1980*, MA thesis, Oslo, 2010; A. Jakubowska, "The 'Abakans' and the Feminist Revolution", in: *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture*, eds. S. Bru, L. Nuijs, B. Hjartarson, P. Nicholls, T. Ørum, H. Berg, Berlin–Boston, 2012, pp. 253–265; M. Boot, "Like a Flaming Comet: The Rise of Magdalena Abakanowicz in the Netherlands", *Textile*, 2018, 16, no. 4, pp. 378–385; M. Jachufa, "Crafting an Art Practice. The Postwar Polish Art Scene" and M. Moskalewicz, "Knots. Abakanowicz and the Polish Art Scene in the 1960s" both articles in: *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, eds. A. Coxon, M.J. Jacob, London, 2022, exh. cat. Examples of papers at *Abakanowicz Today: New Encounters with the Artist and Her Work*, research symposium, Tate Modern, London, 12–13 May 2023, organized

## International art in post-war Sweden: an unwritten, entangled history

This article builds on what art historians Katarina Wadstein MacLeod, Marta Edling, and Pella Myrstener call a “rich stream” of artists being part of international exhibitions in Sweden during the post-war period, 1945–1980.<sup>6</sup> They show how heterogeneous the field of art exhibitions were and point out that this has gone unnoticed in the written art history due to tendencies to afford attention to Western European and North American art by focusing on exhibitions in major museums.<sup>7</sup> A related observation of the specific period is that art in general was understood through the lens of national belonging.<sup>8</sup>

Notable, among their findings, is that art from the Nordic countries made up half of the exhibitions, a majority of which showed Danish artists, closely followed by art from France. More unexpectedly, the archival research also brings forth that many of the exhibitions showed art from Eastern Europe where Polish participation stands out particularly at certain venues.<sup>9</sup> This shows that Sweden, in the Northeastern part of Europe, was made up of horizontal relations between many different geographical axes crisscrossing the presumed Cold War divide, complicating previous attempts to write exhibition history.<sup>10</sup> This article looks at Abakanowicz’s exhibition history in Sweden as a case with the aim to investigate how the presence of her art can be understood within the context of Sweden at the turn of the 1960s, being part of the welfare society built up at the time, where new municipal art galleries and public art played a crucial role, and, to investigate what role those events played in her artistic development.

Abakanowicz’s art in Sweden is also a case of artistic transfers between Poland and Sweden. Two countries that exist on the margins of Europe, mentally and geographically far from the art metropolises of Paris and New York, but also inherently different as nations. This case offers a fresh contribution to research on cross-border relations and on modern art that seeks to replace hierarchical concepts of stylistic diffusion from presumed centres to presumed

---

by *Abakanowicz Arts and Culture Charitable Foundation*: S. Altmann, “Catalysts of Fibre Work: The Impact of Abakanowicz’s Art and *Projekt Art Magazine* on Fibre Art in the GDR”; D. Crowley, “Abakanowicz and the Alibi of Use”; A. Jakubowska, “Occupation: Textile Artist. Positioning Magdalena Abakanowicz in the Art Field of 1950s State-Socialist Poland”.

6 K. MacLeod, M. Edling, P. Myrstener, “Exhibiting in a European Periphery? International Art in Sweden during the Cold War”, *Art@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2, pp. 128–129.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

8 P. Myrstener, *Konst i rörelse. Tillfälliga utställningar med internationell konst i Sverige 1945–1969*, forthcoming PhD thesis, Huddinge.

9 Wadstein MacLeod, Edling, Myrstener, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

peripheries.<sup>11</sup> This article asks how one can speak of contact between two semi-peripheries with no clearly defined power hierarchy.<sup>12</sup> The most evident differences are that Poland was controlled by the Soviet Union and had a long history of occupation by foreign powers, while Sweden was non-aligned and had experienced almost two hundred years of peace and thus cultural stability and economic growth prevailed. This difference in modern history can be one reason why there is a larger population of Poles living in Sweden than vice versa and the economic conditions can also be one major explanation to why more Polish artists exhibited in Sweden than the other way around. After World War II there was an expansion of temporary exhibitions with international art in Sweden. Myrstener identifies factors that influenced this tendency, such as museums had empty spaces that needed to be filled quickly, the general art audience was interested in contemporary art outside of the home country, and art and culture were becoming a tool in emerging cultural policy-making and cultural diplomacy.<sup>13</sup>

As this article investigates archives of different art institutions, maps out contacts between individuals and analyses how art was disseminated and understood, entanglement is not only a useful word to describe textile art, but it is also a concept with methodological implications. I use the concept of “entangled history” or “history of crossing”, discussed by social historians Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann as *histoire croisée*.<sup>14</sup> Exhibitions are the main objects of study and the concept of entanglement is used to investigate how meaning-making was generated within the exhibitions for individuals, institutions, for the burgeoning process of cultural policy-making, and for larger structures of cultural diplomacy, as well as for the artist herself. In the case of Abakanowicz in Sweden, her art was exhibited at the Nationalmuseum, the national gallery of Sweden, municipal galleries in Lund, Södertälje, and Malmö, Kulturhuset and Liljevalchs konsthall, the two municipal galleries in Stockholm and in museums specialising in craft and design such as Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft in Gothenburg, as well as the Region of Stockholm, which commissioned art for hospitals. Entangled history has

11 P. Piotrowski, “Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde”, in: *Europa! Europa! The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, eds. S. Bru, P. Nicholls, Berlin, 2009; I. DaCosta Kaufmann, C. Dossin, B. Joyeux-Prunel, *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, Ashgate, 2015; *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, eds. B. Hock, A. Allas, New York-London, 2018; A. Öhrner, “Exhibiting Contemporary Art in the Early 1990s Nordic-Baltic Realm”, *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2.

12 This is in line with art historian A. Ring Petersen sketching a semi-peripheral Nordic perspective as an attempt to pluralise and deconstruct the hegemonic position of the West, using the margin to implement a double perspective of being both insider and outsider, A. Ring Petersen, “Global Art History: A View from the North”, *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2015, 7, no. 1.

13 Myrstener, *op. cit.*

14 M. Werner, B. Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison. Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity”, *History and Theory*, 2006, 45, no. 1, pp. 30–33.



developed out of a need to go beyond methods of comparisons, often used when writing national history, and circumvent the trap of methodological nationalism, that is to take nationality as something already given and therefore an unproblematic container to build research on.<sup>15</sup> In this article Sweden and Poland are understood as larger frameworks, constructions marked by the geo-political situation of the time.

To understand how the exhibitions came about, documents and correspondence from archives have been studied, along with texts published in exhibition catalogues, folders, or distributed as hand-outs. The art critical reception has been studied in newspapers as well as magazines devoted to arts and crafts. To differentiate the result, there will also be comparison between Abakanowicz's fibre art exhibitions and her fellow artist Tadeusz Kantor's (1915–1990) exhibitions in Sweden.<sup>16</sup> Kantor exhibited extensively in Sweden, but worked in the medium of painting, drawing, sculpture, and around the mid-1970s he became world renown for his work in theatre. This comparison is crucial to investigate how artists were perceived differently due to what they made artistically, fused with their national belonging. Here we will see how entanglement of artistic idioms and national belonging create different interpretations. One main result is that what is considered Polish in Sweden is many things, depending on the artist, artistic expression, time and place of the art institution and the recipient, and it was valued differently. This is by no means unexpected. It is nevertheless a finding that needs to be differentiated to understand how art is valued and how national belonging is constructed in different times.

## Magdalena Abakanowicz's early years in Poland and abroad

From the 1980s onwards Abakanowicz had solo exhibitions and was commissioned to make site-specific works in Europe, America, and Asia.<sup>17</sup> She had what one could say the world as her workplace. In her writings she talks about being alone both as a child growing up in a noble family in the countryside during Nazi occupation as well as in her hard work as an artist.<sup>18</sup> Following this narrative she might have become world-famous all by herself. Nonetheless,

---

15 S. Neunsinger, "Cross-Over! Om komparationer, transferanalyser, *histoire croisée* och den metodologiska nationalismens problem", *Historisk Tidskrift*, 2010, 130, no. 1.

16 C. Larsson, "The Politics of Appearance: Tadeusz Kantor Exhibiting in Sweden 1958–2014", *Sztuka i dokumentacja*, 2022, p. 85.

17 Dally, op. cit., pp. 234–245.

18 Art historian B. Rose uses quotations from Abakanowicz and unfolds the artist's autobiography, B. Rose, *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, New York, 1994. Critical and contextual readings of this narrative in J. Ingot, *The Figurative Sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz. Bodies, Environments, and Myths*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, 2004.

her early work and career cannot be understood without her fellow artists Wojciech Sadley (born 1932), Jolanta Owidzka (1927–2020), Barbara Falkowska (born 1931) and Krystyna Wojtyna–Drouet (born 1926), who together with other textile artists made up what has been called the “Polish tapestry school”. Other individuals working with textile art in Poland and elsewhere have been instrumental, such as Krystyna Kondratiuk the founding director of the Museum of the History of Textiles in Łódź [now Central Museum of Textiles], and the French artist Jean Lurçat and collectors and art lovers Pierre and Alice Pauli, who in different constellation established the Centre international de la tapisserie ancienne et modern, or CITAM, the International Tapestry Biennial in Lausanne, and Galerie Alice Pauli.<sup>19</sup>

The tapestry biennial started in 1962 and quickly became an international forum for experimental fibre art. In the first edition, works of 59 artists from 17 countries were exhibited, including Sweden and Poland.<sup>20</sup> Magali Junet, curator of the Fondation Toms Pauli in Lausanne, describes the contribution by the Polish artists as “total freedom of expression” regarding the material they used and the way they had woven their artworks, free from traditional cartoons that were transferred by professional weavers.<sup>21</sup> Many of their works were rough reliefs, made of non-traditional materials such as sisal, rope and horsehair. The biennial adopted a national representation system, and in the first edition Abakanowicz represented Poland together with Sadley, Owidzka, Ada Kierzkowska (1926–2016) and Anna Śledziewska (1900–1979), and works by Maria Łaszkiwicz (1892–1981) and Wojtyna-Drouet were displayed in public areas outside of the main exhibition.<sup>22</sup> Before Abakanowicz art was shown in Sweden her name had occurred in Swedish papers in the context of her participation in the Lausanne Biennial.<sup>23</sup>

During Abakanowicz’s time at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, from which she graduated in 1954 with a diploma in weaving from the department of painting, art historian Michał Jachuła points out that the studios of Eleonora Plutyńska (1886–1969), Anna Śledziewska and Mieczysław Szymański (1903–1990), taught their students respect for the use of traditional weaving techniques beside the knowledge of how to dye, use organic materials, and primarily urged them to experiment.<sup>24</sup> In 1961, after some years working with

19 M. Junet, “Abakanowicz and Lausanne: The Path to Fame”, in: *Abakanowicz. Metamorfizm | Metamorphosis*, ed. M. Kowalewska, Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, exh. cat., 2018, p. 85.

20 The other participating countries were France, Belgium, Portugal, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Great Britain, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Italy, Norway, the USA, Canada, and Japan, *ibid.*, p. 87.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

22 M. Kowalewska, “Mapping New Meaning”, in: *From Tapestry to Fibre. The Lausanne Biennials 1962–1995*, eds. G. Eberhard Cotton, M. Junet, Milan, 2017, p. 159.

23 T. Lundgren, “Gobelinbiennal i Lausanne”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 25 June 1967; E. Zweigbergk, “Bildväv med och utan bild”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 July 1967.

24 Jachuła, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

painting on fabric, Abakanowicz started to weave and found what Jachuła calls an “artistic home” in the Atelier Expérimental de l’Union des Artistes de Polonais, an independent studio run by Łaskiewicz.<sup>25</sup> Here Abakanowicz’s woven works started to take a three-dimensional shape and would later move from the walls out into the space.

As the Polish textile artists were praised internationally, group exhibitions started to be organised in Poland and abroad, like the *Modern Polish Tapestries* touring in Germany, Austria, Holland and Switzerland during 1964–65, and in Norway *Moderne polsk billedvev* was arranged at Kunstindustrimuseet in Oslo in 1965.<sup>26</sup> Abakanowicz was also included in international surveys of the latest developments in fibre art, like Stedelijk museum’s *Perspectief in Textiel* and *Wall Hangings* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, both in 1969.<sup>27</sup> It is in this larger context that the early exhibitions in Sweden circa 1970 can be positioned as we will see how they were part of paving the way for her artistic expansion while also serving the interests of Swedish art institutions and cultural policymakers.

These group exhibitions developed into solo presentations abroad, such as *Magdalena Abakanowicz’ arbeider i vev*, at Kunstindustrimuseet in Oslo in 1967.<sup>28</sup> From 1968, plans for her first solo in Sweden started to grow and around 1970 she took part in no fewer than three survey exhibitions with Polish fibre art in the country. The surveys were organised at a time when Swedish art and design museums and municipal galleries also paid attention to the domestic fibre art that developed new large-scale formats under public commissions, even if most Swedish textile artists continued to work flat against walls.

## Magdalena Abakanowicz exhibiting in Sweden: an overview

The exhibitions in Sweden lasted almost 30 years of Abakanowicz’s lifetime, starting in 1967 and ending in 1996.<sup>29</sup> The article will focus on her first six public events when she worked with weaving and different fibre materials,

---

25 Ibid., pp. 150–151.

26 Ibid., p. 91 and J. Gola, “Magdalena Abakanowicz: A Biographical Outline” in: *Abakanowicz. Metamorfizm | Metamorphism*, ed. M. Kowalewska, Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, exh. cat., 2018, pp. 271–273. In *Moderne polsk billedvev* 26 Polish artists were participating with 40 artworks and Boger has pointed out that information on this show is scarce, and she only mentions the name of Abakanowicz, Łaskiewicz, Sadley and Owidzka. See: Boger, op. cit., p. 37.

27 Junet, op. cit., pp. 97–99.

28 Boger, op. cit., pp. 38–39.

29 Solo and group exhibitions in chronological order in Sweden during Abakanowicz’s lifetime: *Moderna gobelänger och aktuell grafik från Polen [Modern Tapestry and Graphic Arts from Poland]*, Lunds Konsthall, 15 Jan–5 Feb 1967; *Magdalena Abakanowicz / Textil*

starting with three survey exhibitions followed by a chapter on three solo events. During this time, professional contact with art historians and museum curators Eje Högestätt (1921–1986) and Dag Widman (1924–2003) developed. The first six events were followed by exhibitions that showed her sculptural practice, developed in materials such as burlap treated with resin, wood, steel, iron and bronze, shaped into human-like figures.

Letters and telegrams in archives of the above-mentioned Swedish museums and galleries attest to how the exhibitions took shape between the artist and curators. Most extensive and lively correspondence can be found between the artist and Högestätt and Widman.<sup>30</sup> They sent letters to plan production and delved into artistic and curatorial matters. Documents were also sent to Desa – the Polish State Enterprise for Works of Art and Antiques.<sup>31</sup> These documents testify to the larger framework of the relation between the two countries. The official relations between Sweden and Poland during the preceding decade of the 1960s and 1970s were marked by the Cold War but they were also shaped by an older history with the common border of the Baltic Sea giving way to exchanges of individuals via politics, religion and culture.<sup>32</sup>

After World War II, many of the Polish refugees in Sweden left the country, but some years later a new influx began due to the newly polarised political landscape.<sup>33</sup> In a survey article, literary scholar and specialist in Swedish-Polish relations Andrzej Nils Ugglå states that in Sweden, Polish organisations of various kinds had collected and spread knowledge of the Polish language and culture since 1918.<sup>34</sup> During the Cold War period the interest in Polish cul-

---

*skulptur / Textile Environment*, Södertälje Konsthall, 1–30 March 1970; *Moderna polska textilier [Modern Polish Tapestry]*, Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft, Gothenburg, 10 Oct –14 Nov 1971; public commission, *Black Brown*, Huddinge Hospital, 1971–72; Collection Exhibition, Kulturhuset in Borås (inauguration of the Cultural House) 1975; *Abakanowicz. Organic Structures*, Malmö Konsthall, 26 Feb–11 April 1977; *Malmoe*, Malmö Konsthall, 20 March–3 May 1981; *Textil skulptur: ur 12e internationella textilbiennalen i Lausanne 1985 [Textile Sculptures: From 12th International Textile Biennale in Lausanne 1985]*, Liljevalchs konsthall, 11 April–25 May 1986; *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, Kulturhuset in Stockholm, 31 Aug–13 Oct 1996.

30 For a compilation of Abakanowicz's correspondences with curators, gallerists, and other collaborators, see *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Writings and Conversations*, eds. by M.J. Jacob, J. Dally, Milan, 2022.

31 Desa was established in 1950, dealing in the trade of works of art and antiques by the ordinance of the Minister of Art and Culture and Ministry of International Trade. The organisation had showrooms all over Poland and according to Jachuła they are equal with cultural institutions exhibiting art. In the 1970s Desa had around sixty galleries and at the end of 1990s it was privatised, Jachuła, op. cit., p. 200.

32 A.N. Ugglå, "Polacker", in: *Det mångkulturellt Sverige. En handbok om etniska grupper och minoriteter*, eds. I. Svanberg, H. Runblom, Stockholm, 2nd ed., 1990, p. 294.

33 Ibid., p. 296.

34 Ibid., pp. 299–300.

ture declined compared to the war years.<sup>35</sup> Overall the growth of Polish exile culture was neither uniform nor dynamic, according to Uggla, but marked by political disagreement depending on if one worked with the Polish government or not.<sup>36</sup> The Polish government acted via organisations both in Poland and in Sweden such as Desa and the Polish Institute in Stockholm, founded in 1973, and the ones who acted independently or in direct opposition to the government worked with exile groups or with underground artists in Poland.<sup>37</sup> Polish exile culture was also marked by conflicts between ethnic Poles and Polish Jews.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, there was no unified call for Polish arts and culture from a Polish-Swedish audience within Sweden.

