

**FEMINIST  
PERSPECTIVES  
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS  
AND THEORIES OF ART**

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**SEXING-UP EASTERN EUROPE: GENDER  
CHECK**



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ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO**

When Xabier Arakistain and Lourdes Méndez invited me to take part in their course “Feminist Perspectives on Artistic Productions and Art Theories” of 2013 I felt indeed honored. In their previous courses they gathered a number of great feminist art historians and curators whose practices were and still are crucial for my understanding of feminism. When I asked Arakis what he wanted me to present in Bilbao, he said that I should talk about the project and exhibition *Gender Check*, because “we here don’t know anything about Eastern Europe.” The Basque country is certainly not the only place in the world lacking (feminist) knowledge about Eastern European art and theory.<sup>1</sup> Hence, in order to address an audience of “absolute beginners,” my task in Bilbao was basically to provide a “sexing-up” of Eastern Europe. My first stay among the Basques was initially based on fear and hope: I felt that I was landing to an alien planet all the way hoping that the natives — “the beginners” - are friendly. And they *were* friendly indeed. *Gracias!*

The project *Gender Check — Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* started in Summer 2007 and it was initiated and funded by ERSTE Foundation based in Vienna.<sup>2</sup> The year of 2007 will be remembered as a “feminaissance (Viv Groskop). Around that date many smaller feminist shows were held in Europe and the USA. Among them three large scale exhibitions involving feminism also took place: *WACK! Art and The Feminist Revolution* in Los Angeles, *Global Feminisms* in New York and *Gender Battle/A Batalla dos xéneros* in Santiago de Compostela in Spain. The first included four women artists born or based in Eastern Europe, the second seven and the last one three. Unable to see the shows, I focused on their catalogues in order to understand, firstly, how a younger generation of historians and curators remake feminist art, and secondly to find out whether these shows offered any insights into the spatialization of feminist strategies beyond the West.<sup>3</sup> The American shows did open to the Third World (represented primarily by artists who live in the First), but as usual, “our” Second World was bypassed. Moreover, there was a lack of information about “us” (Eastern Europeans) among “us.” Western and Eastern European feminist sociologists had dealt with gender issues in state socialism but not touched upon visual culture. Conversely, since the mid-1990s many publications have appeared about Eastern European art during the Cold War or later but *exclude* feminist readings. Moreover, some publications on Eastern European art completely disregard the practices of women. And finally, many volumes discussing the post-communist condition belong to Russian Studies rather than to Eastern European studies; they tend to privilege Russian (women) artists and obliterate other parts of formerly “red” Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Feminist artists, curators and scholars became visible in the early 1990s during the years of political, economical as well as cultural “transition.” This comes as no surprise because, as a Swedish art historian put it, “feminisms are about democracy.”<sup>5</sup> In proposing the *Gender Check* project, my wish was to somehow bring together feminist art historians and curators of a younger generation, one scattered across Eastern European geographies, who write excellent texts and curate important exhibitions in their own countries but who had never worked together or even met.

Since 2007 up to 2010 the project went through several stages: the first was research performed in 2008 by women and three male art historians, curators and artists living in 23 Eastern European countries, who were invited to select art works and textual material from their national art histories; they were to look at art and excavate articles that had been produced from the 1960s till 2008. The only exception was GDR, which was researched till 1990, the year of German reunification. Certainly, as the leader of the project, I did not intend nor need to instruct any of my (mainly) younger colleagues about the meaning of the term “gender.” Surprisingly, it appeared that

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<sup>1</sup> See Martina Pachmanová, “In? Out? In Between? Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory”, in Bojana Pejić (ed.), *Gender Check - Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, exhibition catalogue (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig and Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2009), pp. 241-248. Reprinted in Bojana Pejić (ed.), *Gender Check: A Reader - Art and Theory in Eastern Europe* (Vienna: Erste Foundation, Museum Moderne Kunst Ludwig/MUMOK, and Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2010), pp.37-49.

<sup>2</sup> In 2007, ERSTE Foundation invited seven curators based in Western and Eastern Europe to propose a project that would mark the twenty-year anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain. Five of us responded and the Advisory Board selected my proposal.

