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## 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”, *Artl@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

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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>

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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.