Under the leadership of Władysław Gomułka, 1956–70, the border politics softened.<sup>39</sup> Officially what was needed to bring over Polish artists was a formal invite, even if the bureaucracy was still complicated and time-consuming. Art exhibitions also involved costs for research trips, production for new artworks, transportations, and bringing artworks over national borders meant contact with customs and excise institutions, which regulated exports as well as temporary exportation. This means that even if Gomułka made crossing the border easier, curators and artists still needed support to realise their artistic visions and therefore had to involve official organisations with their own agenda. During the 1970s, the Swedish labour movement and parts of Swedish cultural life actively pursued a discussion around the fact that Poland was a Soviet-ruled dictatorship.<sup>40</sup> During the mid-1970s, there were collaborations between the Polish opposition and Swedish organisations.<sup>41</sup> Officially, the

35 Ibid., p. 300.

36 Regarding Abakanowicz status in Poland, art historian M. Moskalewicz mentions that because Abakanowicz did not partake in the boycott of official cultural event after 1981 imposition of Martial Law in Poland, it alienated many of her peers from her, but I have not found any explicit mentioning of similar feelings from individuals in Sweden, earlier or at later date, Moskalewicz, op. cit., p. 32.

37 One example of independent initiatives was the festival *Polska Munkaveln och ordet* [The Polish Mouth Calf and the Word] at the gallery Maneten in Gothenburg in May 1981, partly organised by Polish photographer and writer Joanna Helander (born 1948) living in Sweden since the early 1970s, Polish art critic Tadeusz Nyczek, and Håkan Persson, curator at Maneten, different exhibitions were organised and textile artists such as Anna Bednarczuk and Ewa Korczak–Tomaszewska participated.

38 Uggla, op. cit., p. 301. Research on Polish Jews in Sweden is being conducted by Martin Englund at Södertörn University in collaboration with Nordiska Museet, for more information see <https://minnen.se/tema/vi> [accessed 22 August 2023].

39 Uggla, op. cit., p. 297.

40 *Det började i Polen. Sverige och Solidaritet 1980–1981*, ed. F. Eriksson, Huddinge, 2013, pp. 9–11 and p. 25.

41 M. Heino, B. Törnquist–Plewa, “Svenska stödkommittén för Solidaritet. The Swedish Support Committee and Independent Polish Agency in Lund”, in: *Skandinavien och Polen. Möten, relationer och ömsesidig påverkan*, ed. B. Törnquist–Plewa, Lund, 2007, pp. 25–58. Polish Summary.

consultation revolved around labour law issues, but for those involved it also included other political areas. The content of the letters between Abakanowicz, Högestätt and Widman evolves only around work, and if they exchanged any thoughts on the political situation, they saved it for personal meetings.

Officially, Sweden and Poland with heads of states Olof Palme and Edward Gierek, 1970–80, had a good relationship, which, however, would harden with the rise of the incipient Solidarity movement around 1980.<sup>42</sup> The introduction of Martial Law in December 1981 meant that travel to Sweden almost completely ceased, but the number of Poles who stayed increased significantly.<sup>43</sup>

Human geographer Thomas Lundén describes the general attitude of the Swedish foreign policy during the Cold War decades as follows: while national independency in countries such as Namibia, Nicaragua, Palestine, and South Africa was supported officially and with enthusiasm, the relations with the immediate neighbourhood around the Baltic Sea was characterised by cautiousness.<sup>44</sup> Support for cultural exchanges was steered by Svenska Institutet [the Swedish Institute], an institution for cultural and public diplomacy founded in 1945 and reorganised in 1970 as a state-financed institute.<sup>45</sup> And, as Lundén points out, the Swedish Institute was formally but only indirectly linked to the Swedish government and it is often “far from clear” how the decision order ran and the institute appeared as more independent than it was.<sup>46</sup> Sweden used tools of soft diplomacy, which meant that the country performed diplomacy through value attitudes and by means of non-governmental organisations and civil society to handle cultural relations with Poland.<sup>47</sup>

## Three early survey exhibitions with Polish fibre art in Sweden

The three survey exhibitions, *Modern Tapestry and Graphic Arts from Poland* at Lunds konsthall in 1967, *Poland Weaves in Freedom* at the Nationalmuseum in 1970, and *Modern Polish Tapestry* at Röhsska in 1971 share many main features, such as a similar selection of artists, the artists worked with textile in a modern, free way, they represented tendencies within the country of Poland, and they had established themselves on the international forum that attracted critical and public attention. The following chapter will look closer

42 Eriksson, op. cit., p. 23.

43 Uggla, op. cit., p. 297.

44 T. Lundén, “Turning Towards the Inland Sea? Swedish ‘Soft Diplomacy’ Towards the Baltic Soviet Republics Before Independence”, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 2021, 47, no. 3, pp. 1–2.

45 “Vår historia” [“Our History”], <https://si.se/om-si/var-historia/> [accessed 20 June 2023].

46 Lundén, op. cit., p. 3.

47 Ibid.

at these three exhibitions to examine both similarities and differences, As we will see, the exhibitions at the Nationalmuseum and Röhsska were made in collaboration with Desa, while Högestätt seemed to be more independent in navigating the Polish art scene.<sup>48</sup>

Högestätt was the first director of Lunds konsthall, a municipal art gallery in the university town of Lund in southern Sweden that opened as early as 1957. Högestätt acted as director between 1957–67 and one of the last exhibitions he curated was *Modern Tapestry and Graphic Arts from Poland*.<sup>49</sup> During the planning process in 1966, Högestätt attended the International Graphic Art Biennial in Krakow, and on his way there he passed through Warsaw and discovered the work of Abakanowicz, Zofia Butrymowicz (1904–1987), Janina Dobrzynska (1906–2003), Falkowska, Kierzkowska, Owidzka, Sadley, Śledziewska, and Janina Tworek–Pierzgalska (1933–1983).<sup>50</sup> In the exhibition catalogue, he describes being astonished by the expression of the artworks and wanted to learn more about these artists and add them to the upcoming show with graphic art. Polish graphic art and posters had been exhibited regularly in Sweden since the end of the war and had been well known for their high quality, but what Högestätt experienced in the realm of textile was something new and bold for him.<sup>51</sup>

In shorter newspaper notes and reviews, *Modern Tapestry and Graphic Arts from Poland* was highlighted as a “different kind of tapestry exhibition”.<sup>52</sup> The fact that Abakanowicz had participated in both the Venice Biennial and the newly started Lausanne Biennial was mentioned under the heading “Polish World Art to the kunsthalle”. I will come back to the label “world art”, as it is interesting that early on she was seen as an artist of the world as well as being Polish, because other Polish artists were “only” Polish in the eyes of the Swedish critics, even if they had international careers like Abakanowicz did.

One Swedish writer predicted that the show would “cause great surprise because of its originality” where the textile works were more reminiscent of sculptures than wall-hung tapestries.<sup>53</sup> The art critic Mailis Stensman wonders if Polish textile was rarely seen in Sweden because the domestic textile

---

48 In an interview Högestätt talks about relations with the Swedish cultural attaché in Warsaw crucial in reporting on current tendencies within Polish tapestry art. See “Polsk världskonst...”, op. cit.

49 *Moderna gobelänger och aktuell grafik från Polen*, Lunds konsthall, 15 Jan–5 Feb 1967.

50 C. Duke, “Världsberömd polska visar textilsulptur”, *Länstidningen Södertälje*, February 1970 and E. Högestätt “Introduction”, in: *Moderna gobelänger och aktuell grafik från Polen*, Lund, 1967, exh. cat., no pagination.

51 Examples of exhibitions with Polish posters and graphic art: *Polsk affischkonst [Polish Poster Art]* at Röhsska Museum for Design and Craft, 1966 and *Aktuellt från Polen. Grafik och affischer i Konstmuseet [Contemporary from Poland. Graphic and Poster Art in the Art Museum]*, Gothenburg Art Museum, 1971.

52 “Polsk världskonst till konsthallen”, op. cit.

53 “Levande skulpturala bonader på Konsthallens polska expo”, *Arbetet*, 10 January 1967.

art was flourishing.<sup>54</sup> Stensman highlighted Abakanowicz, Sadley and Tworek–Pierzgalska as she thought they stuck out compared to others whom she considered more traditional. The contribution by the three was characterised as “powerful and serious which distinguished Polish art”. She also reviewed the exhibition in the design magazine *Form*, where she puts Abakanowicz even more at the forefront as the most innovative among the exhibited artists.<sup>55</sup> Even if Abakanowicz was the most acclaimed in the reviews, the same magazine did not publish an article on her until 1970 when she had her solo exhibition at Södertälje Konsthall. Sadley, on the contrary, was featured in *Form* as early as in 1968. This means that many other Polish artists working with textile and exhibiting together in these early surveys were given attention by the Swedish art critics at the time.<sup>56</sup>

Overall, Swedish art critics emphasised the sculptural side of Polish textile art, from wall-hung tapestry to free expressions in three dimensions. What was also highly valued by the critics were artists that weaved by themselves and experimented with different fibre materials. Alongside Sadley, Tworek–Pierzgalska and Łaskiewicz, Abakanowicz was by far the most mentioned artists.

In the early 1960s Högestätt was already the *primus motor* for experimental international art happenings and exhibitions at Lunds konsthall.<sup>57</sup> Wadstein MacLeod shows that the artists Högestätt worked with testify to his ability “to win the artists’ trust, because he was a good listener and could offer them artistic freedom”.<sup>58</sup> She also points out that he had his strongest networks in the local art circuits of southern Sweden, in France and in Poland.<sup>59</sup> Högestätt’s interest in Polish art and culture was most probably favoured by his Polish wife Apolonia. Her maiden name was Byrska and she was born in 1920

54 M. Stensman, “Polska gobelänger”, *Arbetet*, 25 January 1967.

55 M. Stensman, “Polska gobelänger”, *Form*, 1967, 4, pp. 260–263. *Form* is the oldest magazine devoted to design still being published in Sweden, founded 1905 by Svenska Slöjdföreningen [the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design] and covers arts and crafts, industrial design, and debates issues on housing and public space, “Form”, Nationalencyklopedin, [https://www-ne-se.till.biblextern.sh.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/l%C3%A5ng/form-\(tidskrift\)](https://www-ne-se.till.biblextern.sh.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/l%C3%A5ng/form-(tidskrift)) [accessed 8 August 2023].

56 Relevant parts of the 1968 issue no. 4 devoted to Polish art and design and textile art include D. Wroblewska, “Wojciech Sadley” and G. Lundahl, “Tre polska textilare” text about Grupa 5 (Abakanowicz, Butrymowicz, Kierzkowska, Owidzka, Sadley). In the 1970 issue no. 3 B. Sydhoff published “Abakanowicz”.

57 K. Wadstein MacLeod, “Superlund: Lunds konsthall och det centrala i det perifera”, *Periskop*, 2018, 20, pp. 91–109; K. Wadstein MacLeod, “Troubling Peripheries: Pierre Restany and Superlund”, *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, 2021, 90, 1, pp. 13–24; K. Wadstein MacLeod, *From Fluxus to Fest. International Art in Lunds konsthall, 1965–67*, Huddinge, 2022, pp. 137–138.

58 Wadstein MacLeod, *From Fluxus...*, pp. 111–112.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 67.



in Krakow.<sup>60</sup> She was catholic and joined the resistance movement during the Nazi occupation and after being sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp when her group was discovered, she managed to flee to Sweden via the Red Cross. Apolonia ended up in southern Sweden where she met Eje Högestätt. They married and moved to Lund, and regularly travelled to Poland to see their family and for business. Even if Högestätt's exhibition programme was separated from current politics, Apolonia received a medal in 2008 for her engagement in humanitarian aid to Poland from 1981 onwards, which means that they both had insights into the socially urgent and politically repressive situation in the country.<sup>61</sup>

With *Modern Tapestry and Graphic Arts from Poland* Abakanowicz had established a presence in Sweden with one well-attended and reviewed exhibition (Fig. 1).<sup>62</sup> Already the year after the exhibition in Lund, in 1968, Högestätt invited Abakanowicz to have a solo presentation at Södertälje Konsthall, about to be built in the smaller city of Södertälje 40 kilometres south of Stockholm. Because of her busy schedule, they had to postpone the exhibition until 1970. By that time two other survey shows were also ready to open at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm and at Röhsska Museum of Design and Craft in Gothenburg.

These two surveys were similar kinds of group exhibitions as the one in Lund, highlighting Polish fibre art. Both museums collaborated with Desa. Dag Widman, keeper of the department of Applied Art at the Nationalmuseum and Göran Axel-Nilsson and director of Röhsska, travelled to Poland to visit artist studios recommended by Desa. It is hard to tell exactly from archived documents how these collaborations were set up, but one can read in the correspondence about everything from Desa contacting the Swedish museums, to arranging and paying for the research trips. Desa also signed agreements with the museums for entire exhibitions, regulating participating artists, lists of works, insurance, transport and sale prices.

During late autumn of 1970, *Abakanowicz. En konfrontation* [*Abakanowicz: a Confrontation*] and a survey *Polen väver fritt* [*Poland Weaves in Freedom*] were on display at the Nationalmuseum and Butrymowicz, Jaroszynska-Pachucka, Tworek-Pierzgalska, Łaskiewicz, Owidzka, Sadley and Stephan took part.<sup>63</sup> Documentation of the exhibition shows that many of the large-scale tapestries hung close to the walls while Sadley's net-like pieces with ripped up

60 Att överleva. Röster från Ravensbrück, *En lärarhandledning*, Lund, 2006, pp. 18–19. [https://www.kulturen.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Ravensbruck\\_Lararhandledning.pdf](https://www.kulturen.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Ravensbruck_Lararhandledning.pdf) [accessed 11 July 2023].

61 M. Haykowski, "Polskie odznaczenia za szwedzką pomoc humanitarną", *Polonia*, 1 January 2008, <https://www.poloniainfo.se/artykul.php?id=921> [accessed 15 July 2023].

62 Abakanowicz's *Golden Zlota* was also acquired by the city of Malmö; "Mellanhedsgången får polsk gobeläng", *Arbetet*, 18 February 1967; "Polsk kvinnlig professor lockade fullt hus i Lund", *Arbetet*, 13 February 1967.

63 *Polen väver fritt*, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 1970, exh. cat.

10 - Måndag 13 februari 1967

Lund

Skolbarnens... MÅNADSKORT... MÅNADSKORT... MÅNADSKORT...

Lundskommunens styrelse... 1967... 1967... 1967...

Arbetsmarknaden

För nya hembygd... Arbetsmarknaden... Arbetsmarknaden...

Arbetsmarknaden... Arbetsmarknaden... Arbetsmarknaden...

Festmusik i Lund

Mellan de profeta... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund... Festmusik i Lund...

Byggnadsstyrelsen planerar riva men återuppföra Vipeholms sjukhus

Enligt vad arbetet omfattar en ombyggnad på gamla... Byggnadsstyrelsen planerar riva men återuppföra Vipeholms sjukhus... Byggnadsstyrelsen planerar riva men återuppföra Vipeholms sjukhus...



Lasarettets personal skall få H-utbildning

Skollagen ska omfatta ARV, utbildning och Lund kommuns... Lasarettets personal skall få H-utbildning... Lasarettets personal skall få H-utbildning...

Bowlingrekorden föll vid KBK:s jubeltävling

Lundskillingen KBK avslutade på KBK i Lund... Bowlingrekorden föll vid KBK:s jubeltävling... Bowlingrekorden föll vid KBK:s jubeltävling...

Vårkortser inledning för Lunds studenter

Skollagen ska omfatta ARV, utbildning och Lund kommuns... Vårkortser inledning för Lunds studenter... Vårkortser inledning för Lunds studenter...

Arbetet och Tennisgillet arrangerar korptävlingar

Arbetsmarknaden... Tennisgillet... Korptävlingar... Arbetet och Tennisgillet arrangerar korptävlingar... Arbetet och Tennisgillet arrangerar korptävlingar...

Arbetet förlorar Reso till Sparbanken i Lund

Reso till Sparbanken i Lund... Arbetet förlorar Reso till Sparbanken i Lund... Arbetet förlorar Reso till Sparbanken i Lund...

Polsk kvinnlig professor lockade fullt hus i Lund

Polsk kvinnlig professor lockade fullt hus i Lund... Polsk kvinnlig professor lockade fullt hus i Lund... Polsk kvinnlig professor lockade fullt hus i Lund...



Lund första kärorten med damhandbollserie

Lund första kärorten med damhandbollserie... Lund första kärorten med damhandbollserie... Lund första kärorten med damhandbollserie...

Arkeologisk stundersökning för biblioteksbygget i Lund

Arkeologisk stundersökning för biblioteksbygget i Lund... Arkeologisk stundersökning för biblioteksbygget i Lund... Arkeologisk stundersökning för biblioteksbygget i Lund...

Studentkåren

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Studentkåren... Studentkåren... Studentkåren...

Har Ni gjort alla avdrag Ni får?

Har Ni gjort alla avdrag Ni får? Har Ni gjort alla avdrag Ni får? Har Ni gjort alla avdrag Ni får?

Alma Mater

Alma Mater... Alma Mater... Alma Mater...

LUNDA-NOVEN

LUNDA-NOVEN... LUNDA-NOVEN... LUNDA-NOVEN...

Stäkets taverna

Stäkets taverna... Stäkets taverna... Stäkets taverna...

KLIPP HÄR

KLIPP HÄR... KLIPP HÄR... KLIPP HÄR...

5:50

5:50... 5:50... 5:50...

PREMIER

PREMIER... PREMIER... PREMIER...

Att minnas i dag

Att minnas i dag... Att minnas i dag... Att minnas i dag...

HEALTH WINKLER ALVAREZ KEY

HEALTH WINKLER ALVAREZ KEY... HEALTH WINKLER ALVAREZ KEY... HEALTH WINKLER ALVAREZ KEY...

SKANDIE

SKANDIE... SKANDIE... SKANDIE...

PREMIER I KVÄLL

PREMIER I KVÄLL... PREMIER I KVÄLL... PREMIER I KVÄLL...

Här har du ditt liv

Här har du ditt liv... Här har du ditt liv... Här har du ditt liv...

AGENT med ditt liv

AGENT med ditt liv... AGENT med ditt liv... AGENT med ditt liv...

ROBERT VAUGHN

ROBERT VAUGHN... ROBERT VAUGHN... ROBERT VAUGHN...

PREMIER I KVÄLL

PREMIER I KVÄLL... PREMIER I KVÄLL... PREMIER I KVÄLL...

ROBERT VAUGHN

ROBERT VAUGHN... ROBERT VAUGHN... ROBERT VAUGHN...

AGENT med ditt liv

AGENT med ditt liv... AGENT med ditt liv... AGENT med ditt liv...

Har Ni gjort alla avdrag Ni får?

Har Ni gjort alla avdrag Ni får? Har Ni gjort alla avdrag Ni får? Har Ni gjort alla avdrag Ni får?