<sup>3</sup> See Bojana Pejić, “Why is Feminism Suddenly So ‘Sexy’? Analysis of a ‘Resurgence’. Based on Three Exhibition Catalogues,” at [http://www.springerlin.at/dyn/heit\\_text.php?textid=2025&lang=en](http://www.springerlin.at/dyn/heit_text.php?textid=2025&lang=en) (2.3.2014)

<sup>4</sup> For a feminist critique of these attitudes, see Katrin Kivimaa, “Present Histories and Missing Voices” in *n.paradoxa: an international feminist art journal* 11 (January 2003), pp. 88-90. Reprinted in Bojana Pejić (ed.), *Gender Check: A Reader* (see note 1), pp. 193-6.

<sup>5</sup> Malin Hedlin Hayden, “Women Artists versus Feminist Artists: Definitions by Ideology, Rhetoric or Mere Habit?” in Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe (eds.) *Feminism is Still Our Name — Seven Essays on Historiography and Cultural Practices* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2010), p. 58.



“gender” was still associated with “femininity” only: namely, from more than many countries we received only works by *women* artists. This had to be revised, and beside the works by female and male artists who construct in their art femininity and masculinity in heteronormative terms, the researchers also detected some (indeed very few) artists who were active in the time of state socialism (that is till 1990), dealing with homosexual and lesbian identities. After this first, research stage, others were to follow: meetings and lectures took place during 2008. The next was the exhibition held in Vienna, in Museum moderne Kunst –Stiftung Ludwig/ MUMOK (2009-2010), which comprised about 400 artworks. This number was slightly reduced in the show staged in Zacheta Gallery in Warsaw (2010). In both venues, the exhibition was accompanied by symposia, public seminars, workshops, lectures and panels. Finally, the last stage including the production of two publications: the catalogue, with 13 commissioned essays and reproductions of many pieces featuring in the show;<sup>6</sup> and finally the *Gender Check Reader* was published in 2010 with 33 republished articles by Eastern European ethnologist, art historians, curators and critics originally printed between 1988 and 2008.

In proposing the project to ERSTE Foundation in 2007, I profited from my knowledge “capital” and contacts harvested during the past years. In 1997, David Elliott, freshly appointed director of Moderna Museet in Stockholm engaged me as chief curator of the exhibition *After the Wall – Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe*.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the show was to map contemporary art in Eastern European countries that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. We researched and travelled to 19 countries. The show was structured in four sections, one of which was “Genderscapes,” which presented works by women and men artists who explored sexuality, desire, and “new” social identity constituted under the post-communist condition, which revised the relationship between the private and the public, and it reshaped our relation to history, to nationalism and to the body. When selecting artists for *After the Wall*, I was not looking for women artists. I was rather after artworks that could help us understand the “dialectics of normality” in the newly established, Eastern European democracies.<sup>8</sup> And so in the end, the show was found to have “too many women artists”! In addition, one critique pointed to a revamped modernist myth about the High and the Low: in question was the work of a woman artist who cast in porcelain (sic!) political performances of her male colleagues. She was seen as “just” an applied artist!

Reflecting on the *After the Wall* show, Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski came to this conclusion: “The year 1999 was the last moment when it was still possible to realize such a project. Soon thereafter the post-Communist world would disappear from the map of Europe as a historically determined territory. ... Will we be able, in the near future, to find similarities between the former East Germany and Armenia, Slovenia, Poland or Belarus?”<sup>9</sup> Certainly, in this part of the world (as elsewhere) the question of geography is a rather sensitive issue. One should be aware that “Eastern Europe” is not (and never was) a united whole; none of the countries in question practiced state socialism or currently experiences democracy in the same way.

