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## From Within, From Without: Configurations of Feminism, Gender and Art in Post-Wall Europe

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When I was writing an essay for the catalogue of the exhibition *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (held at the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig in Vienna and in Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw in 2009–2010),<sup>1</sup> I mentioned in one of the footnotes a disturbing case of ignorance of women in the Prague-based Kunsthalle, Rudolfinum Gallery. During the sixteen years of its existence, as I noted, one of the most prestigious and visible art institutions in the Czech Republic did not run a single solo show of a Czech woman artist. When asked about this blatant disproportion by Mirek Vodrážka, a feminist activist, writer and musician in his documentary film titled *Mlha a moc* (Fog and Power) (2006), the director of the Rudolfinum Gallery rejoined: “Give me names of those women who would deserve to be exhibited [here] ... Czech women artists do not ... reach quality of their male colleagues.”<sup>2</sup> Considering the fact that since the 1990s the Rudolfinum Gallery exhibited a number of significant women artists from the West whose oeuvre is inextricably related to gender politics (Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman, Louise Bourgeois, Kiki Smith, Rineke Dijkstra, Ana Mendieta), this reaction was quite paradoxical.

Now, at the time of writing (2015), the situation remains basically the same. The only exception was a small exhibition in 2011 called *Vyjevování* (Revealing) by Adriena Šimotová, the outstanding figure of the Czech post-war art scene who just then reached the age of 85. Compared to 25 solo exhibitions by Czech male artists of different generations, both alive and dead, many of which were retrospective, Šimotová’s exhibition could hardly balance the striking underrepresentation of local women artists. For the last 22 years, the state-funded institution located in the center of the capital city is a bastion of patriarchal dominance. Is this just a case of gender arrogance of a single male director who has been masterminding one gallery for almost a quarter of a century or does it tell something more fundamental about the configurations of feminism, gender and art in post-Wall Europe?

### Neutralizing feminism

The case of the Rudolfinum Gallery undoubtedly deserves a more prominent place than being mentioned in a footnote. Besides gender inequality, it also documents the hegemony of a largely de-politicized discourse that demonstratively turns away from

examining any social effects of art, choosing instead to preserve the myth of art as absolute, transcendent, and innocent through-and-through. Even the women artists from the West who are wreathed in international success and are apparently privileged over their less internationally renowned Czech colleagues are subordinated to the transcendent category of art as an entity distant from life and politics, and the feminist agency of their “imported” work is often concealed. The most striking recent example of neutralizing the feminist content of the work and the feminist stand of the artist was the gallery’s 2014 show of Ana Mendieta entitled *Traces* that travelled to Prague from the Hayward Gallery in London. Despite the presence of Mendieta’s key works, the show, including all the related events, was constructed as an ideologically neutral product for mass consumption that bothers the visitors neither by posing complicated and disturbing questions related to violence against women and identity politics nor with any political agenda. Mendieta was thus “sold” in the essentialist “package” as an artist of female sensibility whose main interest is reaching harmony with earth and the “mother” nature. Of course, the de-politicizing strategy should be ascribed not only to the hosting institution but also to the guest curator Stephanie Rosenthal from the Hayward, who thought of the exhibition in terms of a globally marketable product as opposed to a site that might – just like Mendieta’s own work – arouse critical thinking and disturb social and cultural norms. However, it was the director of the Rudolfinum Gallery who repeatedly vocalized in public that *Traces* was under no circumstances a feminist show and should not be seen as such.<sup>3</sup>

If the most common opinion in post-1989 Eastern Europe is that art has no gender and should not be mixed with politics, and if the importance of feminist ideas and gender is largely dismissed in local societies “which stubbornly perpetuated the myth of being [societies] not without gender then at least without ‘gender trouble,’”<sup>4</sup> there is no wonder that the possibility of feminist art as a vital force in a reorganization of cultural hierarchies is silenced or obscured under the mask of ideological neutrality or the “eternal feminine.” Moreover, showing feminist artists from the West while neglecting local women maintains the widespread notion that feminism is a Western concept (its proponents mostly ignore the multivalence of Western feminism and conceive it as a monolithic bloc) that is alien to Eastern European mentality, and therefore it can come and go. Last but not least it also reinforces nationalist voices that promise to protect the authentic local art scene from galloping globalization which the feminist movement – for better or worse – is part of.