**Fig. 2.** Exhibition catalogue for *Polen väver fritt* [*Poland Weaves in Freedom*], Nationalmuseum 1970. Photo: Alexandra Larsson Jacobson.

holes, Owidzka's GAMA-series with many free-hanging parts building up an impressive tableau, and Jaroszynska Pachucka's abstract three-dimensional forms and rudimentary human like figures created accents in the space. Even if Abakanowicz is not mentioned in the catalogue for the survey, one of her free hanging fibre sculptures called *abakans* can be seen in the documentation.<sup>64</sup> In correspondence between Widman and Abakanowicz they discuss the possibility for the museum to acquire *Abakan Orange* (1968) which they did and it is most probably that piece that is on display, hovering in one of the corners behind Sadley's intricately knitted nets.<sup>65</sup>

The catalogue gives the reader a good impression of the contemporary Polish art scene with a historical background on influences from Oriental weaving techniques from Kilim and Flemish techniques (Fig. 2).<sup>66</sup> Helena Lutteman, curator at the Nationalmuseum and editor of the catalogue, like many of the art critics reviewing the survey in Lund, emphasises the importance of the Lausanne Biennial and she compares the Polish artists' presentation

<sup>64</sup> Photographic documentation, Archive Nationalmuseum.

<sup>65</sup> After Abakanowicz increased the price, *Abakan Orange* cost USD 6,000. See letters from Abakanowicz to Widman, 30 December 1970, Archive Nationalmuseum. Parts of the GAMA-series by Owidzka were sold to Hushållsseminariet för blivande textillärare i Umeå [Seminar for textile teachers in Umeå]. All sales were taken care of by Sveagal-leriet. Archive Nationalmuseum.

<sup>66</sup> H. Lutteman, "Polsk textilkonst" and "Polsk bild i aktion", in: *Polen väver fritt*, Stockholm, 1970, exh. cat., p. 2 and pp. 14–16.

with the Swedish one with Einar Forseth (1892–1988) and Lars Gynning (1920–2003) who participated with “rather traditional weaves”. She also refers to an article in *Form*, the 1968 exhibition catalogue of Władysław Hasiór (1928–1999) at Moderna Museet, and a theatre performance at the City Theatre in Stockholm, an intricate cross-referencing that shows how Lutteman positioned the show in a web of Polish events taking place in Stockholm. The collaboration with Desa and the Polish Cultural Ministry was mentioned by the director Bengt Dahlbäck in the foreword, giving the official, national collaboration a prominent position.<sup>67</sup>

On 21 September 1970, a letter from Desa was sent to Göran Axel-Nilsson, director at Röhsska, saying that they tried to contact the museum but without success. With some help from the Polish Embassy in Stockholm, they reached out a second time because they had “gladly” heard about the museum’s forthcoming plan to exhibit Polish textile artists and they thought it was both “important and purposeful” that the museum had contact with Desa, who would facilitate the preparations. One initial concrete offer was to cover the costs of the hotel and food for a five-day research trip.<sup>68</sup>

In the final selection of *Modern Polish Tapestry*, Abakanowicz exhibited with Butrymowicz, Łaskiewicz, Teresa Muszynska (born 1937), Owidzka, Tworek–Pierzgalska, Agnieszka Ruszczyńska–Szafranska (born 1929), Sadley and Stephan.<sup>69</sup> Documentation shows how most works were single large-scale weavings that hung close to the walls, with works by Abakanowicz and Sadley displayed in the room, filling up the whole space between the ceiling and the walls.<sup>70</sup> The Lausanne Biennial was mentioned in the printed matter, and the group of artists were singled out as the most central of those working in the cross-section of classical tapestry and free expressions.<sup>71</sup> The museum also acquired works to their collection, i.e. Abakanowicz’s *Abakan Brown* (1969) and Ruszczyńska-Szafranska’s *Kolidia 70*.<sup>72</sup>

It is impossible to say if Axel-Nilsson would have made the same exhibition without Desa, but even if the organisation had single-mindedly invited itself, the guidance and knowledge of the staff in Poland would have been well received by the museum director.<sup>73</sup> The first secretary of the Polish Embassy, Jan Gorzelancyk, opened the show and it serves as a good example of how

67 B. Dahlbäck, “Polen väver fritt”, in: *Polen väver fritt*, Stockholm, 1970, exh. cat., p. 1.

68 Letter from Desa via the Polish Embassy in Stockholm to Göran Axel-Nilsson, 21 September 1970, Archive Röhsska Museum.

69 Exhibition contract between Röhsska Museum and Desa, signed 12 May 1971, Archive Röhsska Museum.

70 Photographic documentation, Archive Röhsska Museum.

71 Press release, 6 October 1971, Archive Röhsska Museum.

72 The museum acquired *Abakan Brown* for around SEK 23,000 and *Kolidia 70* for SEK 3,470. See a document from Röhsska to the Swedish customs, Archive Röhsska Museum.

73 Report to the Board of Röhsska Museum written by Göran Axel-Nilsson, May 1971, Archive Röhsska Museum.

two organisations working nationally manifested their relations during public ceremonies. One may compare how Desa proactively established contact with Röhsska with Thomas Lundén's research on how the Swedish Institute acted more passively in line with Sweden's soft power cultural diplomacy.

Looking at the three larger survey exhibitions of Polish fibre art in Sweden as an entangled history we can see how the exhibitions have a different significance for the actors involved. In the very late 1960s Abakanowicz struggled with breaking out of the category of textile art that she found too narrow, but even so she took part in the Röhsska exhibition 1971. One year later she secured a more prominent position in a solo presentation at the Nationalmuseum, as will be discussed soon. So, even if the surveys were not events where she directly developed her artistic language, they gave benefits such as opportunities to expand her professional network, to confirm her international reputation, and to sell her artworks.

Through the exhibitions the museums and municipal art galleries manifested how they were in tune with their time and had the ability to act quickly, showing the latest most internationally celebrated artists. To make sure the audience would not miss how renowned the artists were, it was clearly stated many times in the printed matter. Looking at the surveys from a larger perspective, the artists are grouped together not only by their artistic materials and techniques but also as a national phenomenon, which resonates well with how leading actors worked, like the grand old biennial in Venice and the up-and-coming one in Lausanne. From the Polish side, Desa and the Embassy of the Polish People's Republic were actively involved in the two last events using art as examples of the excellence and liberal attitude of the country at large. This shows, in line with Werner and Zimmermann, that the perspective of entangled history goes beyond set categories of scale such as macro and micro and shows how different spatial categories interact. The perspective makes us aware of how exhibitions can be understood as a set of dynamic interrelations.<sup>74</sup>

The survey at Röhsska stands out in one respect. It was part of a bigger Swedish-Polish event called *Polska dagarna i Göteborg* [*Polish Days in Gothenburg*].<sup>75</sup> The event took place between 14–24 October in 1971, promoting Polish culture and commerce for a Swedish audience. A document testifies to the event's broad range, presenting culture, industrial innovations, and food, together with a military parade and a trade conference.<sup>76</sup> In this context Röhsska was part

---

<sup>74</sup> Werner, Zimmermann, op. cit., pp. 43–44.

<sup>75</sup> In a letter, Å. Norling acting for the City of Gothenburg gives a short background to the event, as follows: when the Polish Ambassador visited Gothenburg in 1970, the head of the city council took the initiative to suggest a week of promoting Polish culture and commerce, letter dated 15 May 1970, Archive Gothenburg Art Museum.

<sup>76</sup> Gothenburg Art Museum and the municipal art gallery showed the group exhibition *Aktuellt från Polen* [*Contemporary from Poland*] with paintings and sculpture in the art gallery and graphic art and posters at the museum. Desa was also involved in setting up

of a local event with national key features and the museum most probably gained from being a player among the other cultural and trade institutions in the city, getting extra marketing and reaching out to new audiences. One note and one review in the local press highlighted the event, which illustrates the appeal of this larger national framework.<sup>77</sup>

At the same time, Röhsska associated themselves with commercial and foreign cultural diplomacy. Art historian Maija Koskinen discusses these kinds of events as part of how nations in the “Cold War climate” interacted through culture. Koskinen put emphasis on the double nature of such events, as potential bridges that could increase mutual understanding in a divided world, but they could also, as she puts it: “[...] subvert and corrupt hearts and minds, depending on who was making the assessment”.<sup>78</sup> Being part of an exhibition that later on was included in the programme for the *Polish Days* might not have meant anything for Abakanowicz and the other artists, but for the Swedish audience the artworks were given an extra dimension as a bearer of a version of Polish culture that the authoritarian Polish state wanted to promote to foreign populations in order to appear more liberal.<sup>79</sup> This can never be seen as a neutral act.<sup>80</sup>

## Magdalena Abakanowicz’s three large-scale events in Södertälje and Stockholm

By the late 1960s Abakanowicz was an artist that Swedish art critics and curators found important because of her experimental approach to fibre materials and her way of pushing the conventions on how the materials could be handled spatially. Her way of working can be labelled with art and design historian Cilla Robach’s umbrella term *free form* [*fri form*]. It refers to textile artists bridging traditional materials and techniques of handicraft with fine art, where one of the features is that the beholder could have the impression

---

these exhibitions. The whole event was inaugurated by the Minister of Foreign Trade, K. Olszewski, 14–15 October 1971, and dinners and cocktail parties were arranged, Archive Röhsska Museum.

77 “Tre polska evenemang”, in: *Handelstidningen*, 9 October 1971 and K. Ekholm, “Polsk textilkonst”, *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-tidning*, 25 October 1971.

78 M. Koskinen, “Artistic Novelties or Political Tool?”, *Art@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2, p. 141.

79 For an analysis on how the Polish government acted as more liberal than they were during the Gierek era through modern art abroad forming opinions, see K. Prykowska–Michalak, “Years of Compromise and Political Servility – Kantor and Grotowski during the Cold War”, in: *Theatre, Globalization and the Cold War*, eds. C.B. Balme, B. Szymanski–Düll, London, 2017, pp. 198–200.

80 Koskinen points out that art and art exhibitions might not be effective weapons, but they did and still have a role in diplomatic tool kits, Koskinen, op. cit., p. 149.



that the works were made by a person not educated technically or a child.<sup>81</sup> Robach examines the 1960s in Sweden and shows that expressions of free form are a blind spot in the written history of Swedish design and craft that has a strong focus on the legacy of functionalism. This means that craft and design that stood out from this tradition have been left rather under-researched without any proper place in neither the history of craft nor art. Textile artists working in this free manner, like Sten Kauppi (1922–2002), Kaisa Melanton (1920–2012), and Margareta Hallek (born 1932), emerged as exceptions.<sup>82</sup> For Swedish textile artists, who worked and found interest in radical expressions in fibre, as well as for an interested audience, Abakanowicz's large-scale experiments were reasonably appreciated events when she worked on site with rope and immersed the audience in woven pieces at Södertälje Konsthall, Nationalmuseum, and Huddinge Hospital at the turn of 1960.<sup>83</sup>

At Södertälje Konsthall, Högestätt made sure Abakanowicz could stay for a longer time of three weeks because he knew she wanted to experiment in the exhibition space.<sup>84</sup> In March 1970 the solo presentation *Magdalena Abakanowicz / Textil skulptur / Textile environment* opened at the two-year-old art gallery.<sup>85</sup> Photographs of the installation show how Abakanowicz transformed the space with thick ropes, loosely joined together in knots, and woven parts that hung freely in the space, casting dramatic shadows on the walls and floor.<sup>86</sup> The building of municipal art galleries and cultural houses was part of a national modernization policy, within the public housing reform called the "Million Homes Programme". The programme was implemented between 1965 and 1974 by the governing Swedish Social Democratic Party to ensure the availability of affordable, high quality housing for all Swedish citizens.<sup>87</sup> When standards of living rose during the 1960s, the Social Democrats successively developed a cultural policy with similar ideas of equality and accessibility to art. Words such as "modernization" and "artistic quality" were used

---

81 C. Robach, *Formens frigörelse. Konsthantverk och design under debatt i 1960-talets Sverige*, PhD thesis, Stockholm, 2010, p. 20.

82 Ibid., pp. 303–315.

83 A study based on interviews should be made to understand more fully whether and how individual textile artists were influenced by Abakanowicz and her fellow Polish artists, compared to Runa Boger's study in Norway – Boger, op. cit.

84 Letter from Högestätt to the Polish Ministry of Culture, 13 January 1970, Södertälje City Archive.

85 Besides the solo exhibition with Abakanowicz, the city of Södertälje acquired the sisal woven piece *Abakan 32* (1968) for SEK 6,750, Art database city of Södertälje [accessed 10 October 2021].

86 Due to copyright to the photographic documentation, there is no coherent documentation at Södertälje Konsthall, but images of the installation can be found in *Magdalena Abakanowicz. Organic Structures*, Malmö, 1977, exh. cat.

87 T. Hall, S. Vidén, "The Million Homes Programme: A Review of the Great Swedish Planning Project", *Planning Perspectives*, 2005, 20, no. 3, pp. 301–305.

and one of the goals was to “counteract the negative effects of commercialization of culture”.<sup>88</sup>

*Textile sculpture / Textile environment* was composed of more than eighteen artworks. Thirteen were works for space and five of them were wall works, shipped from Poland in co-operation with Desa, and then, new works were made on site during the installation period.<sup>89</sup> This is an aspect not to be overlooked. Abakanowicz’s invitation was open, and she could work freely on site. The exhibition was one of her earliest installations that the audience could enter, and one of the earliest events where she used rope, found in the shipping industry.<sup>90</sup>

The catalogue was printed on thick brown coloured paper with images of artworks as black silhouettes, that corresponded graphically with the exhibition (Fig. 3; Fig. 4).<sup>91</sup> In the catalogue, Abakanowicz underlines that the works are “compositions with textile materials”, “neither related to historic textile art nor sculptural structures, but objects in space compact and soft at the same time”. In Högestätt’s introduction and in excerpts from published articles, emphasis was on the work in an international art context, comparing her to Picasso but also mentioning fellow textile artists such as Sadley, a Croatian Jagoda Buić (1930–2022), and two Americans Lenore Tawney (1907–2007), and Claire Zesler (1903–1991). The catalogue delivers a clear message to the audience: Abakanowicz is a free visual artist pushing the boundaries of what was known internationally in the arts by introducing fibre materials in site-specific environments. Compared to the catalogues made by Nationalmuseum and Röhsska there is no contextualization made positioning Abakanowicz in the Polish arts and craft history, which is more in line with how the artist herself choose to conceptualise her practice as more distanced from other fellow artists.

Parallel to the work in Södertälje, the Nationalmuseum started to plan *Poland Weaves in Freedom*. Widman met Abakanowicz for the first time during her stay at Södertälje. In the catalogue he writes that he really wanted to include her in the exhibition so when she proposed working on site and exhibiting alone, he agreed to let her do an exhibition within the exhibition with the title *Abakanowicz. A Confrontation*.<sup>92</sup> To manifest the “experiment”,

88 1974 years Cultural Proposition (proposition 1974:28).

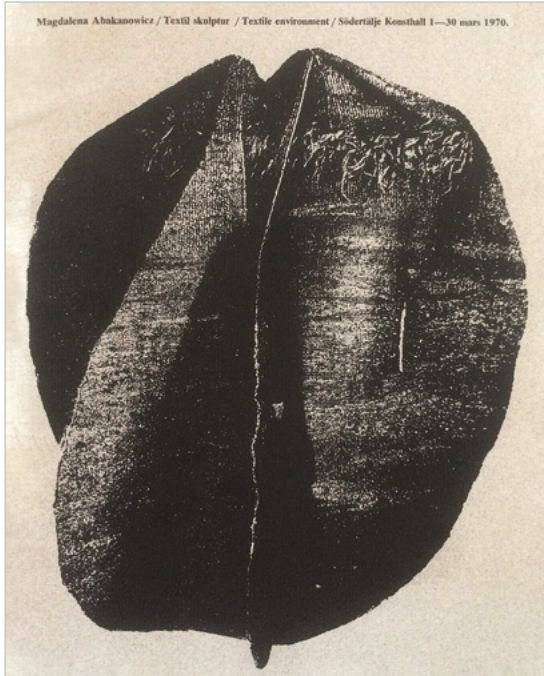
89 Letter from Desa to Högestätt confirming that they would be part of the exhibition and the possible sale of artworks, with Södertälje Konsthall paying for the shipping, 16 September 1969, Södertälje City Archive.

90 *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Writings and Conversations*, eds. M.J. Jacob, J. Dally, Milan, 2022, p. 98; Inglot, op. cit., p. 68.

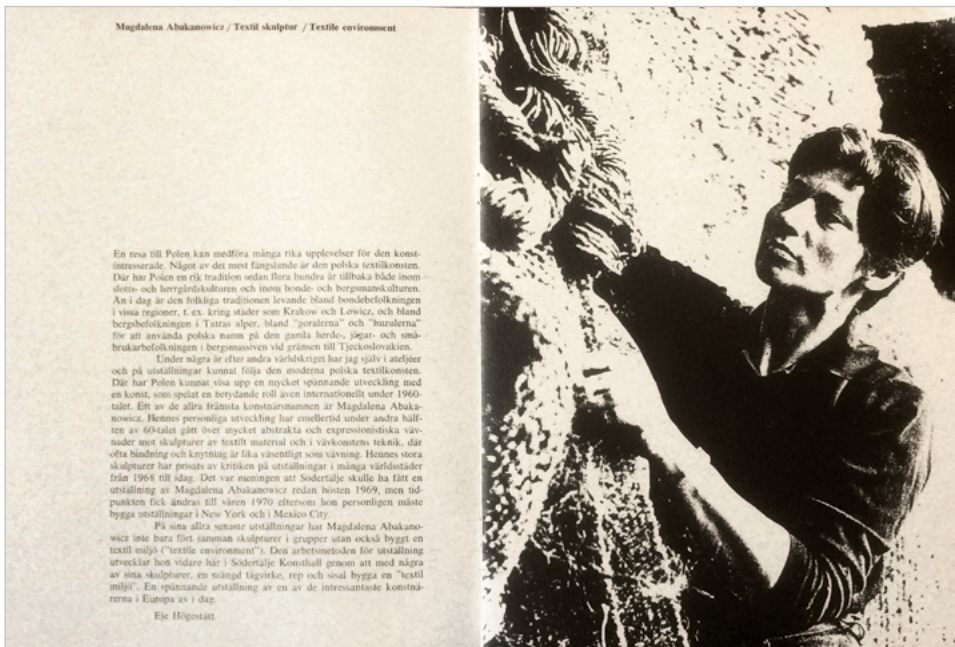
91 Beside the introduction by Högestätt, the catalogue included three excerpts from current published articles by D. Wroblewska in *Opus International*, Paris (year not mentioned); J. Lenor Larsen in *Craft Horizon*, 1969; E. Billeter, Zürich, 1968 (journal not mentioned), and quotes by the artists about her process, *Magdalena Abakanowicz / Textil skulptur / Textile environment* (Södertälje: Södertälje Konsthall, Södertälje, 1970, exh. cat.