Indeed, twenty years after 1989, it would be really hard to trace similarities among “us.” Yet, “we” *still* share many things in common. Let’s take art historical studies, for example. Throughout the 1990s, Eastern Europeans generally embarked on an epoch of remaking history (still in progress!). Whereas historians engaged in revising national histories and claiming the nation as the main opponent as well as main victim of Communist regimes, art historians began appending modernist tendencies to national art histories.<sup>10</sup> In revisiting modernist painting and sculpture today, East European art historians generally show, alas, an uncritical acceptance of many modernist

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<sup>6</sup> Regrettably, the list of the exhibited works was not included in the catalogue. The complete list is available online: <http://www.erstestiftung.org/gender-check/exhibition/list-of-works/> (04.03.2014)

<sup>7</sup> *After the Wall – Art and Culture in post-communist Europe*, chief curator Bojana Pejic, together with David Elliott and Iris Müller-Westermann, Moderna Museet, 1999. That same year the show was mounted in Budapest in Museum of Modern Art – Foundation Ludwig and later in Berlin held in Hamburger Bahnhof and Max Liebermann House, 2000-2001.

<sup>8</sup> See my article, “Dialectics of Normality” in Bojana Pejic and D. Elliott (eds) *After the Wall - Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999), pp. 16 – 28.

<sup>9</sup> Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta – Art and Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), p. 21. In passing, Piotrowski is one of the rare men in Eastern European feminisms.

<sup>10</sup> In Titoist Yugoslavia, my home country, however, which did not belong to the Warsaw Pact, abstract and modernist art was accepted as official art and modernist paradigms had been “domesticated” in theoretical and artistic practices since the early 1960s.



myths, such as the division between high (i.e. painting and sculpture) and low media (i.e. applied arts, such as textiles or ceramics), male genius, art as a genderless and also apolitical sphere.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, after 1989 many Eastern European artists, curators and critics took a feminist stance while most male as well as female historians remained distant from (if not hostile to) feminist interventions. If we agree that there are two art histories, one written in the academic world and the other told via exhibitions, then I would argue that the feminist rewriting of modernism and its aftermaths in the Eastern European context occurred in exhibition catalogues rather than academic textbooks.

Thinking about Piotrowski's remark, I realized that the question to be raised in *Gender Check* was not *what* "we" had to research (visual representations and textual material) in order to see what "we" have in common: rather, the question was *how* "we" can approach the researched visual and textual information. In other words, what we shared in making *Gender Check* was *common methodology* informed by feminist and gender knowledges. Simply put, "gender" was *not* the theme of the project (as some journalists tended to conclude): "gender" was instead our *theoretical tool*.

The exhibition as well as the catalogue was divided in three parts. Yet the structure of the exhibition and its 16 thematic sections were not preconceived but based on the material gathered during the research and received from our "national" researchers. In the two first parts we tried to offer a politicized reading of various artistic practices that materialized in Eastern Europe during the last thirty years of state socialism and - in the shadow of the Cold War. This implied a revisiting of official and non-official art from the 1960s and 1970. The third part of the show offers alternative art cartography of the post-socialist period.

The first part of the exhibition, entitled "Socialist Iconosphere" opens with a small number of paintings originating in the 1950s, which pursue strict Socialist Realist direction. Even if Socialist Realism as a constituent part of "official" socialist culture was a long-lasting doctrine in the Soviet countries, over time it inevitably underwent many changes both in iconography and in the execution of painting as in the "harsh style" emerging in the 1960s. Artworks in this part display artists' relation to the collectively shared social/ist reality and this relation could be apologetic as well as critical. These works point to the ethos of labor, to the state-promoted egalitarian gender policies and women's emancipation under socialism, showing, for example, women performing traditionally male professions (as in paintings depicting women working in metal industry, for example). Parallel to this "progressive" women's role we find also many paintings depicting women performing traditional "women's duties", such as making bread and preparing the meal. But we also have a number of works that critiqued the official vision of new socialist societies and negative impacts of women's emancipation. For example, in juxtaposing the works displaying the socialist ideal of "happy" heterosexual family and those offering alternative family models (such as hippy life), it is suggested that (women) artists indeed showed their resistance to the official imagination. If we closely inspect the official ideology, which posited that state socialist states "resolved" the Women's Question (the question with which Socialist theory insisting on the class issue traditionally ignored), then we discover a significant paradox. This part of the exhibition also demonstrates that the socialist period delivered two dominant images of *productive* femininity: the woman worker (and the mother. They indeed blend in the "new" femininity introduced by state socialism: if there was an icon of socialist woman then this the icon of the "working mother" - a women working in two shifts, in her home and at her working place.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to visual representations (paintings, sculptures, drawings and videos), that we nowadays can expose to feminist readings, it proved impossible to trace textual sources relating to visual arts that were written till the late 1980s, which refer to women's position in state socialist apparatus or analyze the work by women artists from a gender perspective. As is well known, during the existence of state socialist states, "feminism" (as theory and as social movement) used to be regarded as "import" from the capitalist West. Therefore, all