Contemptuousness towards the “F” word expressed by institutions’ authorities undoubtedly has a big impact on how, when, and where (if at all) women artists in post-communist countries want to identify themselves with feminism. Their ambiguous attitude to feminism is exemplarily manifested by the experience of a Slovak art historian, Jana Oravcová, who was asked in the mid-1990s to write an entry about feminism for the encyclopedia of post-war art.<sup>5</sup> “I was standing in front ... of a tough task since I ... assumed that I will face a certain animosity on the side of Slovak women artists that I wanted to include into the entry,” she later recollected. “My expectation was practically fulfilled when some of them strictly rejected to be mentioned in my text. Although Ilona Németh, for example, finally agreed that I could refer to some of her work as feminist, she – just like many others – argued that she ‘doesn’t want to be identified with feminism’, and also ‘doesn’t want to switch from one minority into the other’ (in her case Hungarian).”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Oravcová pointed out that some women

who refused to figure in the “controversial” entry later agreed to participate in some international exhibitions with an explicit gender agenda that were organized by Western curators. It seems that while the gender framing helps emancipating women artists from the “East” to be more smoothly incorporated into the Western structures, gender blindness or even openly expressed antipathy to feminism help them to be more smoothly incorporated into the local/national institutional structures.<sup>7</sup>

These kinds of double-standards that many women artists in Eastern Europe hold when the issues of gender politics and feminism are at stake have unfortunate consequences on both local and international levels. On the one hand, they contribute to minimalizing any political agenda among local women artists and curators, which disables their affront to the patriarchal system and, in the long run, reinforces the discriminatory practices of art institutions.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the complicated relationship of Eastern European women artists to feminism that has been, among other things, nourished by both a strong mistrust in political art and powerful and glorified myth of modernism increases a danger of being simply co-opted into the canon of the West, which often leads to cardinal misunderstandings.<sup>9</sup> When Suzana Milevska, a Macedonian art theorist and curator, wrote about the highly problematic attitude of Western curators to Balkan women artists (although her comment can be applied to Eastern Europe as a whole), it was just this risk of misrepresentation she stressed: “A very well-known phenomenon is that Balkan female artists, when selected and curated by foreign curators, are usually put in an obsolete theoretical framework when it comes to the questions of ethnicity and gender, and that the female writers and curators were either not consulted or when invited did not want to go against the grain by discussing this topic. This has to do on the one hand partly with the Balkans not being ready to deal with gender issues but on the other hand with the West not being ready to hear even the existing voices discussing these issues within the domestic art scenes.”<sup>10</sup>

## Where are the women artists?

Whether and how women artists in Eastern Europe should struggle for a higher representation in local art institutions when, as it is well known, inclusion entails advantages but also risks is obviously a crucial question vis-à-vis the continuing invisibility of their work. To be represented by mainstream institutions means visibility but the centrality requires loyalty to the institutional mechanisms. The greater number of women artists in galleries and in higher ranks of other art institutions might disturb the patriarchal canon and patrilineality of art history, but it is less likely that it would make gender an integral element of contemporary debates about art, and would not instead lead to the integration of feminist agendas into the system which usually blunts its most radical blades. That artists’ freedom is logically jeopardized in the system of still prevalingly public (state- or region-funded) museums and galleries in the “former East” is evident even from the recently published interview with the director of the Rudolfinum Gallery who openly claimed that “none of the participants [of the exhibition], i.e. artist, curator, economist, program director, owner of the art works, graphic designer or production manager, can claim absolute freedom, and assert only themselves, since every little element [of the project] is closely linked to its other elements.”<sup>11</sup>

The question whether a true feminist discourse can even be practiced in institutions that take “an active role in the evacuation of critical knowledge, de-linking art from political and social questions, producing only one history of arts and dismissing any possibilities for an understanding of new alternative histories and new platforms of knowledge”<sup>12</sup> is fundamental for the discussion about feminism and visual art in Eastern Europe. The Rudolfinum Gallery is just one of many examples of such neoliberal logic that predominates in public art institutions in post-communist countries. Looking at the feminist art production in these locations, the most challenging works have been usually produced outside of the system: in non-profit galleries, artist-run centers, public spaces, nature, or underground. This oppositional locatedness of emancipatory practices applies to the pre-1989 totalitarian, the period of transition as well as to the present day, when most countries of the “former East” entered the European Union.<sup>13</sup>