92 D. Widman, “Warszawa i april 1970”, in: *Polen väver fritt*, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm 1970, exh. cat., pp. 4 and 14.





**Fig. 3.** Exhibition catalogue for *Magdalena Abakanowicz / Textil skulptur / Textile environment*, Södertälje Konsthall 1970. Photo: Alexandra Larsson Jacobson.



**Fig. 4.** Exhibition catalogue for *Magdalena Abakanowicz / Textil skulptur / Textile environment*, Södertälje Konsthall 1970. Photo: Alexandra Larsson Jacobson.

a poster was distributed inside of the catalogue of *Poland Weaves in Freedom*. Next to her portrait, Abakanowicz states her problem with textile art being degraded to craft, and that she wants to expose the viewer to the raw material in the process of becoming (Fig. 5).<sup>93</sup>

Photographs capture how the thick, rough rope was entangled into oversized knots hanging close to the floor and laid out with loose threads in heaps on short podiums.<sup>94</sup> In letters, Widman and Abakanowicz discuss the problem of making adequate documentation, and Widman asks Abakanowicz to spend more time in the collection of the museum, and come back later in December 1970 or January 1971, to continue their collaboration.<sup>95</sup>

Widman had been the keeper of the department of applied art since 1966 and before he had worked for Svensk Form [the Swedish Society of Crafts and Design]. Educated in art history, Widman wrote for the magazine *Form*, artist monographs, and survey textbooks on Swedish craft and design.<sup>96</sup> He has been acknowledged for modernising the department for applied art at the Nationalmuseum and to have given space to large-scale textile of which the thorough work with Abakanowicz is a good example.<sup>97</sup>

The two solo presentations gave Abakanowicz time and space to try out new materials and elaborate on them spatially. She was cautious to document her work on site for posterity given the temporary characters of the pieces, and a list of handwritten addresses to international actors working with art and textile was found in the Nationalmuseum archive with a letter where Widman lets Abakanowicz know that catalogues have been sent to her contacts.<sup>98</sup> Even if the Swedish exhibitions were most probably not attended by international key players these documents show that they were informed in writings and in photographic documentation. Seen in this light the exhibitions played a role in Abakanowicz's wider career.

In the Nationalmuseum archive, the last dated letter from Widman was sent on 31 December 1970, and no reply can be found. So, it seems that Abakanowicz turned down the proposal to continue her work at the museum, which most probably had to do with her busy schedule. Högestätt was good

93 *Abakanowicz en konfrontation*, exhibition poster, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 1970.

94 *Magdalena Abakanowicz. Organic Structures*, Malmö Konsthall, Malmö, 1977, exh. cat.

95 Letters between Widman and Abakanowicz, 10, 11, 15, 18 November and 31 December 1970, Archive Nationalmuseum.

96 "Dag Widman", Nationalencyklopedin, <https://www-ne-se.till.biblextern.sh.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/l%C3%A5ng/dag-widman> [accessed 8 August 2023].

97 P. Bjurström, M. Boman, H.H. Brummer, E. Nordenson, "Dag Widman. Lysande museiman satte konsthantverket främst", *Dagens Nyheter*, 12 November 2003, <https://www.dn.se/arkiv/familj/dag-widman-lysande-museiman-satte-konsthantverket-framst/> [accessed 8 August 2023].

98 Ten names were listed among them: Mildred Constantine, Museum of Modern Art NY, Jack Lenor Larsen, Dr K.H. Hering, Dusseldorf Kunsthalle, and Dagmar Tucna, Prague, Archive Nationalmuseum.

# ABAKANOWICZ en konfrontation



Min utställning i Stockholm är den andra i en serie som jag ämnar visa på olika platser i Europa. Den huvudsakliga avsikten är inte bara att ställa åskådaren ansikte mot ansikte med verken, utan att göra honom uppmärksam på deras olika betydelse. Jag känner, att fastän vi uppfattar saker, saknar vi ofta förmågan att se dem som de verkligen är: våra svar är förutbestämda; våra känslor är associativa och låsta. Jag skulle vilja medverka till att få bort dessa vanor. Enligt allmänt accepterade regler klassificeras — och begränsas — det "textila" till konsthantverk. Min utställning vill protestera mot en så stel uppfattning. Min utställning i Stockholm är inte en kavalkad av utställningsföremål. Jag vill i stället visa råmaterialet i en avstannande rörelse, i en oavslutad process. I det ögonblick när möjligheten till förändring är som störst.  
Magdalena Abakanowicz 1970

#### MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ:

1930 föds i Warszawa  
1950—55 studerar vid Konstakademien i Warszawa  
1959—70 reser och utställer i Europa, Nord- och Sydamerika gör internationellt genombrott på biennalen i Lausanne  
1965 får guldmedalj på 8:e biennalen i Sao Paulo  
Magdalena Abakanowicz har tilldelats flera officiella polska utmärkelser och priser.

#### REPRESENTERAD I FOLJANDE MUSEER:

Nationalmuseum, Warszawa  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
Musée d'art moderne, Sao Paulo  
Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem  
Kunstinstrumuseet, Oslo  
Kunsthalle, Mannheim  
Museum am Ostwall, Dortmund  
Musée des beaux-arts, La Chaux de Fonds  
Kunstgewerbemuseum, Zürich  
Nationalmuseum, Prag

#### SEPARATUTSTÄLLNINGAR:

1960 Galerie Kordegarda, Warszawa  
1962 Galerie Dautzenberg, Paris  
1963 Galerie d'art contemporain, Warszawa  
1965 Galerie Zacheta, Warszawa  
1967 Galerie Alice Pauli, Lausanne  
1967 Galerie d'art modern, Warszawa  
1967 Kunstinstrumuseet, Oslo

1967 Vestlandske Kunstforening, Bergen  
1967 Stavanger Kunstforening, Stavanger  
1968 Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven  
1968 Trondheims Kunstforening, Trondheim  
1968 Helnhaus, Zürich  
1968 Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem  
1969 Groninger Museum, Groningen  
1969 Stedelijk Museum, Schiedam  
1969 Stedelijk Museum, Arnhem  
1969 Kunsthalle, Mannheim  
1970 Södertälje Konsthall

#### BIENNALER OCH INTERNATIONELLA SAMLINGSUTSTÄLLNINGAR:

1962 1er Biennale internationale de la Tapisserie, Lausanne  
1965 2e Biennale internationale de la Tapisserie, Lausanne  
1965 8e Biennale internationale, Sao Paulo  
1967 3e Biennale internationale de la Tapisserie, Lausanne  
1968—69 "Wall Hangings Exhibition" Museum of Modern Art, New York  
1968 34e Biennale internationale, Venedig  
1969 "Perspectief in Textil" Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam  
1969 4e Biennale internationale de la Tapisserie, Lausanne  
1969 "Experiencias Artisticotextiles" Museo Espanol de arte contemporaneo, Madrid

#### MATERIAL:

150 kg 1-trådig 3/4 sisalgarn  
150 .. 4-trådig 3/4 sisalgarn  
165 .. 10 mm trossgarn  
600 .. grovre tågvirke  
Materialet är i aktivitet från 29.10—29.11 — villar sedan till nästa konfrontation då det åter bringas till aktivitet i annan form.

Jag intresserar mig inte för vävanden (vävkonsten) i den traditionella formen. I termens professionella användning eller i dess inskränkta betydelse. Jag intresserar mig för vävtekniken bara så länge jag behöver den som stöd i mitt arbete. Jag har funnit ett material och en teknik som jag kan använda för att ge fast form åt och förverkliga mina idéer. Av trä gör man inte bara stolar utan också statyer. Det är på samma sätt med mig, jag söker i vävkonsten, i vävtekniken, de möjligheter som motsvarar mina föreställningar.  
Magdalena Abakanowicz 1969

Vad är viktigast, det färdiga verket eller den skapande processen? Magdalena Abakanowicz har velat ge oss ett ögonblick av tillblivelsen av ett verk, ett ögonblick då möjligheterna tycks många, men målet redan skymtar eller kan anas. Vi är glada att hon velat göra Nationalmuseum till skådeplats för ett ut, smitt ur sitt skapandes process och tackar henne för att hon kommit. Stockholm i oktober 1970  
Bengt Dahlback

# Stockholm 29.10 - 29.11 NATIONALMUSEUM

Fig. 5. Poster for *Abakanowicz en konfrontation* [*Abakanowicz a Confrontation*], Nationalmuseum 1970. Photo: Alexandra Larsson Jacobson.

at finding occasions for artists to materialise their artistic visions. As a member of the commissioning group for public art in hospitals in Stockholm, he included Abakanowicz in a public competition for a new hospital<sup>99</sup> being built between the city of Stockholm and Södertälje, in an area called Huddinge. When Huddinge Hospital was built in the late 1960s it was the most modern hospital in Sweden and the largest building project in Scandinavia.<sup>100</sup> In the grand entrance hall, four separate niches, 7 by 7 metres each, were to be fashioned with artworks built for the site.<sup>101</sup>

In the very Swedish line-up of artists, Abakanowicz stood out not only because she was from another country, but also because she responded to the assignment by transforming the whole space. Jan Nordahl (born 1934), a photographer and who would become a long-time collaborator of Abakanowicz, captured how the piece *Black Brown* made up an environment, inviting people to hide from the busy hospital in a dark, brown space with a warm orange centre.<sup>102</sup>

The fashioning of the hospital environment was proposed by a commissioning group of leading actors on the Swedish art and architecture scene.<sup>103</sup> In 1969 the group released *Huddinge Hospital. Principal Program for Art and Environment* which served as a tool to manoeuvre the whole fashioning. Formulations show how the group understood the way artists had started to work in relation to space. One can characterise this nascent Swedish art bureaucracy as caring strongly for the individual to meet and experience art well integrated with the built environment, with parallels to the formation of the national cultural policy, previously mentioned.

In art critic Beate Sydhoff's review of Abakanowicz's solo at Södertälje Konsthall, she, like previous critics, saw something unique, but at the same time something typical for a "Polish environment and problematic".<sup>104</sup> Sydhoff refers to the exhibition at Moderna Museet with Władysław Hasiór in 1968, and in her opinion the two artists "showed a freedom from the historical burden of Western European aesthetic tradition". Instead Abakanowicz, in Sydhoff's view, creates painful artworks because they remind us of what we miss

99 M. Romdahl, "Drömskog i sjukhusmiljö", *Dagens Nyheter*, 2 March 1972.

100 M. Ljungström, *Huddinge sjukhus - lika stort som Gamla stan*, <https://www.locum.se/om-oss/press/nyheter/2021/huddinge-sjukhus-historia/> [accessed 11 April 2023].

101 *Black-Brown* was selected alongside *Röd fågling* by Britta Kjellgren, *Resa i rymden* by Kaisa Melanton and *Vandring i markerna* av Ingegerd Möller-Nygren. SEK 275,000 were allocated for the commissions including the fee for sketches, *Principal Program for Art and Environment*, Huddinge 1969. According to the contract, Abakanowicz received SEK 72,000, Regional Archive Stockholm.

102 Nordahl and Abakanowicz became long-time collaborators and friends, Jacob, Dally, op. cit., pp. 102–111.

103 In 1977, due lack of space, a niche had to be cleared out and the artwork was destroyed on 14 January 2011 because of dirt and dissolution of the material and mould infestation. Database for the culture administration in Region Stockholm.

104 B. Sydhoff, "Textila rum av Abakanowicz", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 22 March 1970.

in modern times, the proximity to nature and a loss of tactile experience connected to old craftwork.

The exhibition at Södertälje Konsthall also grabbed the local newspaper's attention with two acclaimed reports, using words such as "world-famous Pole" and "textile world art".<sup>105</sup> Yet not all art critics were unified in this kind of appreciative view. Voices were also raised that problematized the Polish art exhibited in Sweden. In the review of *Abakanowicz. A Confrontation and Poland Weaves in Freedom* at the Nationalmuseum, Poland was called a "textile world power" by art critic Stig Johansson.<sup>106</sup> He explicitly framed the exhibition in political terms, saying that "Polish art has become a fine export product, an exterior facade [...], but even if the cultural climate in Poland is special in relation to other Eastern states, it is hard not to imagine that artists need to consider certain political limitations". In earlier reviews on exhibitions with Polish painting in Stockholm with artists such as Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Krawczyk, Johansson and other critics also took a geo-political stance and questioned how free the artists could be living in an authoritarian country.<sup>107</sup>

In those reviews, the Polish artists were perceived as *only* being representatives of Poland, even if they had international careers like Abakanowicz and when being compared with artists from other countries, they were considered "belated" in relation to what had already been seen in Paris and France. Here we can see how mechanisms of a Western-Eurocentric hegemonic position were played out in the field of painting and aesthetic canons of styles, artists, and models of influence were connected to national belongings, discussed critically by art historian Piotr Piotrowski among others.<sup>108</sup> Even though, for Abakanowicz personally, the category of textile art and craft felt as an obstacle, in hindsight it can be understood as a gateway for her to become an internationally acclaimed artist, at a time when many textile artists broke free from old traditions.<sup>109</sup> In the minds of the Swedish art critics, Abakanowicz

105 C. Duke, "Världsberömd polska visar textilkulptur", *Länstidningen Södertälje*, February 1970; C. Duke "Ögats och handens äventyr", *Länstidningen Södertälje*, March 1970.

106 S. Johansson, "Sköna textila attentat", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 5 November 1970.

107 One example is S. Johansson, "Bra och prisbillig polsk konst", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 1 October 1968, review of the exhibition *Fri polsk konst [Free Polish Art]* at Sveagalleriet [Svea Gallery] 21 Sept–13 Oct 1968, with artists such as Tadeusz Kantor, Bogus Balicki, Jerzy Krawczyk and Maria Hiszpańska–Neuman.

108 C. Bydler, "Piotr Piotrowski. In Memoriam", *Baltic Worlds*, 2015, 3–4, p. 12. In relation to women textile artists of Central and Eastern Europe, Piotrowski's critique has been scrutinised by Susanne Altmann showing that his revision also has blind spots regarding women artists who worked between disciplines and aesthetic idioms. See S. Altmann, "Disentangling. Women Artists in the Eastern Bloc Reinvent Textile and Fibre Art" in: *Abakanowicz. Metamorfizm | Metamorphosis*, ed. M. Kowalewska, Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, 2018, exh. cat., pp. 228–253.

109 Inglot, op. cit., p. 66; A. Coxon, "Every Tangle of Thread and Rope. Abakanowicz's Organic Environments", in: *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, eds. A. Coxon, M.J. Jacob, op. cit., pp. 65–66.



represented something new, free and belonging to a “world art” in comparison to her fellow artists working in the medium of painting. She became not only a point of reference for Polish textile art but also for visual art in general.

Even if Abakanowicz was by far the most mentioned and the most thoroughly analysed compared to other Polish artists exhibited in Sweden, it is again important to stress that she was not alone. Exhibitions on official levels organised by museums, municipal galleries, and artist-run initiatives testify to the myriad of presentations with Polish artists of different generations working with different artistic means.<sup>110</sup> Yet still, what stands out in the conceptualisation of Abakanowicz’s fibre art and the art critical reception of it in Sweden is how her artworks could appear in a larger international “world” context, addressing universal human issues. Swedish art critics can understand being a world-artist in at least two ways: one, having an international, that is a Western career and, two, being in tune with modern times, that is, being able to address a critique of what was considered inhuman conditions in respect to questions important for a growing environmental movement.

## Entangled Polish art in Sweden

This study has examined a Polish artist and her presence with art exhibitions and a public commission in Sweden with the ambition to show how this history has been crossed by many kinds of interests. Methodologically, in line with how historian Silke Neunsinger argues about the outcome of *histoire croisée* research, the study shows how actors from governmental and national organisations as well as national and local museums and galleries, and independent actors such as artists and art critics, interacted dynamically by shaping and reacting to exhibitions as public events at the turn of 1960.<sup>111</sup>

As the mediated history of post-war art has been oriented towards the West and tended to divide Europe and the world in two, the findings of this article, on the contrary, re-frame Sweden’s position in relation to the countries behind the Iron Curtain. The frequency of Abakanowicz and her Polish artist fellows’ exhibiting in Sweden and their thoroughness contradict prevalent ideas of a Cold War divide. Not one but three different, still similar in many ways, survey exhibitions of Polish fibre art were made in the country which means that curators and art institutions wanted to show what was about to become a turning point for tapestry and textile art in the European context regardless of country of origin. Individuals participating in these surveys gained different amounts of critical attention and their artworks were acquired by museums and public

---

110 Research for this article and for the above-mentioned field will be carried out through the project *Serious and with Poetic Powers: Polish Art in Sweden from the Cold War Period Up Until Today* funded by the Baltic Sea Foundation, 2023–2025.

111 Neunsinger, op. cit., p. 21.

collections. And, as Abakanowicz was eager to expand her practice to sculpture and installation she was proactive and as an equal she was met by willing attitudes from curators such as Högestätt and Widman, who saw a potential in her way of expanding the notion of textile art, craft, and visual art as such.

The initial proposal to see the larger context of Sweden and Poland as two semi-peripheries with no fixed power hierarchy, are confirmed by these relations as the collaboration between Abakanowicz and the two curators continued over time and over institutional borders. Additionally, on a contrary note, the enthusiasm from curators and critics were not equally prominent among Swedish artists in the studied material. It might be that other indications can be found when interviewing individuals, but statements from critics and curators rather point to the fact that few Swedish textile artists were influenced artistically by the Polish artists. Even though we must believe that the Swedish artists, like their fellow curators and critics, enjoyed taking part in what was happening abroad on the frontiers of the Lausanne Biennial and elsewhere. Inspiration can come from unexpected sources and not always manifest itself visually. Abakanowicz on her part saw Swedish textile art at the Lausanne Biennial and visited the collection of Nationalmuseum, but she also seemed not to have been artistically affected by her experience; still, she kept accepting invitations to exhibit and work in the country.