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<sup>11</sup> Hungarian feminist art historian Edit András was the first to attempt a feminist deconstruction of modernist myths in dealing with Hungarian context. See András, 'A Painful Farewell to Modernism: Difficulties in the Period of Transition' in Edit András and Anna Bálványos (eds), *Omnia Mutant - XLVII International Biennale of the Visual Arts - Hungarian Pavilion*, exhibition catalogue, reprinted in Bojana Pejić (ed.) *Gender Check: A Reader - Art and Theory in Eastern Europe* (see note 1), pp. 115- 125.

<sup>12</sup> See my introduction, "Proletarian of All Countries, Who Washes Your Socks?" in B. Pejić (ed.) *Gender Check - Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, (see note 1), pp. 19- 29. The title of my article was in fact a slogan that accompanied the first feminist conference ever held in socialist state, *Comrade-Woman: Women's Question - A New Approach?* It was organized 1978 in Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, an institution in which I worked from 1971 till 1991.



but one article from 1988, all other reprinted essays the *Gender Check Reader*, which reflect on art of the socialist period and explore power relations between men and women artists (in artistic group, for example) are published after 1990.

The second part of the exhibition, "Negotiating Personal Spaces," presents art productions that also came into existence in the socialist period, but here the center of attention was not placed on collective dreams and fantasies and/or their critique. Rather, the artists featuring in this part focus on the individual and personal, which manifests their urge to (politically) approach sexual politics, explore bodily subjects, question socialist puritanism, critique representations of "woman" in visual art and mass media, and in some cases undermine the normative heterosexuality characteristic of state socialism. In doing so, they indeed employed various techniques of resistance. This part offers a variety of old and new media such as painting, sculpture, photography, photo-collages, video and photo- and video documentation of performances enacted in the 1970s and 1980s. Feminist art historians coming from different countries, who earlier wrote about the women artists represented here describe their practice as "latent feminism" or "intuitive feminism." Many paintings and sculptures deal with the notion of "woman" and critically examine who this notion became constituted in/by visual representations; we have here a considerable number of self-portraits by women artists (who choose to represent themselves in the kitchen (sic) or with their children); there is also a small section with textile and painted pieces by women artists who appropriated "universal" (abstract and modernist) canon; there is a section dealing with artists' relations to their immediate surrounding such as, for instance, liaisons between artists and models, collaborative working, and couples in love, including, alas, a very few works depicting homosexual and lesbian relationship. This fact must be situated in the very socialist context, which in the main relied on traditional and indeed patriarchal principles, which the ideologues of state socialism declared passé; these were heteronormative norms, which were exemplified in the image of nuclear family, on the one side, and on the other, in criminalization of *male* homosexuality. Finally, this part of the exhibition gathered about ten artworks, which reconsider the heroic male subjectivity, which was a notion (or rather myth) central not only to Western modernist practice/theory, but also crucial for the socialist worldview. Male artists represent here themselves or their male models and friends as tender and vulnerable subjects. (The comments on this particular section implied a double optic. One (heterosexual) curator complained to me: "There are too many gays in this exhibition." Another, this time gay curator, also complained: "You have too many heteros in your show.")

The third part of the *Gender Check* exhibition, "Post-communist Genderscapes" comprises art pieces that emerged in the early 1990s, with the demise of communist regimes. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 is commonly taken as a symbolic beginning of the changes, which in reality kept occurring a bit later, throughout the 1990s. Between 1989 and 2008, Europe witnessed Germany's reunification, the bloody dismemberment of socialist Yugoslavia, and disintegration of the Soviet Union. Twenty-three new nation states were born, some regain their earlier sovereignty, some reached it for the first time in history; some had to be constituted through brutal wars. Each "new" European democracy readily embraced nationalist ideologies so that state socialism was replaced by state nationalism married to neo-liberal capitalism and emblematic of "post-politics." As mentioned earlier, *rewritings* of national art history was an urgent task to be performed by art historians. If so, how come that the women artists who worked in the GDR, Hungary, Soviet Latvia, or Macedonia (as a former Yugoslav republic) in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980 are still not fully integrated in art histories of their native countries? Indeed, the *Gender Check* project suggested that 'we' had more in common than we had ever thought!