However, there is trouble with the oppositional tactic of separation on the level of (writing) art history. Although historical narratives are often rightly criticized as usable tools in the legitimation of violence and oppression, historicizing is also an important vehicle for legitimation of difference and autonomy. Building a separate zone of feminist art practices without confronting existing exhibition cultures and inextricable acquisition policies is, I believe, less likely to generate a vital and much needed process of revising local but also global art histories. Bojana Pejić was right to ask, “How come that the women artists who worked in the GDR, Hungary, Soviet Latvia, and Macedonia (as a former Yugoslav republic) are still excluded from their national art histories?”<sup>14</sup> especially since the given countries are just a few examples of many in Eastern Europe where women artists do not figure in art history and where gender power and sexuality are not recognized as historical forces of significance.

Including women into local and global art histories, or – more accurately – generating new, critical art histories which would question the patriarchal and fundamentally heterosexual canon of the discipline and show women as active subjects of history, should stay an integral part of the feminist practices and theories in the “other” Europe where the second wave of feminism was often skipped, and largely de-politicized debates about postfeminism prevailed.<sup>15</sup> Yet, there is also another reason why historicizing as a process of situating women’s liberation, emancipation, and creation should stay central. Since most debates about gender, feminism, and art in Eastern Europe are focused on post-war and contemporary art, while older history is neglected, there is a danger of a growing ambivalence toward or, worse, disinterest in earlier generations of female and feminist artists (and women in general) that might eventually cause “the amnesia of an a-historical present.”<sup>16</sup> Understanding how various power mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion work today is impossible without comprehension of historical contexts of eclipsing particular groups of people based on gender, sexual, or other differences. Situatedness in place *and* time prevents women (and other subjects on the margins) to be approached as singular and timeless, and makes them more aware of changing modes of oppression: “Feminism’s continuing relevance to contemporary culture/s lies precisely in the fact that the outcome of feminist praxis brings to the surface something almost inexplicable each time, something which already demands a different approach from the one which just rendered it partly visible.”<sup>17</sup>

As a feminist art historian who is “straddled” between research of modernism of the first half of the twentieth century and contemporary art, I am convinced that the act of historicization is crucial for contemporary women artists’ identification with “mothers”

but also, and perhaps most importantly, for the formation of a site from which one can speak as a feminist. As Hiltrud Ebert wrote in her text on women artists in the GDR, one should be wary of being trapped in the circumstances to which one was opposed but “there is one experience that everyone should remain conscious of: subjectivity cannot be achieved in and through exclusion alone.”<sup>18</sup>

## Writing art history without men and without politics

In 2014, the Moravian Gallery in Brno in the Czech Republic organized the exhibition *In a Skirt – Sometimes: Art of the 1990s*. Curated by Pavlína Morganová, it charted the work of fourteen women artists who entered the art scene in the first decade after the Velvet Revolution<sup>19</sup> – in the period of post-revolutionary euphoria but also consequent disillusion from economic instability and growing “ostalgia” (nostalgia for life under the communist system – or nostalgia for the “Ost” [East]): Milena Dopitová, Veronika Bromová, Markéta Othová, Kateřina Vincourová, Štěpánka Šimlová, Míla Preslová, Ellen Řádová, Michaela Thelenová, Zdena Kolečková, Lenka Klodová, Martina Klouzová-Niubó, Markéta Vaňková, Alena Kotzmannová, and Kateřina Šedá. While until 1989 women had been more or less solitary in Czech art, in the course of the 1990s, as Morganová rightly claimed, the Czech art scene witnessed a quick succession of several generations of female artists who introduced new, often technology- and time-based and also conceptual, art practices that challenged traditional methods and genres, who subverted standard representational patterns, and who in many respects overshadowed their male colleagues. The key statement of the curator was that the 1990s was “the first period in which the history of Czech art could be written without men.”<sup>20</sup>

This statement was the one most often quoted by journalists and reviewers but it was also the most criticized. For narrating art history without male artists in a country where the communist ideology of egalitarianism is still alive (although egalitarianism was often mixed with uniformity and equal rights were never respected by the system in which – as one joke ironically commented – “all people were equal but some were more equal than others”) but is fundamentally anti-feminist, and where survey exhibitions and books focused on local modern and post-war art are often written (almost) without women,<sup>21</sup> Morganová was accused of introducing undesired “ghettoism” into the discipline of art history and curatorial practice.