Even if individual curators and artists saw the potential to exhibit art across national borders under surveillance, positive attention was not given to all artists. This becomes evident when considering the artists' country of origin and aesthetic expressions, as the Swedish art world was, as art historian Annika Öhrner has pointed out, very much dominated by the narrative of artistic excellence stemming from metropolitan art influencing the so-called peripheries in a one-way direction which means that many artists have been forgotten.<sup>112</sup> However, this article reveals how Abakanowicz's way of working with fibre materials, immersing the spectators, paired with her international career, was received by the Swedish curators and critics as bold and innovative. And her artistic stance, which art historian Joanna Inglot calls her "idealist vision of transcultural unity", was in tune with ideas flourishing in Sweden, as most art critics saw her artistic work not only as modern, but so far ahead as to make critical, existential contributions to what these modern times had led to in terms of alienating humans from their natural origins on earth.<sup>113</sup> In Sweden, Abakanowicz was a "perfect match" because her practice coincided with the attitude of the larger cultural policy of the late post-war period, with the modernization and renewal of Swedish society. Her artworks corresponded well with what curators and critics sought for when galleries, cultural houses, residential areas and public premises were established.

---

112 A. Öhrner, *Barbro Östlihn & New York: Konstens rum och möjligheter*, Uppsala, 2010, PhD thesis, pp. 189–90.

113 Inglot, op. cit., p. 101.

## References

- “Dag Widman”, Nationalencyklopedin, <https://www-ne-se.till.biblextern.sh.se/uppslagsverk/encyklopedi/1%C3%A5ng/dag-widman>.
- “Levande skulpturala bonader på Konsthallens polska expo”, *Arbetet*, 10 January 1967.
- “Mellanhedsgången får polsk gobeläng”, *Arbetet*, 18 February 1967.
- “Polsk kvinnlig professor lockade fullt hus i Lund”, *Arbetet*, 13 February 1967.
- “Polsk världskonst till konsthallen”, *Arbetet*, 12 December 1966.
- “Tre polska evenemang”, *Handelstidningen*, 9 October 1971.
- “Vår historia”, <https://si.se/om-si/var-historia/>.
- Altmann, S., “Disentangling. Women Artists in the Eastern Bloc Reinvent Textile and Fibre Art”, in: *Abakanowicz. Metamorfizm | Metamorphism*, ed. M. Kowalewska, Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, 2018, exh. cat.
- Att överleva. Röster från Ravensbrück, *En lärarhandledning*, Lund, 2006, [https://www.kulturen.com/wp-content/uploads/2011 November Ravensbruck\\_Lararhandledning.pdf](https://www.kulturen.com/wp-content/uploads/2011%20November%20Ravensbruck_Lararhandledning.pdf).
- Bjurström, P., Boman, M., Brummer, H.H., Nordenson, E., “Dag Widman. Lysande museiman satte konsthantverket främst”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 12 November 2003.
- Boger, R., *Magdalena Abakanowicz og Norge: Stilskeper eller frigjørende forbilde? En drøftelse av Abakanowicz' betydning for norsk tekstilkunst 1960–1980*, MA thesis, Oslo, 2010.
- Boot, M., “Like a Flaming Comet: The Rise of Magdalena Abakanowicz in the Netherlands”, *Textile*, 2018, 16, no. 4, pp. 378–385.
- Bydler, C., “Piotr Piotrowski. In Memoriam”, *Baltic Worlds*, 2015, 3–4, pp. 12–13.
- Coxon, A., “Every Tangle of Thread and Rope. Abakanowicz’s Organic Environments”, in: *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, eds. A. Coxon, M.J. Jacob, Tate Modern, London, 2022, exh. cat.
- DaCosta Kaufmann, T., Dossin, C., Joyeux–Prunel, B., *Circulations in the Global History of Art*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015.
- Dahlbäck, B., “Polen väver fritt”, in: *Polen väver fritt*, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 1970, exh. cat.
- Dally, J., *Magdalena Abakanowicz. Fate and Art. Monologe*, ed. P. Gribaudo, 2nd ed., Milan, 2020.
- Duke, C., “Ögats och handens äventyr”, *Länstidningen Södertälje*, 1970, 3.
- Duke, C., “Världsberömd polska visar textilsulptur”, *Länstidningen Södertälje*, 1970, 2.
- Eckholm, K., “Polsk textilkonst”, *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-tidning*, 25 October 1971.
- Eriksson, F., ed., *Det började i Polen. Sverige och Solidaritet 1980–1981*, Huddinge, 2013.
- Gola, J., “Magdalena Abakanowicz: A Biographical Outline”, in: *Abakanowicz. Metamorfizm | Metamorphism*, ed. M. Kowalewska, Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, 2018, exh. cat.
- Hall, T., Vidén, S., “The Million Homes Programme: A Review of the Great Swedish Planning Project”, *Planning Perspectives*, 2005, 20, no. 3, pp. 301–328.
- Haykowski, M., “Polskie odznaczenia za szwedzką pomoc humanitarną”, *Polonia*, 1 January 2008, <https://www.poloniainfo.se/artikel.php?id=921>.
- Heino, M., Törnquist–Plewa, B., “Svenska stödkommittén för Solidaritet. The Swedish Support Committee and Independent Polish Agency in Lund”, in: *Skandinavien*



- och Polen. *Möten, relationer och ömsesidig påverkan*, ed. B. Törnquist-Plewa, Lund, 2007, pp. 25–58.
- Hock, B., Allas, A., eds., *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present*, New York–London, 2018.
- Högestätt, E., “Introduction”, in: *Moderna gobelänger och aktuell grafik från Polen*, Lunds konsthall, Lund, 1967, exh. cat.
- Inglot, J., *The Figurative Sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz. Bodies, Environments, and Myths*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, 2004.
- Jachufa, M., “Crafting an Art Practice. The Postwar Polish Art Scene”, in: *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, eds. A. Coxon, M.J. Jacob, Tate Modern, London, 2022, exh. cat.
- Jacob, M.J., Dally, J., eds., *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Writings and Conversations*, Milan, 2022.
- Jakubowska, A., “The ‘Abakans’ and the Feminist Revolution”, in: *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture*, eds. S. Bru, L. Nuijs, B. Hjartarson, P. Nicholls, T. Ørum, H. Berg, Berlin–Boston, 2012, pp. 253–265.
- Johansson, S., “Bra och prisbillig polsk konst”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 1 October 1968.
- Johansson, S., “Sköna textila attentat”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 5 November 1970.
- Junet, M., “Abakanowicz and Lausanne: The Path to Fame”, in: *Abakanowicz. Metamorfizm | Metamorphism*, ed. M. Kowalewska, Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, 2018, exh. cat.
- Koskinen, M., “Artistic Novelties or Political Tool?”, *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2, pp. 141–149.
- Kowalewska, M., “Mapping New Meaning”, in: *From Tapestry to Fibre. The Lausanne Biennials 1962–1995*, eds. G. Eberhard Cotton, M. Junet, Milan, 2017, pp. 155–171.
- Larsson, C., “The Politics of Appearance: Tadeusz Kantor Exhibiting in Sweden 1958–2014”, *Sztuka i dokumentacja*, 2022, pp. 77–91.
- Ljungström, M., *Huddinge sjukhus - lika stort som Gamla stan*, <https://www.locum.se/om-oss/press/nyheter/2021/huddinge-sjukhus-historia/>.
- Lundahl, G., “Tre polska textilare”, *Form*, 1968, 4.
- Lundén, T., “Turning Towards the Inland Sea? Swedish ‘Soft Diplomacy’ Towards the Baltic Soviet Republics Before Independence”, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 2021, 47, no. 3, pp. 347–368.
- Lundgren, T., “Gobelinbiennial i Lausanne”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 25 June 1967.
- Lutteman, H., “Polsk bild i aktion”, in: *Polen väver fritt*, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 1970, exh. cat.
- Lutteman, H., “Polsk textilkonst”, in: *Polen väver fritt*, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 1970, exh. cat.
- Magdalena Abakanowicz. Organic Structures*, Malmö Konsthall, Malmö, 1977, exh. cat.
- Moskalewicz, M., “Knots. Abakanowicz and the Polish Art Scene in the 1960s”, in: *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, eds. A. Coxon, M.J. Jacob, Tate Modern, London, 2022, exh. cat.
- Myrstener, P., *Konst i rörelse. Tillfälliga utställningar med internationell konst i Sverige 1945–1969*, forthcoming PhD thesis, Huddinge.
- Neunsinger, S., “Cross-Over! Om komparationer, transferanalyser, *histoire croisée* och den metodologiska nationalismens problem”, *Historisk Tidskrift*, 2010, 130, no. 1, pp. 3–24.

- Öhrner, A., "Exhibiting Contemporary Art in the Early 1990s Nordic-Baltic Realm", *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2.
- Öhrner, Ö., *Barbro Östlihn & New York: Konstens rum och möjligheter*, PhD thesis, Uppsala, 2010.
- Piotrowski, P., "Towards a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde", *Europa! Europa! The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, eds. S. Bru, P. Nicholls, Berlin, 2009.
- Prykowska-Michalak, K., "Years of Compromise and Political Servility – Kantor and Grotowski during the Cold War", *Theatre, Globalization and the Cold War*, eds. C.B. Balme, B. Szymanski-Düll, London, 2017, pp. 189–205.
- Ring Petersen, A., "Global Art History: A View from the North", *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 2015, 7, no. 1.
- Robach, C., *Formens frigörelse. Konsthantverk och design under debatt i 1960-talets Sverige*, PhD thesis, Stockholm, 2010.
- Romdahl, M., "Drömskog i sjukhusmiljö", *Dagens Nyheter*, 2 March 1972.
- Rose, B., *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, New York, 1994.
- Sjöholm Skrubbe, J., "Routes and Ruptures. Swedish Artistic Mobility in the Early Twentieth Century", *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, 2, pp. 20–35.
- Stensman, M., "Polska gobelänger", *Arbetet*, 25 January 1967.
- Stensman, M., "Polska gobelänger", *Form*, 1967, 4.
- Sydhoff, B., "Abakanowicz", *Form*, 1970, 3.
- Sydhoff, B., "Textila rum av Abakanowicz". *Svenska Dagbladet*, 22 March 1970.
- Uggla, A.N., "Polacker", *Det mångkulturellt Sverige. En handbok om etniska grupper och minoriteter*, eds. I. Svanberg, H. Runblom, Stockholm, 2nd ed., 1990.
- Wadstein MacLeod, K., Edling, M., Myrstener, P., "Exhibiting in a European Periphery? International Art in Sweden during the Cold War", *Artl@s Bulletin*, 2022, 11, no. 2, pp. 126–132.
- Wadstein MacLeod, K., "Superlund: Lunds konsthall och det centrala i det perifera", *Periskop*, 2018, 20, pp. 91–109.
- Wadstein MacLeod, K., "Troubling Peripheries: Pierre Restany and Superlund", *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History*, 2021, 90, no. 1, pp. 13–24.
- Wadstein MacLeod, K., *From Fluxus to Fest. International Art in Lunds konsthall, 1965–67*, Huddinge, 2022.
- Werner, M., Zimmermann, B., "Beyond Comparison. Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity", *History and Theory*, 2006, 45, no. 1, pp. 30–50.
- Widman, D., "Warszawa i april 1970", in: *Polen väver fritt*, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm 1970, exh. cat.
- Wroblewska, D., "Wojciech Sadley", *Form*, 1968, 4.
- Zweigbergk, E., "Bildväv med och utan bild", *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 July 1967.

*Michalina Sablik*

DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES (ART STUDIES)

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

ORCID: 0000-0002-9683-0046

## Between the Stage and the Art Gallery: “Artistic Actions” at the Lublin Theatre Spring in 1973 and 1974

### Abstract

In this article, I have undertaken an analysis of the visual arts section “curated” by Zbigniew Warpechowski at the student festival Lublin Theatre Spring in 1973 and 1974, where many artists, later known as precursors of performance art, performed. Experimental happenings within the field of student theatre, referred to as “artistic actions”, are mentioned by many sources as an event marking the start of performance art history in Lublin. The aim of this article is to reconstruct individual actions, collect scattered archival materials (brochures, descriptions of actions, memories, photographs, excerpts from press reviews), and analyse the reception of these actions among the audience and theatre critics based on press reviews. These events are placed in the context of the simultaneous emergence of avant-garde theatre represented by Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, and Józef Szajna, as well as student theatre. This contextualisation illustrates how this new art form, later defined as performance art, negotiated its position and sought its place between the theatrical stage and the art gallery in the mid-1970s. The article also demonstrates how these new theatre models converged with the reflection on action art. Moreover, the research highlights the local and transmedial specificity of the development of this artistic direction.

**Keywords:** performance art, transmediality, student theatre, Lublin Theatre Spring, reconstruction

“Artistic actions” presented at the two editions of the Lublin Theatre Spring in 1973 and 1974 are considered foundational events for performance art in Lublin. They preceded the pioneering actions of Piotr Bernacki, Krzysztof Zareński, Marek Konieczny, as well as the *International Meetings of Artists* “Performance

*and Body*" in 1978, which were one of the innovative festivals showcasing performance art in Poland. The commissioner of the "artistic actions", Zbigniew Warpechowski, described them as "the first avant-garde art presentation since the Group Zamek in Lublin".<sup>1</sup> They took place at a time when the emerging new form of action art was searching for its identity and place in the artistic landscape of that time. The precursors of action art from various artistic backgrounds (including poets, actors, sculptors, visual artists), presented their happenings in diverse locations that allowed for bold artistic experiments. They circulated between the gallery and the theatre stage. The aim of this article is to reconstruct the individual actions presented at the Lublin Theatre Spring, gather scattered archival materials (brochures, action descriptions, memories, photographs, press excerpts), analyse the reception of "artistic actions" among audiences and theatre critics, and demonstrate how in the mid-1970s, a new art form, later defined as performance art, negotiated its position and sought its place between the theatre stage and the art gallery. The article presents a transmedia perspective on the beginnings of performance art in Poland, highlighting the relationships between avant-garde artists and experimental theatre, as well as the presence of performers on the fringes of theatre in the student cultural field. It also argues that the presentations of "artistic actions" were an important reference point in shaping the program of the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin since 1974, directed by Andrzej Mroczek.

Many researchers believe that the concept of "performance", along with its practice, was "imported" from Western art criticism and emerged in 1978, together with the International Artists' Meetings at the Remont Gallery in Warsaw and *Performance and Body* at the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin.<sup>2</sup> However, Piotr Piotrowski's methodology of horizontal art history requires a focus on the local specifics of the emergence of this new art movement and its embedment in a particular institutional and ideological context, rather than adopting the paradigm of "importing" progressive art from the West. The article uses a framework of concepts developed by the artists themselves and the local community from which they originated to describe the phenomena presented. The artists later labelled as performers defined their procedural works in various ways. To describe them, I will mainly use the term "action" or "artistic action" as used by Warpechowski to describe various phenomena that defy genre categories.

1 Z. Warpechowski, *Podręcznik Bis*, Cracow, 2006, p. 54.

2 Ł. Guzek, *Rekonstrukcja sztuki akcji w Polsce*, Warsaw–Toruń 2018, pp. 533–534.

## The relations between theatre and action art in the 1970s

New interpretations of performance under the sign of the “performative turn”, initiated in Poland by Agnieszka Sosnowska and the exhibition *Other Dances* at the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, propose focusing on the transmedial origins of performance art, highlighting its intersections with various disciplines, including happenings, street and avant-garde theatre.<sup>3</sup> They advocate for a rewriting of both art and theatre history, challenging essentialist approaches proposed by numerous scholars, such as Łukasz Guzek.<sup>4</sup> In Poland, the topic of the connections between performance art and experimental theatre in the 1970s has not yet been extensively explored by researchers, as if these worlds existed in isolation. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that there were numerous collaborations between visual artists and theatre practitioners, as well as significant parallels in thinking about the actor’s and performer’s body, active presence, and the crossing of boundaries in traditional art forms. Researcher and artist Anka Herbut wrote on this topic as follows:

“In the mid-1960s, a performative revolution took place in art. The body of the actor–performer no longer represents or imitates reality. By freeing itself from the compulsion of representation, it turns towards its own materiality, experiences space, establishes a connection with the audience and the object. Both in theatre and gallery spaces, it achieves aesthetic and semantic autonomy. Embedded within dense structures of signs, it starts to exert influence and respond more than signify. The presence of the spectator’s body becomes equally important – their presence should involve active participation. Performance art and performativity establish a new grammar of artistic language. [...] The body becomes the fundamental mode of existence in the world and the only possible channel of communication”.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between performance art and theatre remains complex due to the use of multiple terms and their different definitions by researchers. Marco de Marinis describes the osmotic interpenetration of basic performance indicators into the realm of new theatre.<sup>6</sup> The researcher points out that there

---

3 The title of the exhibition *Other Dances* originates from the title of the performance by Akademia Ruchu (Academy of Movement), a theatre group operating at the intersection of several artistic disciplines. See A. Sosnowska, ed., *Inne tańce. Zwrot performatywny w polskiej sztuce XXI wieku*, Warsaw, 2019.

4 Guzek, op. cit.

5 A. Herbut, “Vita negative”, in: *Dzikie pola: historia awangardowego Wrocławia*, ed. D. Monkiewicz, Wrocław, 2016, p. 181.

6 M. De Marinis, “Performance and Theatre: From Actor to Performer and Back?”, text presented by Jerzy Grotowski at the conference *Performer – Old or New Paradigm of the Artist?* which took place on 19–21 April 2012 in Cracow. <https://grotowski.net/performer/performer-5/performans-i-teatr-od-aktora-do-performera-i-z-powrotem> [accessed 18 April 2023].

are many convergences between New Theatre Studies and performance studies. De Marinis notes that in the 1970s, two parallel phenomena emerged: the “theatricalisation of performance” and the “performatisation of theatre”. Happenings, the performances of the New York-based Living Theatre, and Jerzy Grotowski’s “poor theatre” are connected not only by the reduction of theatre to the spectator-actor relationship but also by a focus on real action, transformation, and a departure from the fiction of dramatic action towards “truth” and an interest in the reality of the actor’s body.<sup>7</sup> The emphasis shifts to the action itself rather than the mimetic value of the performance. De Marinis identifies three main characteristics of the “theatricalization of performance”: the prevalence of self-referential presence and materiality over fictional plot and referential meaning, the deconstruction of staging structures, and a focus on the concepts of “event” and “relation”, primarily the corporeality of the actor.