This last part of the show is in fact "about" democracy and how Eastern European artists wrestle with democratic condition, which is, as ever, pregnant with paradoxes. Take, for example, the issue of nationalism. In our smaller nation-states that are not big global players, the nation-state is imagined more in terms of the nation than of the state. Thus, the "survival" of the nation appears as a demographic problem to be cured by non-working mothers, pro-life parties, anti-abortion policies (the anti-abortion bill passed in Poland in 1993) etc. Feminists questioning these policies are accused of importing foreign ideas that destabilize the nation - just like socialists believed that "capitalist feminism" was not needed because they had "solved" the Women's Question. In spite of this, women as well as some male artists shown here, address these issues critically.

Women artists relaying in strategy of self-representation turned to the politicization of the private; others who are also involved in self-portraiture do not believe any more that the self-image (produced as painting, photograph or video) "tells the truth" but present their feminine - and sometimes even feminist- identities opting for tactics of spectacle and masquerade. In this part of the show we could — at



last — present a number of photographic and video works that openly reveal homosexual and lesbian identities, even though not all of the presented artists opted for queer issues as their political positioning. It goes without saying that nationalist ideologies hardly ever show the respect for human rights of any kind of social minorities, be they sexual or ethnic: the resulting effects of such policies are homophobia and xenophobia. The last section of the show was dedicated to the artists (both male and female) who in deconstructing the relation between capital and gender implicitly provided a critique of globalization by mapping the global space of sexual labor, “feminization” of poverty and worldwide distribution of pornographic imagery.

Lastly, I should perhaps say something concerning my power as chief curator invited to first, co-ordinate the research and eventually produce the *Gender Check* exhibition, and edit the catalogue and the reader. Whereas getting hold of material was a “democratic” process in the sense that each of the researchers from 24 countries proposed artworks from their country of origin, it is also true that I used (or abused) my power and responsibility as the curator of an international exhibition. I tried to respect choices but curating an exhibition, be it large or small, national or international, has little to do with “democracy.” When you curate, you actually perform an un-democratic act: you make certain professional decisions (as the researchers themselves made), you include and exclude, and you do this to arrive at a more or less consistent narrative. So, let’s say that I have come to self-identify with a “position of authority, in a way that exposes the illusions of that position without renouncing it.”<sup>13</sup> It’s easier to undermine this illusion with self-irony and humor. And there is an old slogan from post-1945 Yugoslavia: “We are building the railroad and the railroad is building us.” Each exhibition project requires a level of openness and is a process of learning and unlearning.

As far as the future of feminism(s) among Eastern Europeans is concerned, I have to state that the *Gender Check* project could happen only because it did not try to invent Eastern European feminist art and theory but acknowledged their existence. Even so, it need to be said that in this part of the world — as elsewhere — women artists like to state that are not feminists because their prime concern is to make “just art” — art untainted by “ideology.” In Eastern European cartographies, *feminist moves* — be they academic, artistic, theoretical, or activist — are carried out as scattered resistances that are not just locally meaningful. Looking locally, however, things look slightly different. As late as 2005, in research conducted in the Czech Republic one interviewee, perhaps an artist, exemplified this attitude, confessing: “I use that word, feminism, only intimately and when it is dark.”<sup>14</sup>

Berlin, 6.03.2014.

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<sup>13</sup> Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> See Alice Cervinková and Katerina Šaldová, “‘I Use That Word, Feminism, Only Intimately and When it is Dark...’ (from an Investigative Interview)”, *Umelec I* (2005) [www.divus.cz/.../i-use-that-word-feminism-only-intimately-and-when-it-is-dark](http://www.divus.cz/.../i-use-that-word-feminism-only-intimately-and-when-it-is-dark) (3.03.2014)