However, whereas Morganová’s strategy of separation proved that the “transition of the classic postmodernism to post-conceptual art of the present”<sup>22</sup> was largely initiated and elaborated by women artists in the Czech Republic, the exhibition avoided any fundamental reflection of gender agenda. The resentment against the politicizing of gender identity in art was openly declared in the introductory text for the catalogue. “It is important to point out,” wrote Morganová, “that the ... project is not a product of some feminist grievances or feelings that the 1990s female artists should be collectively promoted and subjected to positive discrimination, on the contrary. The project is rooted in the idea that it was women who played the most important part in 1990s Czech art ... and introduced new artistic expression.”<sup>23</sup> Although her dismissal of framing the exhibition as feminist and her emphasis on artistic expression might be interpreted as a diplomatic strategy (without which the exhibition might not even take place in one of the largest and most visible state-funded galleries in the country), it also

indicates more principle issues that are emblematic of the precarious relationship between feminism and art in most countries of Eastern Europe.

First, the project showed that the concept of art as an apolitical and autonomous creation is still a vital force in curatorial and art historical discourse, even in situations when it concerns emancipation of the disadvantaged and when the deconstruction of the patriarchal canon is at stake. Besides this de-politicized and universalist approach that generates her-story as a seamless and linear narrative, it also documents the naturalization of liberalism that started to dominate the lives of women (and men) in the post-1989 “East,” and weakens the chances of feminism and gender politics to become an integral part of art and its theory. As the Czech sociologist Alice Červinková stresses in her essay “Emancipation without feminism?”, while the subject of a liberal discourse is an autonomous individual (which was a dream of people who lived under the communist oppression, in the system that favored collectivism and equality over freedom), feminism turns to women as a social group, which is exactly what women artists in this part of Europe felt most ambivalent about. “It seems that the liberal emphasis on the individual and his/her autonomy as the main ideological fundament of the 1990s [in former Eastern Europe] productively met the modernist idea of an autonomous artist-creator and played – in contrast to feminism ... – the central emancipatory role: women artists lost their diffidence about standing up for themselves in the male art world. The question is, nevertheless, whether the figure of the autonomous artist who averts him/herself from engaged art since he/she understands it as a reverse of his/her individuality and inner inspiration will be further sufficient.”<sup>24</sup>

The trouble with writing the history of art without men but also without politics is then multiple: not only does it neutralize socially and politically charged works that are included in such narratives (which was also the case of *In Skirt – Sometimes* which contained a number of remarkable works that dealt with gender roles and identities, or that critiqued sexist imagery which accompanied the boom of advertising and first commercial mass media after the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc), but it also reinforces the stereotypically used term “women’s art” that identifies women artists through their sex and approaches them as a homogeneous collective. In a longer perspective, it has an impact on the continuing elimination of women artists from exhibitions, academic positions, art history books, and other decision-making structures inside the art world since it deprives them of real social and political interests and, of course, of real power.

## Against the “monoculture” of gender

However, it is more and more obvious that any serious talk about feminism, gender politics, and art in any part of today’s globalized world should not be reduced to the representation and visibility of women artists (in history books, exhibitions, etc.) and/or to visual representation of femininity and masculinity. The issues of power, hegemony, hierarchy, and dominance reach further than just to patriarchy; or, to put it differently, patriarchy’s foundation is the subordination of women, but it is also maintained by other means of power control. As Mirek Vodrážka puts it, “it is important to work with gender critically and reflectively, and mainly to examine in what kind of hidden relations and power ‘coalition discourses’ gender functions ... It is apparent that gender

can be more strongly legitimized when it is connected with broader political issues such as injustice or violence. It is – not only in art – a much more effective strategy than to assert gender specialization and gender monoculture."<sup>25</sup> If we acknowledge that the truly feminist discourse in art can barely be reached today without exploring the existence of these power coalitions, then we can also more easily locate where these discourses are mostly generated: outside the mainstream, mostly conservative institutions, and by those who are usually pushed to the edge.