In the field of Polish theatre, one can identify many phenomena within the realm of what Martines refers to as “theatrical performativity”. The most obvious link between the gallery and the theatre stage is the figure of Tadeusz Kantor, who not only directed but also designed set pieces, costumes, decorations, and painted or created installations. He played a significant role in the development of performance art by directing group happenings in urban or gallery spaces in the 1960s, as well as creating productions for the Cricot 2 Theatre, which included many Cracow-based visual artists. His happenings involved numerous young artists who, in subsequent decades, became pioneers of performance art, including Jerzy Beres<sup>8</sup> and Maria Pinińska-Beres.<sup>9</sup>

The closest approach to theatrical performativity was the idea of “poor theatre” by Grotowski, which had already crystallised in his performances and paratheatrical actions of the Laboratory Theatre in the 1960s and was expressed by the director in his book *Towards a Poor Theatre*.<sup>10</sup> It involved rejection of unnecessary elements of the spectacle – set design, props, makeup, music, the division between the audience and the stage – while focusing on the relationship between the spectator and the actor. These experiments led Grotowski to assign a special role to the actor, whom he called a “performer” endowed with exceptional physical and mental abilities developed through ascetic training. The actor was supposed to be a “dancer, priest, and warrior”,<sup>11</sup>

7 Ibidem.

8 J. Beres, “Moje kontakty z Tadeuszem Kantorem i Grupą Krakowską w latach sześćdziesiątych”, in: *Cricot 2, Grupa Krakowska i Galeria Krzysztofory w latach 1960–1970*, ed. J. Chrobak, Cracow, 1991.

9 J. Hanusek, “O pewnych aspektach Panoramicznego Happeningu Morskiego Tadeusza Kantora”, *Estetyka i Krytyka*, 2014, 35, no. 4, pp. 90–105.

10 For the first time published in 1968 by Odin Teatrets Forlag in Denmark, see <https://grotowski.net/encyklopedia/ku-teatrowi-ubogiemu-towards-poor-theatre> [accessed 19 April 2023].

11 J. Grotowski, “Performer”, in: idem, *Teksty z lat 1965–1969*, eds. J. Degler, Z. Osiński, 2nd edition, Wrocław, 1990, p. 214.

and, above all, himself rather than a played character in classical theatre. Additionally, the performative aspect of Grotowski's theatre involved interaction with the audience, involving them in the dramaturgy of the performances. Through the search for transcendence, the presentation resembled a ritual or ceremony. It aimed to initiate spiritual experiences both for the actors and the audience.

Grotowski's ideas did not arise in isolation from the thoughts of contemporary visual artists. When examining the history and map of avant-garde Wrocław, one can notice many common places for theatre and visual arts. One such location was the Club of Artistic Associations in Wrocław. Here, starting from 1966, the Galeria pod Moną Lisą was based, run by the theorist Jerzy Ludwiński; it also housed the rehearsal room of the Laboratory Theatre. As Anna Markowska writes: "the conceptual line of Wrocław's neo-avant-garde represented, among others, by Jerzy Ludwiński, intersected with the performative line represented by Ryszard Cieślak, Grotowski's brilliant actor".<sup>12</sup>

Ludwiński was a frequent visitor to avant-garde theatres in Wrocław, as evidenced by his interview with Marcello Bacciarelli, in which he compared the non-state theatre scene to a network of independent galleries.<sup>13, 14</sup>

Józef Szajna, a theatrical artist, painter, sculptor, set designer, and director, was also the author of an experimental concept called "plastic theatre" in the 1960s and 1970s. He transcended the traditional boundaries of theatre and sought new means of artistic expression. His performances often incorporated elements of artistic installations and environments, utilising space and objects in unconventional ways to create holistic performative situations.<sup>15</sup> On his initiative, the present-day Galeria Studio in Warsaw was established in 1972, which from the very beginning showcased performers such as Marek Konieczny, Krzysztof Zarębski, Stuart Brisley, and Akademia Ruchu.<sup>16</sup>

As a director and playwright, Helmut Kajzar created the *Manifesto of Meta-Daily Theatre*. He believed that the essence of theatre lies at the contact point between actor and audience, which should take the form of minimal mediation.<sup>17</sup>

---

12 A. Markowska, "Klub Związków Twórczych", in: *Dziki pola: historia awangardowego Wrocławia: przewodnik*, ed. D. Monkiewicz, Wrocław, 2016, p. 196.

13 "Wrocławskie centrum sztuki aktualnej. Rozmawiali: Marcell Bacciarelli i Jerzy Ludwiński", *Kierunki*, 12.04.1970, no. 15, p. 3

14 Moreover, Grotowski collaborated with many visual artists, among whom Krzysztof M. Bednarski should be mentioned. See "W mojej bliskości wyczuwałem śmierć, z rzeźbiarzem Krzysztofem M. Bednarskim o jego pracach dla Jerzego Grotowskiego rozmawia Waldemar Baraniewski", *Odra*, 2008, no. 11, pp. 77–81.

15 N. Andrzejewska, "Muzeum Józefa Szajny i synteza sztuk: dokumentacja kontekstu wielomedialnego dzieła sztuki – ochroną jego idei", *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, 2013, no. 8, p. 22.

16 A publication on the complex relationship between visual arts and theatre in Szajna's work was created: L. Dorak-Wojakowska, *Szajna Teatr/Te-art. W poszukiwaniu formuły teatru plastycznego*, Cracow, 2017.

17 Herbut, op. cit., p. 173.

Therefore, he eliminated elements borrowed from other disciplines, such as set design, sound, props, and decorations, which could disrupt communication. He focused primarily on working with the actor's body. The most important aspect was performativity, the act of happening, movement on stage. Similar to Grotowski, he defined the actor as a "man in action". He was interested in ritualism and personal transgression, akin to rites of passage, but presented within the framework of everyday practices. In 1974, he began collaborating with Krzysztof Zarębski, one of the pioneers of performance art at the Labirynt Gallery. They worked together on the play *Rycerz Andrzej* (Knight Andrew) at the Teatr Studio in Warsaw. Zarębski was responsible for "fetishes and artistic actions" that formally went beyond traditionally understood scenography. For Zarębski, the body was a living sculpture. In theatre, he involved actresses in its creation, while in films and performances, he involved women who were close to him,<sup>18</sup> juxtaposing the intimate private sphere with the public one.<sup>19</sup>

The examples cited illustrate that theatre and the emerging performance art shared many common spaces. They were created by artists who mutually inspired each other, viewed each other's works, and met in the realms of independent art. Furthermore, they were closely aligned with the idea of an "expanded", transdisciplinary field of art. Experimental theatres were open to new forms of expression, distinct from traditional interpretations of classics and playwrights' works. The Lublin Theatre Spring is just one example of these numerous interdisciplinary encounters between visual arts and theatre in the 1970s. The above examples demonstrate the process of "theatrical performativity". Below, I shall focus on illustrating how the actions of performers operated within the field of student theatre, which was distinct from mainstream theatre and major experimenters but also open to new, unconventional forms.

## The Lublin Theatre Spring as an example of student culture open to artistic experiments

The Lublin Theatre Spring was a recurring event that took place in Lublin from 1966 to 1974. It operated outside the mainstream of the theatrical world, on its periphery, and was a significant expression of student culture. Its main organiser was Andrzej Rozhin, initiator of the Academic theatre UMCS Gong 2. Most of the performances were shown at Chatka Żaka, a local student cultural centre. As part of the festival, theatres from all over the country were invited to present performances and participate in a competition. Regular participants included Teatr STU, Teatr 38, Teatr Miniatur, Teatr 77, Pleonazmus,

18 Among others Krystyna Jachniewicz, who as an artist and performer presented her works at BWA Lublin in the 1980s.

19 A. Herbut, "Strefa kontaktu", in: *Dzikię pola...*, p. 223.



and ST Gliwice. Alongside the later Young Theatre Confrontations, the Lublin Theatre Spring is one of the two most important theatre festivals in the contemporary history of Lublin. Both focused on alternative and student theatre and aimed to intervene in urban spaces.<sup>20</sup>

In the last two editions of the Lublin Theatre Spring, the award for the best performance was discontinued and the event was renamed the “Workshops of Young Theatre”. The main programme included not only performances but also workshops delivered by the artists themselves, followed by presentations.<sup>21</sup> There were also accompanying events, including exhibitions, lectures, and “artistic actions”, which encompassed experimental activities at the intersection of visual and performative arts, the subject of this article. In parallel with the festival, a brochure called “Teatralia” was published, featuring presentations of theatre groups, reviews, and a calendar of events, often containing witty and ironic comments. In 1973, four such brochures were published and two in 1974. They are an important source of information that captures the intellectual atmosphere of those events.

The authors of the anthology “Scena Lublin” emphasise that the city had a reputation as a centre for avant-garde and student theatre at the turn of the 1980s. The scene of non-institutional theatre, not only student or alternative, was very rich. At that time, several notable groups and venues were active, including Teatr Gong at Chatka Żaka, Grupa Chwilowa, Provisorium, Scena 6, and the Gardzienice Center for Theatrical Practices<sup>22</sup> located near Lublin. The mid-1970s marked the peak for independent theatre in Lublin. In the second half of the 1970s, the wave of “theatre of contestation” began to lose momentum,<sup>23</sup> as can be clearly seen in critical texts related to the festival.

The Lublin Theatre Spring was part of the student theatre movement that had been developing since the 1950s. Its foundation lay in a network of clubs, festivals, publications, and local periodicals. According to Aldona Jawłowska, its manifestations were a conscious attempt to contest not only the social but also the political reality. It allowed the formation of an “alternative worldview” among the theatre-going audience.<sup>24</sup> Sławomir Malaga contextualised student theatre within the events post-1968, the global student countercultural rebellion, while avoiding specifying the local characteristics of these phenomena. He wrote about theatres such as Teatr 77, OTO Kalambur, Akademia Ruchu, Scena Plastyczna KUL, and Teatr Stu.<sup>25</sup> The author saw student theatre as a tool to measure the emotional dynamics and expression of different generations.

---

20 J. Cymerman, “Konfrontacje z miastem. Festiwale teatralne w Lublinie”, in: *Między świętem a przesytem. Festiwale teatralne i ich miejsce we współczesnym życiu kulturalnym Polski*, ed. D. Kosiński, Szczecin 2016, p. 117.

21 T. Nyczek, *Pełnym głosem. Teatr studencki w Polsce*, Cracow 1980, pp. 110–113.

22 J. Cymerman, D. Gac, G. Kondrasiuk, eds., *Scena Lublin*, Lublin, 2017, pp. 85–92.

23 Ibidem.

24 A. Jawłowska, *Więcej niż teatr*, Warsaw, 1988.

25 S. Magala, *Polski teatr studencki jako element kontrkultury*, Warsaw, 1988, p. 35.

The student scene was less constrained by material limitations and more direct than institutional theatre. It could serve as a space for experimentation and expression of progressive content. According to the author, it nurtured the tradition of critical theatre, which is confirmed by the words of Jerzy Stefan Osowski: “The fever of ideology went hand in hand with interference in the existing reality. This theatre was a movement closely linked to an authentic community of spectators, serving as a sensitive barometer [...] student theatre will remain faithful to its critical audience and to itself”.<sup>26</sup>

Konstanty Puzyna wrote about it as “alternative culture”, alternatively referring to this phenomenon as the “new theatre” and, following Grotowski, as “active culture”.<sup>27</sup> However, the issue of political entanglement remains complex, as it existed within the framework of official institutions.<sup>28</sup> Andrzej Rozhin’s statement points to the intricate nature of this phenomenon:

“We had certain limitations; we had to take into account the requirements and demands of our sponsors – mainly the Union of Polish Youth [ZSP] and the Provincial Office [Urząd Wojewódzki]. We needed approval for everything; every performance and idea regarding the organisation of the event had to be approved by the censorship. The festival was, on the one hand, a source of pride for the community and the city, but on the other hand, a constant source of anxiety – what new ideas would these students come up with?”<sup>29</sup>

The statement highlights the tension between state expectations, censorship requirements, and creative freedom, experimentation, or political and artistic rebellion, which lay at the core of such artistic initiatives in the 1970s.

The Lublin Theatre Spring was not the only student event in the 1970s where avant-garde artists and performers showcased their work. Other venues included the Studencki Teatr Satyry Pstrąg in Łódź, Klub Sigma at the University of Warsaw, Klub pod Jaszczurami in Cracow, Galeria Remont at the Riviera Student Club, and Galeria Dziekanka in Warsaw. Student initiatives were attractive to neo-avant-garde artists as they were seen as more open and spontaneous spaces. For the communist authorities, student culture had a non-professional status and was not always taken entirely seriously. It served as a “safety valve” where various tensions, including youthful rebellion, could be discharged.

Furthermore, the student theatre movement, in a formal sense, was open to avant-garde experiments inspired by figures like Grotowski, Kantor, Szajna,

26 J.S. Osowski, “Gombrowicz, ty byku”, *Student*, 1979, 24, p. 10.

27 K. Puzyna, “Jak krety”, in: idem, *Półmrok*, Warsaw, 1982, pp. 142–156.

28 It’s worth noting that the statements and writings about student theatre mentioned above were produced in the 1980s. The assessments of the achievements of student theatre contained in them may have been influenced by an evaluation of their political involvement in the struggle against communist authorities.

29 Quoted after: M. Dejneka, *Lubelska Wiosna Teatralna w Lublinie (próba monografii)*, Zelwerowicz theatre Academy, Warsaw, 2000 [typescript], p. 102, [http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/Content/47984/Studenckie\\_Wiosny\\_Teatralne.pdf](http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/Content/47984/Studenckie_Wiosny_Teatralne.pdf) [accessed 2 May 2022].

and Kajzer, as demonstrated by the program of the recent editions of the Lublin Theatre Spring. Interest in the “theatrical performativity” and its expanded format can be seen in the accompanying texts of the Lublin Theatre Spring. Director Kazimierz Braun, in his article titled “The Viewer – Spectator or Participant”, outlines a new vision of theatre – one devoid of stages, baroque buildings, and focused on the act of gathering and community. In this theatre, the presence of the actor and the viewer is paramount, with the viewer becoming a co-participant in the events. The author also references the practices of the New York-based Living Theatre, which left traditional theatre buildings, emphasising egalitarianism and direct interaction with the live audience. He advocated for “an open structure of the performance and a theatre that defied definitions and rules but was felt with profound realism”.<sup>30</sup>

The opening of student theatre to new, performative forms was not just a matter of declaration; it was also reflected in the performances showcased in the last editions of the festival. Among the highly praised productions in 1973 were “Collage” and “Lectures” by Akademia Ruchu, directed by Wojciech Kruczkowski. The former received the main jury award for being “a mature and technically refined performance”. Akademia Ruchu was established in 1973, initially as a student group affiliated with the Academy of Physical Education in Warsaw. They created actions at the intersection of theatre, visual arts, film, happenings, and performance. “Collage” was their first production, consisting of a dynamic montage of “visual signs” created by actors while constantly moving across the stage, creating a filmic composition. The overall effect was meant to resemble the one-directional movement of a film reel.<sup>31</sup> “Lectures”, referred to as a “Fragment of a Larger Whole” in the brochure, consisted of seemingly abstract rhythmic behaviour of the actors who appeared within circles of light projected successively at various points on the stage. It was accompanied by the playback of the book *Do you Speak English?* from a tape recorder. In juxtaposition with it, the actors’ movements gradually took on meanings as an allusive commentary on individual socio-political entanglements. Both performances received glowing reviews from the critics. Tadeusz Kruczyński concluded his review with the statement: “We have finally met Godot”.<sup>32</sup>

Evidence of the opening up of student theatre and the Lublin Theatre Spring itself to new forms of expression was the invitation extended by Rozhin to visual artists, whose “artistic actions” had little in common with traditional theatrical performances. The texts accompanying the festival attempted to argue for the presence of these new forms and highlighted the transmedial

---

30 Teatralia. 8th Lublin Theatre Spring. Workshop of Young theatre, Lublin 1973, brochure, no page numbering.

31 Description of the performance available: <https://www.akademiaruchu.com/cont/story.htm> [accessed 21 September 2023].

32 T. Kruczyński, *Waiting for Godot*, Teatralia. 8th Lublin Theatre Spring. Workshop of Young Theatre, Lublin 1973, brochure, no page numbering.

nature of the visual actions. In announcing the activities of the visual artists, the editorial committee wrote: “Undoubtedly, anyone who participated in the presentations and visual actions at last year’s ‘Spring’ was struck by the fact that the means that theatre had wielded so far had been taken over for beyond theatrical activities.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, Jan Świdziński, a contextual art theorist, in his article “Okolice sztuki” (The Vicinities of Art), anticipated what was to happen at the student festival, emphasising the artists’ bold move beyond media divisions such as theatre or art, outlining a perspective that today could be called transmedial: “I am interested in the area of the latest art – post-happening and post-avant-garde, a broader field than professional divisions and broader than what we traditionally considered art. [...] This year’s 8th Lublin Theatre Spring, through avoidance, expanded the scope of its activities to include accompanying events, which, at least in part, provoke reflection beyond just theatre.<sup>34</sup>

## The reconstruction of artistic actions and an attempt at classification

Artistic actions were presented during two editions of the Lublin Theatre Spring. From the documents, it appears that in 1973 the festival took place between 30 April and 6 May. It ceased to be a competition of student performances and became a creative meeting under the theme *Workshop of Young Theatre: Goals, Tasks, Means*. The artistic actions did not take place in the standard festival location, which was Chatka Żaka, but in the exhibition salon of the Bureau of Art Exhibitions (“BWA”), a separate venue designated for visual arts presentations. During the first edition in 1973, Zbigniew Warpechowski, the commissioner, invited Włodzimierz Borowski, Jerzy Bereś, Andrzej Brzeziński, Andrzej Dłużniewski, and Giovanni Lucci<sup>35</sup> to create actions and workshops. The presentations were commented on by Jerzy Ludwiński and Jan Świdziński, who were present at the event.

The ninth edition of the Lublin Theatre Spring took place from 15–19 May 1974, with the participation of Ewa Partum, Andrzej Partum, Jerzy Bereś, Lech Dymarski,<sup>36</sup> and theorist Andrzej Kostołowski, who gave a lecture entitled *The Context of the Museum*. The film *Na wylot* directed by Grzegorz Królikiewicz

33 Teatralia. 9th Lublin Theatre Spring. Workshop of Young Theatre, Lublin 1974, brochure, p. 19.

34 Teatralia. 8th Lublin Theatre Spring. Workshop of Young Theatre, Lublin 1973, brochure, no page numbering.

35 Edward Krasieński, an artist associated with the Foksal Gallery, was also invited to the festival but did not appear in Lublin.

36 An artist and politician who later became estranged from the artistic community.

and Krzysztof Zarębski was also shown. The event also involved artists from the Workshop of Film Form, who presumably presented a film. Additionally, during the 9th Lublin Theatre Spring, a workshop was organised by the Poznań-based Grupa Od Nowa,<sup>37</sup> involving Izabela Gustowska, Bogumił Kaczmarek, Wiesław Krzyżaniak, and Wojciech Müller.<sup>38</sup> From archival materials, it can be read that the group proposed a visual arts workshop called *The Theatre Museum*, which thematized the role of visual arts in theatre and performances as a separate, autonomous field not solely subordinate to scenography.

Below, I present the course of events from both editions of the festival that have been reconstructed thanks to documents, materials from brochures, catalogues, and interviews with artists. They can be divided into two categories. The first category comprises actions focusing on the performer's body and their relationship with reality, akin to reflections in the field of body art but more grounded in spiritual and transcendental contemplation. The second category consists of conceptual actions that use the analytical language of conceptual art and engage in critical dialogue with it. It is worth emphasising, however, that unlike "Western" performance art, which is based on bodily aspects, the performer's identity (gender, race, or class), political gestures, and in contrast to superficial interpretations of action art in Eastern Europe as "political performance" or "anti-communist"; the actions of performers in Poland were more rooted in media experiments, formal experimentation, and engagement with traditional visual arts media (such as sculpture or painting) or conceptual thinking.

During the 8th edition of Lublin Theatre Spring Warpechowski performed one of his most iconic actions, *Dialogue with a Fish*. He used a live fish taken out of the water, which he embraced while partially naked and spoke tenderly to. Throughout the action, he became verbally more affectionate. The audience witnessed a cruel spectacle in which a live animal suffocated before their eyes.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, the artist "surrendered" and returned the fish to the water. In the artist's interpretation, the literary and biblical symbolism of the fish was important, as well as its "pure and silent" disposition.<sup>40</sup> The artist asked

---

37 The Poznań group existed from 1970 to 1980 and its name referred to the Od Nowa Gallery, run by Andrzej Matuszewski from 1964 to 1969, which was an important place for the development of happening art in Poland. The artists were later associated with the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Poznań. Unfortunately, it is not known exactly what their activities involved during the Lublin Theatre Spring.

38 Source: leaflet "Grupa Plastyczna Od Nowa Poznań" found in the archives of the NN Theatre, ref. no. oai:biblioteka.teatrnn.pl:46358, <https://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/publication/49338/edition/46358#description> [accessed 10 October 2022].

39 This was not the artist's only action involving animals. He had previously suffocated another fish during an action at Andrzej Partum's Poetry Office, and in the *March* action in 1984, he tied a small bird to his leg.

40 Z. Warpechowski, *Zasobnik: autorski opis trzydziestu lat drogi życia poprzez sztukę performance*, Gdańsk, 1998, p. 28.

what was more important to the audience: the suffering of the animal or the art/performance they were witnessing. He wrote, "I wondered what people considered more important, the suffocating fish or my acting performance".<sup>41</sup> In the context of theatrical considerations, the actions can be seen as a reflection on the tension between the reality and fiction of theatrical performances or actions. The artist did not portray any character but physically inhabited the space of the room, close to the audience. The live fish and the act of suffocation were also real. However, the artist introduced an element of acting, which involved speaking to the animal. Verbally, he tried to placate it, but physically, the fish was dying. This placed the audience in a state of cognitive dissonance. The action itself could also be understood as a critique of theatrical activities based on fiction and plot. The art presented by Warpechowski focused on the "here and now", emphasising embodiment, the reality of physical experience, and a certain transgression associated with the use of a naked body or a live animal.

In the same year, during the festival, Jerzy Bereś performed an action titled *Transfiguration III: Author's Altar*. At the beginning of the performance, the artist arranged a square made of four concrete slabs in the centre of the room, around which the action unfolded, resembling a ritual. The rhythm of the action was marked by successive gestures repeated by the artist. Half-naked, Bereś entered with a belt made of two planks wrapped around his hips. Attached to the planks was a cord, one end of which the artist placed in the centre of one of the slabs. This cord determined the distance he could move away from the centre of the action. One by one, he painted his feet in blue, then green, yellow, and red, using them to trace a circle of colourful imprints on the ground. He alternated between signing pieces of paper and concrete slabs. He placed four pieces of paper on the four slabs. Then, he undressed completely and alternately painted his body with black, elongated lines and chopped a wooden block until only splinters remained. Using the wood and crumpled paper, he formed a bonfire, which he ignited. When the flames had grown into a fire, he left the room.<sup>42</sup>

The action significantly differed from a classical theatrical performance that the audience might have been accustomed to. The artist did not portray a character or a literary scene, but rather existed in the space as a real person. His male nudity caused a stir, as it transgressed the taboo of the prudish culture of the People's Republic of Poland. The concerns about nudity and its appropriateness are reflected in Warpechowski's statement: "These were emotional moments for me because when I picked up Bereś in Lublin, he already warned me as he got off the train, 'Listen, I'll be undressing'. I, as the one

41 Description of the work from the collection of the Museum of Art in Łódź, <https://zapy.msl.org.pl/arts/view/5357> [accessed 10 October 2022].

42 A. Węcka, ed., *Zwidy, wyrocznie, ohtarze, wyzwania*, exhibition catalogue, Poznań, 1995, pp. 103–104.

responsible for him, felt that I had to make sure there was no scandal because our comrades would have exploited it right away.<sup>43</sup>

Furthermore, the artist ignited a real fire in the gallery space, further surpassing the conventions typically associated with theatrical performances.

In the following year, Bereś performed an action titled *A Toast to Spring* with the musical group Osjan, which included Jacek Ostaszewski, Marek Jackowski, and Tomasz Hołuj. The band regularly performed at Piwnica pod Baranami and was associated with Cracow's progressive jazz and improvisational music scene. In the artist's archive, a score was found labelled "Transfiguracja – Bereś+Ossjan" for an action at the Galeria Współczesna in Warsaw in 1973. It can be suspected that the action in Lublin ran a similar course. The score for the action was unusual because it was detailed,<sup>44</sup> which may indicate that it served the group to keep track of the action's progress or served the director of Galeria Współczesna, Janusz Bogucki, to submit the action for censorship approval.

If we were to assume that the artist, along with the Osjan group, repeated the action in Lublin as they did in Warsaw, it might have looked as follows. As in other manifestations from the early 1970s belonging to the *Transfiguration* series, the artist invited the audience to join a quasi-ritual in which he outlined the sacred space, a circle marked by footprints in green paint around a slice of tree trunk. Kneeling next to the tree trunk, he alternately painted white divisions on his body from the waist up and cut a cheese into pieces. Then, he alternately painted red divisions from the waist down and poured wine into glasses. Next, he painted a vertical blue line on his torso and sliced a pear. Finally, he invited the audience to participate in the action by partaking of the refreshments, as indicated by the notation in the score, "Please eat and drink". During these moments, there was usually a relaxation of tension, and Bereś tried to establish contact with the audience. The props he used were simple and raw, with metaphors reminiscent of Christian liturgical symbolism.

The artist commented on the action as follows: "It wasn't a full-fledged manifestation. Firstly, it was repeated. Secondly, it had a decorative character. Thirdly, it wasn't fully authorised because it was performed during a concert by Osjan."<sup>45</sup>

Bereś did not consider it his typical performance, or in his terminology, a "manifestation". The structure of the action was repeatable and structured with a clear beginning and end, and it was a collective work, which could fit into theatrical presentations. There are no notes on the reception by the audience regarding this performance. The musical performance and how it may

---

43 The conversation between Aniela Mroczek and Zbigniew Warpechowski took place on 11 June 2010, in Sandomierz [manuscript].

44 The uniqueness of this score was confirmed by Oskar Hanusek, who is responsible for the artist's archive.

45 Węcka, op. cit., pp. 103–104.

have influenced the dramaturgy of the action were also puzzling. However, this collaboration is significant in the context of transmedial considerations about the origins of performance art and is another example of various artistic collaborations between performance art, theatre, and music.

Another category of visual actions that can be distinguished during the Lublin Theatre Spring are “conceptual actions”, referring to considerations from the field of conceptual art, language, or structuralist philosophy. In 1974, Warpechowski invited Ewa Partum to participate in the festival. Partum, an artist who ran the conceptual Gallery Adres in Łódź from 1972 to 1977, focused on mail art, performative actions, and art documentation. Partum performed an action in Lublin titled *If you Want to say Something, Speak the Language of Language*. In an interview, she mentioned that she had attempted to perform the same action earlier at the *5th Biennial of Industrial Forms in Elbląg in 1973 – Kino Laboratorium*.<sup>46</sup> In Lublin, several individuals present in the room were invited to participate, which involved simultaneously uttering the titular sentence in multiple languages. Partum was clearly inspired by Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement, “The medium is the message”. She wanted her art not to be subject to interpretation but to be what it is – pure language. The form of art was intended to be its message. Partum was primarily interested in semantics and created tautological, conceptual, and “linguistic” works in the spirit of actual poetry. The presentations of “visual actions” were just a pretext to showcase her work, which also functioned in other media. The titular sentence appeared in *Book by Ewa*, the first grassroots-published book about the artist containing her conceptual poems.<sup>47</sup> It was also sent and presented as paper mail art at various exhibitions, including the anti-Documenta in Kassel in 1977.<sup>48</sup>

A workshop with a similar topic was conducted by Włodzimierz Borowski, a precursor of the neo-avant-garde art in post-war Lublin and co-creator of the Zamek Group. He was invited to lead one of the workshops at Chatka Żaka. It was titled *Perception of Perception*, and its announcement in the accompanying brochure of LTW’73 directed attention to topics related to conceptual and perceptual art:

“WORKSHOP IV led by: Włodzimierz Borowski  
 PERCEPTION OF PERCEPTION  
 1. ACTION REACTION  
 2. ACTION ACTION

46 In Elbląg, she was said to have been silenced by male artists, primarily Józef Robakowski. Ewa Partum gave me a phone interview about the Lublin Theatre Spring in May 2022. She mentioned, among other things, how difficult it was for a woman to perform in an environment dominated by male performers and artists.

47 E. Partum, *book by ewa: jeżeli chcesz coś powiedzieć mów językiem języka*, published in collaboration with Klaus Groh’s International Artist Cooperation, Oldenburg, 1974.

48 D. Monkiewicz, U. Król, eds., *Ewa Partum 1965–2001*, Warsaw, 2006, p. 11.



3. REACTION ACTION

4. REACTION REACTION

Does a deciphered sign become a new sign, and if so, can this sign 'NEW SIGN' cause another one or restore its former value?

SIGN RECEPTION SIGN

SIGN RECEPTION SIGN

STAGE AUDIENCE

STAGE = AUDIENCE

LACK OF SIGN = SIGN

SIGN O

Workshop IV, titled 'Perception of Perception,' will be conducted by visual artist Włodzimierz Borowski. The author invites participants of the Young Theatre Workshop to take part. The production group should consist of sensitive participants with imagination and acting skills".<sup>49</sup>

Unfortunately, apart from an enigmatic note, no information regarding the progress of the workshops or the final presentation has been preserved.<sup>50</sup> The quoted text includes wordplay with the words "action" and "reaction", as well as references to signs. There is also an equation that juxtaposes the audience and the theatrical stage, which may relate to the contemporary reflections that aimed to break down the clear divisions of classical theatre performances. Borowski, known for his trickster-like happenings in the spirit of Dada and art filled with ready-made elements, turned towards conceptual art in the early 1970s. Ludwiński wrote that during those years, the artist was mainly engaged in writing texts, giving lectures, and having conversations. "Concepts became art, and what used to be art before was reduced to the status of an addition to concepts".<sup>51</sup> Right after these events, from 1974 to 1976, Borowski suspended his artistic activities due to criticism of what was happening in contemporary art.

In 1973, Warpechowski performed an action titled *Nic+Nic+Nic+Nic* (Nothing+Nothing+Nothing+Nothing), which, according to the artist's interpretation included in the catalogue, was meant to relate to the category of *Noumenon*, to "things in themselves", a concept introduced by Immanuel Kant.<sup>52</sup> The action consisted of four parts that played with the titular concept. In the first "Nic" (Nothing), Małgorzata Dłużniewska, cut Warpechowski's hair into the shape of the word "Nic" (Nothing) using scissors. Then the artist stated that the cut locks of hair corresponded to the letters "N", "I", "C". Next,

---

49 Biuletyn 8. Studenckiej Wiosny Teatralnej, Lublin, 1973, p. 11.

50 The performance at Lublin Theatre Spring is not mentioned in the artist's catalogue published on the occasion of his retrospective at Ujazdowski Castle Center for Contemporary Art in Warsaw, J. Kozłowski, K. Barszowska, eds., *Ślady, 1956–1995. Włodzimierz Borowski*, Warsaw, 1996, or in the catalogue J. Kozłowski, C. Pieczyński, eds., *Włodzimierz Borowski: no to co? Nic: no właśnie*, Warsaw, 2018.

51 J. Ludwiński, "Włodzimierz Borowski – a journey to the world of infinite smallness", in: *Ślady...*, p. 21.

52 Warpechowski, *Zasobnik...*, pp. 27–28.

Warpechowski arranged the hair on a board to form the word “NIC” (NOTHING). In the final scene, the artist set fire to the hair, causing its dematerialisation. Analysing this action through semiotic theory, one could say that the signifier became the signified. The meaningful word “nothing” became “nothingness”. In the book *Zasobnik*, it can be read that the artist’s intention was to “realise” and “qualify” the concept of “Nothing”.<sup>53</sup> Warpechowski devoted many of his performances to this subject, starting from the Edinburgh festival to the iconic film rendition of *Prayer for Nothing* from 1974. Warpechowski engaged in a dialogue with conceptual art, which experienced its heyday in the early 1970s. However, Warpechowski added an emotional, philosophical, and existential element to the dry, dictionary-like, and mathematical concepts, which can be seen in the artist’s subsequent actions described below.

During the Lublin Theatre Spring, there were also works that engaged in a more explicit critical dialogue with the tradition of conceptualism. In 1974, during the last edition of the Spring, Warpechowski performed two actions: *Attempt to Represent the Colour of Reality – Nothing* and *Reading a Treatise on the Collection of Axioms for a Treatise on Art*. Warpechowski described the first one years later as follows: “It was such a conceptual action. I also had several boxes with holes constructed (...). At that time, I was dealing with the problem of ‘nothing.’ Is ‘nothing’ black, colourless, or not visible at all, and so a set of these objects was created”.<sup>54</sup>

Sketches of the objects were included in the “Teatralia”. There were three boxes in total, with the first one being white and unlit inside, the second one black and illuminated, and the last one transparent with the inscription “lack of light”. Alongside stood a mirror with the word “black” written on it, and next to that was a plaque that said “nothing is the colour black”.<sup>55</sup> The drawing was accompanied by a quote from Lao Tse, a semi-legendary Taoist philosopher.

On the other hand, Warpechowski wrote the *Treatise* under the influence of his interest in semiotic and structuralist thought. However, the artist approached these tendencies with distance and humour. Among the axioms, there were playful and ironic fragments, such as “The artist’s action is conditioned by the field of play; it can dominate it, and in the event of the fact of art’s existence, it should destroy it”, or “Irritation with something that nests around art is a possibility of its condition”.<sup>56</sup> The language of these absurd statements resembled the language of structuralists who attempted to describe all cultural phenomena using equations, principles, and dependencies. The artist was particularly inspired by the texts of analytical philosopher

53 Ibidem.

54 The conversation between Aniel Mroczek and Zbigniew Warpechowski took place on 11 June 2010, in Sandomierz [manuscript].

55 Teatralia. 8th Lublin Theatre Spring. Workshop of Young theatre, Lublin 1973, brochure, no page numbering.

56 Warpechowski, *Podręcznik Bis...*, p. 403.

Bertrand Russell. Warpechowski's axioms were repeatedly publicly interpreted, and each time they underwent changes together.

In Lublin, the artist asked a dancer from Teatr Gong 2 to perform an improvised dance live during the reading. "She performed a series of movements, gestures, and exclamations that were an unselfish reaction defining the meanings or indefiniteness of art."<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately, there is no more detailed description of this event, and her name was not mentioned by the artist. However, this serves as another vivid example of the transmedial experiments of the early performers.

Warpechowski also invited Andrzej Partum to participate in Lublin Theatre Spring, a conceptual artist and creator of the Poetry Bureau independent gallery in Warsaw. As part of his performance, Partum presented a provocative action titled *You Are an Ignorant of Culture and Art*. It involved sending a letter with this title to representatives of institutions, authorities, critics, and journalists. The Biuro Poezji action was presented to a wider audience at the festival through distributed leaflets. Łukasz Ronduda wrote that "the purpose of the action was to indicate that the most valuable, living art is always outside the discourse, beyond the competence and knowledge of the institutional art world, and that true art always defies institutional requirements, and in reality, we know nothing about it".<sup>58</sup> Partum's activities differed from the conceptual artists focused on concepts, definitions, and language. The artist mocked it, playing with its conventions and strategies. He caricatured conceptual actions as well as the institutions themselves by using their language and tools such as telegrams, letters, leaflets, or applications. Partum's actions had a dadaist and performative character. He was a trickster, unwilling to conform to the realities of the institutional world of art, literature, and theatre, as demonstrated by the distribution of ironic leaflets to the audience of Lublin Theatre Spring.

Andrzej Bereziański, an artist from Poznań working in the spirit of abstract painting, conceptual art, and performance, who exhibited works in many conceptual galleries in the 1970s, executed an action in 1973 titled *Imagining Pure Necessity*. The course of the action remains unknown, but in the brochure, it can be read that it was an "example of the recently fashionable concept of creating without a work"<sup>59</sup> and part of the paravisual trend in conceptual art. The brochure also contains the artist's manifesto entitled "There Exist Objects", which dealt with phenomenology and the perception of time and object perception.

---

57 Teatralia. 9th Lublin Theatre Spring. Workshop of Young theatre, Lublin 1974, brochure, p. 20.

58 Ł. Ronduda, "Lęk przed wpływem. Rzecz o sztuce Andrzeja Partuma w dekadzie lat 70", *Obieg*, 18 December 2007, <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/teksty/2093> [accessed 3 September 2022].