Although there are feminist artists and theorists in Eastern Europe who in their work seriously consider the ramifications of globalization and the expansion of the capital's competitive logic to the "East" as a crucial issue for understanding the local feminist and gender agenda,<sup>26</sup> and although some others rightly criticize the rule of heteronormativity and introduce a much needed queer context (which was understandably most heavily subdued in countries with strong Catholic tradition and population, such as Poland),<sup>27</sup> and – last but not least – although there is a growing interest in how gender and nationalism overlap,<sup>28</sup> only flimsy attention in these debates has been so far paid to how gender operates in the community of the largest Eastern European ethnic minority whose members are spread all over the region, and have almost no real political power and also no chance for building an autonomous political and economic unit: the Roma. Ethnic, cultural, and also linguistic otherness means that the twelve million people of the Roma have almost no cultural presence in wider society. If there is any, it is usually embedded in specialized institutions that were built to collect, exhibit, examine, and preserve Roma cultural heritage.<sup>29</sup> Roma visual culture is thus presented and "consumed" as an object of ethnographic and anthropologic rather than art historical interest, and thus maintains the exoticization and further racial segregation of Roma.

That feminist and gender-based art and art theory in the ex-East continues to be prevailingly created and written by white women and focuses on white femininity (sometimes on white men/masculinity) comes as no surprise. If compared with the emancipation of, for instance, black women artists in the West, the situation of most ostracized "ex-centrics" in the "other" Europe naturally calls for comparison. Yet, the case is not as simple as it might seem on first sight; while many women artists of color asserted themselves in the Western world through political movements specific just to their color, Roma women cannot mobilize and assert themselves: not only because most of them live in very traditional patriarchal communities but also because, due to discrimination (and criminalization), they can rarely reach higher than elementary school education and a professional art (or any other) career is thus largely forbidden for them.<sup>30</sup>

However, it is an issue not only of authorship but also of the subject matter. Women artists in Eastern Europe – whether they identify themselves with feminism or not – usually avoid reflecting the double-marginalization of women of "color," most of whom live either in forced assimilation or (much more likely) in segregation and poverty: disdained, demonized, or even sterilized.

It would be misleading to claim that issues of ethnic difference did not enter the feminist art and theory in the "grey zone of Europe."<sup>31</sup> Especially in ex-Yugoslavia that was going through a civil war and ethnic cleansing in the decade following the collapse the East Bloc, nationalism, ethnic identity, and gender were important issues for a number of women artists. As art historian and critic Jovana Stokić documented on the work of Sanja Iveković (Croatian), Sanja Ostojić (Serbian), Milica Tomić (Serbian), Andreja Kuluncic (Croatian), and Jelena Tomasević (Montenegrin), the "nation's body" turned

into an important “idiom” of feminist art investigations of national and ethnic identities. “These women artists are indeed ‘self-positioned on borders,’ while constructing contemporary feminine identities in their cultures. Thus, exploring art practices at the southern and eastern boundaries of Europe that incorporate experiences of the disintegration of both the former Yugoslavia and the socialist project sheds light on the formation of feminine identities in the processes of fragmentation (‘balkanization’).”<sup>32</sup> Yet, these artists certainly do not represent the invisible margins; as Stokić put it, they “are widely represented on the global art world scenes in big international shows.”<sup>33</sup>

The peripherality of other female “others” that no have chance of constructing either national/ethnic or female identities, since their existence is inevitably diasporic and dispersed is, however, a different case.

## Wonder mother and Eastern Europe’s black skin

In order to destabilize the multiple “monocultures” in the peripherally Western regions of Eastern Europe – that of patriarchy, of the white majority as well as of gender – and to foster the political agenda of feminist art and scholarship in this part of the “old continent,” it is worth looking at the real margins: at those who deal with gender and politics in the truly blind spots of Europe represented by Roma, who are, significantly, themselves classified as “other.”