59 Teatralia. 8th Lublin Theatre Spring. Workshop of Young theatre, Lublin 1973, brochure, no page numbering.

Andrzej Dłużniewski, a painter, performer, and conceptual artist, carried out an action during which he gave participants commands such as “Stand back-to-back” or “From now on, you will be surrounding”, suggesting that the human mind can shape the surrounding reality. This action reversed the assumptions of “environmental” art, in which the artist invited people to a space he created. In his action, everyone had to create it themselves. The brochure stated that “both actions by Dłużniewski and Bereziański were activities involving the manipulation of the viewer’s consciousness”.<sup>60</sup> They encouraged participants to use their imagination.

## Reception of “artistic actions” on the theatrical stage

“There is no doubt that the artistic actions were the biggest event in the city of Lublin” – wrote one of the editors in “Teatralia”,<sup>61</sup> appreciating the importance of the participation of visual artists in the event. Important sources regarding the atmosphere of the Lublin Theatre Spring and the reception of artistic actions are mentioned in the official press and texts from “Teatralia”.

From press reviews, it can be inferred that the artists’ actions were considered original, elicited emotions among the audience, and sometimes even proved controversial or provocative. Barbara Osterloff, the editor of the monthly magazine “Teatr”,<sup>62</sup> wrote that the artistic actions were more interesting than the student performances presented at the festival.<sup>63</sup> However, this opinion was isolated because most of the reviews were negative. This may have been due to the fact that official media and critics were not favourable towards artistic experiments. The actions by Bereś and Warpechowski caused the most controversy. Janusz Płoński’s outraged piece in *itd* reads as follow:<sup>64</sup>

“The presenter (or performer?) spoke tender words to a fish lying on the floor. The artist lay beside it, and the fish was alive, just taken out of a jar. The action was abruptly interrupted by one of the ladies present, who angrily crushed the fish, preventing the artistic endeavour from reaching its conclusion. This was not the only tragedy that occurred during the 8th Lublin Theatre Spring. (...) Perhaps my opinion will not be

60 Ibidem.

61 Ibidem.

62 The oldest magazine dedicated to theatrical topics in Poland. It has been published (with a break during the martial law period) since 1945.

63 B. Osterloff, “Wiosna czy jesień w Lublinie?”, *Teatr*, 16–30 May 1973, 12, pp. 8–9.

64 *itd* is a student magazine published by the Association of Polish Students between 1961 and 1990, and later re-established in 2005. Its history can be traced back to the magazine *Po prostu*, which ceased publication in 1957 and was transformed into the periodical *Odnova*. In 1960, *Odnova* changed its title to *itd*, which stands for “i tak dalej” (and so on).

very popular within the 'circle', but I believe that the audacity of some artists exceeds the boldest boundaries. They have led to a paradoxical situation in which the viewer or participant of their 'actions' is faced with an imperative to accept everything as a work of art. Because that is the will of the artist."<sup>65</sup>

Wiera Korneluk, a long-time reviewer of theatrical events in Lublin, wrote mockingly about Beres' action: "The artist delivered his credo while another artist, completely naked except for a pimple on his buttock, wandered around the room with a tulip in his hand, not covering his somewhat battered genitalia. One outraged lady, while leaving the room, exclaimed on the stairs, 'We need to restore order here!'"<sup>66</sup>

The reviewers and a portion of the gathered audience had doubts about the artistic status of the performers' acts. Their actions exceeded the boundaries of what was permissible, employing means such as nudity or the use of live animals. Through their form, they also transcended the understanding of theatrical performance and did not fit into the common understanding of the term "plastic art". Partum's actions from the field of conceptual art also encountered some misunderstanding. Maciej Parowski wrote:

"I have two small cards in my hand: 'If you want to say something, speak the language of language' was written on one, and 'I am ignorant in the field of art' on the other. The same is written underneath in French, German, English, and Hungarian. At the bottom, the signature – Ewa Partum (the whole thing was actually led by Andrzej Partum<sup>67</sup>). Does collective chanting of such revelations truly open a person up to new matters, experiences, or bring them closer to anything? Let's just leave it at this kind of question".<sup>68</sup>

The critic may have distorted the content of Andrzej Partum's work. They also did not find Ewa Partum's tautological reflections on the nature of language interesting or compelling. Perhaps they saw them as pure provocation without any meaningful content.

Bereś was also aware that the actions presented by him and other visual artists were met with incredulity from the audience. In a catalogue collecting descriptions and memories of the artist, he wrote about an action during the theatre Spring: "My manifestation had a strong impact because it was a time when the wave of happenings had long passed, and the term 'performance art' was not yet in use. (...) It was a time of conceptual and media ideas. Students called what was happening in BWA 'art without muse'".<sup>69</sup>

The artist was aware that his artistic proposition defied categorisation, "had no muse of its own", was not yet named, and remained in the grey area

---

65 J. Płoński, "Wiosna ukrzyżowana", *itd*, 10.06.1973, 23, p. 7.

66 W. Korneluk, "Wiosna-Wiosna", *Sztandar Ludu*, 19–20.05.1973, 118, p. 6.

67 It is puzzling how Ewa Partum's action proceeded, since according to the critic it was led by her husband, and according to the author – by herself.

68 M. Parowski, "Posucha w Lublinie", *Politechnik*, 09.06.1974, 23, p. 18.

69 Węcka, *op. cit.*, p. 104

“in between”. The statement also suggests that some of the audience were aware that they were encountering a new form of artistic expression.

The positive reception is evidenced by a statement from Janusz Bałdyga, a later member of the Akademia Ruchu and a performer:

“It was something so incredible in Bereś’ performance, in such concentration, that it made a gigantic impression on us. And actually – we were in the third or fourth grade at that time, I say ‘we’ in the plural because Onuch and I always went to various things together – Bereś started to be like a point of reference there. There was a conversation, and it was the first time we encountered such a strong emphasis on the ethical aspect. Someone told us that for the first time.”<sup>70</sup>

The reception of Bereś’ action is also reflected in a comment in the brochure “Teatralia”:

“What we saw at BWA can formally be called an act of self-creation. A happening. The motif of the ritual is linked here with everything that constitutes the starting point of every creativity. An act of marking, an expression of human connections with what surrounds him, the transformation (transfiguration) of what he found into a new dimension, became present in Bereś’ action just as the traces of the ritual are present in the paintings of the Lascaux cave. We encountered something in the face of which words become rigid, and discussion falls silent. Kindling a fire, leaving a trace behind, chopping wood... The only thing that can be done now is the exhumation of human nature, of what lies dormant in all of us, penetrating without reference to time, space, race, cutting off at once from all possible classifications, typologies, distinctions, etc., in which man-cocoon is entangled.”<sup>71</sup>

The comment suggests that Bereś’ action made a significant impression on the audience. The physical presence of the performer, the genuine act of chopping wood and lighting a fire, evoked numerous associations with ritual, ceremony, and spirituality. Nudity did not provoke mockery, as seen with official theatre critics. Another humorous verse in a different issue of “Teatralia” entitled “Na konceptualistę” (To a Conceptualist) goes, “Even if you hang yourself / you won’t be Bereś”. This could be understood as criticism or satire of conceptual artists whose performances lacked the spiritual and ritualistic power found in Bereś’ actions.

In summary, when reading reviews from the official press, one might conclude that the visual actions were not favourably received by the student audience. Their form – conciseness, metaphorical nature, use of nudity, lack of plot, or linearity – remained incomprehensible to the viewers. Similarly, actions using the language of conceptual art were unclear and were interpreted as intellectual provocation. However, the texts from “Teatralia” specialists and

70 The interview conducted with Janusz Bałdyga by Jerzy Hanuszek on 5 July 2016, shared with the author by Jerzy Hanuszek.

71 Teatralia. 8th Lublin Theatre Spring. Workshop of Young theatre, Lublin 1973, brochure, no page numbering.

the statements of other artists suggest that some of the audience appreciated and understood the complex meanings of “artistic actions”, praising Beres’ manifestations particularly highly. The audience was well-versed in contemporary art, familiar with the form of happenings, and aware of conceptual theories. They attentively observed the emergence of a new artistic form at the intersection of theatre and visual arts.

## The new program of the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin

During the last edition of Lublin Theatre Spring, another action organised by artists took place at Galeria Labirynt, located at Rynek 8 in Lublin functioning under the Municipal House of Culture. It was described in the festival brochure as follows: “This year’s artistic activities began at Galeria Labirynt with a total manifestation of this direction in art, which could be called ‘Impossible Art.’ On the 15th of the previous month at 5 pm., as planned, a group of people gathered in the gallery and, after a long wait, declared the absolute absence of artists and art”.<sup>72</sup>

The title of the action may have referred to Jerzy Ludwiński’s theory from a text *Art in the Post-Artistic Era* from 1970.<sup>73</sup> In his theoretical text, Ludwiński outlined the main stages of development in contemporary art. One of these stages was “impossible art”, which Ludwiński positioned on charts alongside “conceptual art”. These charts described artistic projects that were impossible to complete, unable to exist in material reality, but were presented through documented concepts.

The action in Lublin also resembled Yves Klein’s happening, which took place in 1958. Klein invited guests to the empty Iris Clert Gallery in Paris for an exhibition titled *The Void*. The exhibition was inaugurated with honours, and many guests attended the vernissage. However, when they entered the gallery, they found emptiness and freshly painted white walls.<sup>74</sup> The action at Galeria Labirynt also aligned with the tradition of Włodzimierz Borowski’s “shows” in which he always sought to surprise his audience with his exhibitions. In this context, it is worth mentioning *Fubka Tarb*, the “anti-happening” by the artist at Galeria Pod Moną Lisą in Wrocław in 1969, where the artist

---

72 Teatralia. 9th Lublin Theatre Spring. Workshop of Young theatre, Lublin 1974, brochure, p. 20.

73 Its principles were first presented in the summer of 1970 during the 8th Meeting of Artists and Art Theorists in Osieki. P. Lisowski, “Archiwum Jerzego Ludwińskiego”, *Jednodniówka Muzeum Współczesnego Wrocław*, 26 July 2013, <https://muzeumwspolczesny.pl/mwww/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/jednodniowkaLudwinski-1.pdf> [accessed 5.06.2023].

74 Vide F. Lucarelli, “Two Exhibitions at Iris Clert Gallery, Paris: Yves Klein’s *Le Vide* (The Void, 1958) and Arman’s *Le Plein* (The Full-Up, 1960)”, *Socks*, 23 November 2019, 23, <https://socks-studio.com/2019/11/23/iris-clert-yves-klein-the-void-arman-the-full-up/> [accessed 24 October 2022].

did not appear at the vernissage. He treated the audience as the material of his art and presented them with photographs of themselves.

In “Teatralia”, there is a text by Jan Hamilton that recalls this action: “Disheartened by the absence of a strong figure from the world of happenings, Zbigniew Warpechowski, in the ‘Labyrinth,’ we settle into the chairs (...)”<sup>75</sup> and he goes on to describe the impressions of another performance”. No other materials from the action have survived, and it is not known who conceived it. It can only be speculated that it was meant to be a form of conceptual interaction with the audience and provocation. Leaving the empty gallery without artists and artworks at the Galeria Labirynt was a gesture that indicated the conceptual and performative interests of the artists.

Interestingly, this action was also likely the first “exhibition” in that gallery under the direction of Andrzej Mroczek, who became its director exactly halfway through 1974. Therefore, this action can be interpreted as foundational for the gallery and as a manifesto defining the curatorial interests and tendencies that the gallery’s program would be devoted to from that moment on. After Mroczek took over the management, the gallery focused on presenting the latest artistic tendencies such as conceptual art, performance art, video art, and feminist art. From the very beginning, performance art played a significant role in Galeria Labirynt, presented during spontaneous one-day artistic actions as part of exhibition openings and later during dedicated meetings or festivals.

The article has successfully reconstructed most of the artistic actions presented to the Lublin audience in 1973 and 1974. It sheds light on the strategies employed by pioneers of performance art as they sought their place between the theatrical stage and the gallery. It highlights numerous intersections between the theory and practice of experimental theatre, searching for new forms within student theatre and performance art. The Lublin Theatre Spring is a clear example that supports the idea of the transmedial origins of performance art in Poland. The artistic actions presented at the festival not only included live music, dance, strategies from the field of “active poetry”, but also engaged in a dialogue with classical theatre by focusing on the performer’s reality and physicality.

Despite many shared thoughts between performers and experimental theatre in the 1970s, performance art at the Lublin Student Theatre Festival stirred controversy and sparked discussions, as evidenced by the quoted reviews. The Lublin Theatre Spring served as a platform for performance art to confront a new audience, marking a new direction in Lublin’s art scene. This direction was continued by the Galeria Labirynt, which became one of the most important venues in Poland for presenting performance art, hosting numerous performance art festivals.

---

75 Teatralia. 9th Lublin Theatre Spring. Workshop of Young theatre, Lublin 1974, brochure, p. 24.



The experiences of performers within the theatre and festival context may have influenced the need to establish an autonomous festival dedicated to performance art, which would emerge a few years later as the International Meetings of Artists "Performance and Body". This article does not exhaust the topic of transmedial encounters between theatre and performance art in the 1970s. It is hoped that it will serve as a starting point for further interdisciplinary research into the connections between artistic avant-garde and new theatre in Poland.

## References

- Andrzejewska, N., "Muzeum Józefa Szajny i synteza sztuk: dokumentacja kontekstu wielomedialnego dzieła sztuki – ochroną jego idei", *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, 2013, 8, pp. 21–26.
- Bereś, J., "Moje kontakty z Tadeuszem Kantorem i Grupą Krakowską w latach sześćdziesiątych", in: *Cricot 2, Grupa Krakowska i Galeria Krzysztofory w latach 1960–1970*, ed. J. Chrobak, Cracow, 1991.
- Biuletyn 8. Studenckiej Wiosny Teatralnej, Lublin 1973.
- Biuletyn 9. Studenckiej Wiosny Teatralnej, Lublin 1974, <https://docplayer.pl/38760679-9-lubelska-wiosna-teatralna-lublin.html>.
- Cymerman, J., "Konfrontacje z miastem. Festiwale teatralne w Lublinie", in: *Między świętem a przesytem. Festiwale teatralne i ich miejsce we współczesnym życiu kulturalnym Polski*, ed. D. Kosiński, Szczecin, 2016.
- Cymerman, J., Gac, D., Kondrasiuk, G., eds., *Scena Lublin*, Lublin, 2017.
- De Marinis, M., "Performans i teatr. Od aktora do performerera i z powrotem?", *The Grotowski Institute*, 15.11.2012, <https://grotowski.net/performer/performer-5/performans-i-teatr-od-aktora-do-performerera-i-z-powrotem>.
- Dejneka, M., *Lubelska Wiosna Teatralna w Lublinie (próba monografii)*, Akademia Teatralna im. Zelwerowicza, Warsaw, 2000, [http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/Content/47984/Studenckie\\_Wiosny\\_Teatralne.pdf](http://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/Content/47984/Studenckie_Wiosny_Teatralne.pdf).
- Dorak–Wojakowska, L., *Szajna Teatr/Tę-art. W poszukiwaniu formuły teatru plastycznego*, Cracow, 2017.
- Dziamski, G., *Performance*, Warsaw, 1984.
- Grotowski, J., "Performer", in: J. Grotowski, *Teksty z lat 1965–1969*, eds. J. Degler, Z. Osiński, Wrocław, 1990.
- Grupa Plastyczna Od Nowa Poznań, leaflet from the archives of NN Theater ref. no.: oai:biblioteka.teatrnn.pl:46358. <https://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra/publication/49338/edition/46358#description>.
- Guzek, Ł., *Rekonstrukcja sztuki akcji w Polsce*, Warszawa–Toruń, 2018.
- Hanusek, J., "O pewnych aspektach Panoramicznego Happeningu Morskiego Tadeusza Kantora", *Estetyka i Krytyka*, 2014, 35, no. 4, pp. 90–105.
- Jawłowska, A., *Więcej niż teatr*, Warsaw, 1988.
- Korneluk, W., "Wiosna-Wiosna", *Sztandar Ludu*, 19–20 May 1973, 118.

- Kozłowski, J., Barszowska, K., *Ślady, 1956–1995. Włodzimierz Borowski*, Warsaw, 1996.
- Lisowski, P., “Archiwum Jerzego Ludwińskiego”, *Jednodniówka Muzeum Współczesnego Wrocław*, 26 July 2013, <https://muzeumwspolczesne.pl/mww/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/jednodniowkaLudwinski-1.pdf>.
- Lucarelli, F., “Two Exhibitions at Iris Clert Gallery, Paris: Yves Klein’s Le Vide (The Void, 1958) and Arman’s Le Plein (The Full-Up, 1960)”, *Socks*, 23 November 2019, 23, <https://socks-studio.com/2019/11/23/iris-clert-yves-klein-the-void-arman-the-full-up/>.
- Magala, S., *Polski teatr studencki jako element kontrkultury*, Warsaw, 1988.
- Monkiewicz, D., *Dziki pola: historia awangardowego Wrocławia*, Wrocław, 2016.
- Nyczek, T., *Pełnym głosem. Teatr studencki w Polsce*, Cracow, 1980.
- Osowski, J.S., “Gombrowicz, ty byku”, *Student*, 1979, 24, pp. 10–11.
- Osterloff, B., “Wiosna czy jesień w Lublinie?”, *Teatr*, 16–30 May 1973, 12, pp. 8–9.
- Parowski, M., “Posucha w Lublinie”, *Politechnik*, 9 June 1974, no. 23.
- Partum, E., *Book by Ewa: jeżeli chcesz coś powiedzieć mów językiem języka*, Oldenburg, 1974.
- Pawłowski, T., *Wartości estetyczne*, Warsaw 1987.
- Płoński, J., “Wiosna ukrzyżowana”, *itd*, 10 June 1973, 23.
- Puzyna, K., “Jak krety”, in: K. Puzyna, *Półmrok. Felietony teatralne i szkice*, Warsaw, 1982, pp. 142–156.
- Ronduda, Ł., “Lęk przed wpływem. Rzecz o sztuce Andrzeja Partuma w dekadzie lat 70”, *Obieg*, 18 December 2007, <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/teksty/2093>.
- Warpechowski, Z., *Podręcznik Bis*, Cracow, 2006.
- Warpechowski, Z., *Zasobnik: autorski opis trzydziestu lat drogi życia poprzez sztukę performance*, Gdańsk, 1998.