Coping with nationalism, xenophobia, and ethnicity in the background of gender, feminism, and queer can be traced in the multidisciplinary work by Tamara Moyzes. Born in Bratislava to a Jewish Hungarian family with Roma ancestors, studying art in Bratislava, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Prague, and living currently with both a Slovak and an Israeli passport in Prague, Moyzes practices as an artist and curator what she calls “artivism” in the form of strongly politically charged (and often guerrilla) projects that target various aspects of social injustice mostly in East Central Europe, but also in the Middle East. As such, Moyzes is an antithesis of academic or institutionalized feminism, and – as a woman who is a “minority everywhere,”<sup>34</sup> and who has a first-hand experience with minorities, including Roma – she represents transnational and transethnic feminism that is so scarcely present in intellectual and art debates in Eastern Europe.

One of the most radical projects realized by Tamara Moyzes in collaboration with Roma artist Věra Duždová (Roma Kale Panthera Group) is the video and objects installation *SuperMom*, shown as part of the European Roma art exhibition *Have a Look into My Life!* in Strasbourg and Graz in 2014 (Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2). The project is based on the story of the quintuplets recently born to a Czech Roma couple that was extensively reported by local media and also accompanied by hostile racist reactions from right-wing extremists, but also from the “normal” population.

The central part of the project is a six-minute video mocking the format of popular TV shows in which the female moderator demonstrates and promotes the newest and most desirable product for prospective mothers: Prenatal Luxury Box. A small pink suitcase for baby girls (a boy variant is designed in blue) with white dots and a cute portraiture of a black-haired child is designed as a survival kit with basic emergency equipment that, as the ending titles of the video underline, “none of the Czech moms got in the past” and that should – “ensure ... fearless and carefree nights and relaxation.”



Figure 6.1 Roma Kale Panthera (Tamara Moyzes, Věra Duždová), *SuperMom*, video, 6.24 min, 2014.



Figure 6.2 *SuperMom*, installation (posters, objects, video) in the exhibition *Have a Look into My Life!*, Aubette, Place Kléber, Strasbourg, 2014.

The iconography of the PLB equipment – fire extinguisher, plastic safety window films against Molotov cocktail (whose quality “is adapted to the danger that your family is currently in”), voucher for the police escort from the hospital directly home, Legal Act on the Special Protection of Persons – strongly contrasts with the kitschy interior of the studio: superficial, yet dulcet music and mainly the annoyingly glib voice and precious smile on the face of the affected moderator. The show reaches its peak when the moderator – after holding a lottery and randomly picking up one out of many threatening anonymous letters addressed to Roma families – introduces a “special” guest – a pregnant Roma woman called Alžběta (played by Duždová). After the opening small talk, the mother-to-be is asked to use the PLB extinguisher to fight the fire that the moderator’s assistant lights up directly in the studio. A short moment of pretended drama is over after Alžběta successfully conquers the flames, and wins the kit as an award for her brave action.

Although the association of Roma woman with motherhood conforms to the stereotypical image repertoire that was also voiced in the racist reactions to the birth of the quintuplets and that the artists quoted on posters in the installation (she is a womb, a mere baby-pouch whose multiplex progeny will be a parasite on white society), the figure of Alžběta is more complex than merely reproducing the ruling “idiom” of gender and racial normativity in Eastern European societies. Fighting the fire and confidently talking to the white moderator, she turns into a role model of a female superhero, a Roma Wonder Woman. Moreover, an armed mother radically subverts the idealized image of mother as “the keeper of traditional values, hearth and home,”<sup>35</sup> and also shows that the dichotomy between public and private that is central to feminist writing and struggle is not as absolute and self-evident when transplanted to a different cultural setting; unlike the majority of women’s homes that can be a harbor of peace as well as a battleground of domestic violence, there is no fixed boundary between private and public in an Eastern European Roma mother’s life, for their home is often a site of anonymous public violence.

Using pop-culture clichés for challenging such a serious social problem is risky, for it can turn it into a situation comedy. Yet, just like Tamara Moyzes’ previous projects of (including, for instance, the video *Miss Roma*, 2007, which documents a young Roma woman who is repeatedly denied access to various public places in the Czech Republic, and then “white-washed” to be accepted or even celebrated by the majority – made-up into a blond vamp with alabaster skin who represents both racial superiority and dominant beauty ideology)<sup>36</sup> – the *SuperMom* employs the means of pop culture and mass entertainment to open up issues that usually have no place in prime-time TV shows: the fake show presents fear, threat, survival, and even death as a “natural” part of mothering and family life. Appropriating the iconography characteristic for commercial TV channels, the artists manage to evoke the friendly and relaxed atmosphere that strongly contrasts with the offered life-saving (as opposed to nurturing) products. What makes this piece particularly interesting is the oscillation between the convincing illusion of commonplace and the absurdity of the situation that challenges the limits of “normality” which is based on stereotypes and ostracism cultivated by conventional society. Bringing *SuperMom* close to both popular TV shows in which contestants accept wacky challenges to reach their fifteen minutes of fame to the genre of black – metaphorically as well as literally – comedy makes it more effective than trying to “objectively” represent the ordeal of the diaspora of 12 million people that largely exist outside of the

hegemonic power structures, but are for the darker color of their skin exposed to discrimination and to the permanent danger of being chosen as an easy object of violence.

Besides gender and ethnic otherness that defines the lives of non-white women in prevalently white society, *SuperMom* also documents well the manipulative power of contemporary mass media that use voyeurism (often sexually charged) and spectacularization as key tools for turning “trash” (Roma people are often derogatorily called by this word) into a commodity.

## Extra-national counter-narratives: Building the feminist alliance

When Audre Lorde wrote about women, art, and patriarchy, she underlined that, besides celebrating differences between white women as a creative force for change, one should try to recognize that “those differences expose all women to various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share, some of which we do not. ... The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical with those boundaries.” In other words, “to imply ... that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women, is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy.”<sup>37</sup>

Recognizing un-reflected forms of difference and multivocality allows for the possibility of resistance and also of the destabilization of the dominant white-centered feminist (art) agenda in what is routinely called Eastern Europe (but what is in fact a construct that is far from a unified bloc). Also, counter-narratives that are based on social, cultural, and other experiences of those who are denied power and visibility for *being* the “second” sex as well as the “second” race can challenge the frequent self-colonization of the “East” and thus make the East–West divide more porous.<sup>38</sup> Last but not least, bringing the “ex-centrics” into the gender discourse can help undermine the mainstream narratives of (proto)feminist art in Eastern Europe that are defined by and subordinated to the normative model of feminist art in the West.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, none of this is possible without understanding the differences between how femininity and masculinity are constructed in the “white West,” in the “white East” and in their black diasporas whose members “for centuries ... have been victims of representations created exclusively by the non-Roma.”<sup>40</sup> Tímea Junghaus, the first Eastern European Roma art historian and activist, has made a great effort to show that “Roma art does exist,”<sup>41</sup> and some of her recent curatorial projects, including, for instance, *Roma Body Politics* (2015), also address the position of Roma women in Eastern European (art) history and present times, question the master(piece) discourse which underlies the concept of the “universal,” and offer models for revolting against the double (gender and racial) oppression and for constructing new Roma women’s identities.<sup>42</sup>

In her text “Schengen women” (2008), Slovenian art historian Zdenka Badovinac raises an important question of who is the subject that defines the identity of a European and what role gender and space play in this definition. “(W)hen an Eastern European female artist speaks about women’s issues through her own body, she becomes the subject of her own transformation and of her own social position. When analyzing the question of women in Eastern Europe, the dialogue between the external and internal

gazes – between interpretation and self-interpretation – is extremely important.”<sup>43</sup> Facing the slowly emerging generation of Roma women artists and curators who draw attention to gendered aspects of Roma life today as well as in the past (that is who collaterally work on historicization of Roma women’s culture and assert themselves as political activists), it is more than obvious that such dialogue must be set up also along the lines of ethnicity and race. Making the Roma identity part of gender and feminist (art) discourses is essential not only for enhancing solidarity between women (artists) in Eastern Europe, for slowing down the fragmentation of local as well as global feminisms and for building the alliance between academic feminists (such as myself) and activist feminists, but also for stepping over the national borders that usually demarcate these discourses.<sup>44</sup> As Mária Hlavajová, a Slovak curator living in Netherlands who organized the realization of Roma Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2011, declared, the extra-national character of Roma art “offers an invitation and a possibility to ... make it everyone’s.”<sup>45</sup>

## Notes

- 1 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*, Vienna: MUMOK, 2010, pp. 241–248.
- 2 Mirek Vodrážka, *Mlha a moc* (Fog and Power), independent documentary film, 66 minutes, 2006. Translated from Czech by Martina Pachmanová.
- 3 Here I refer to several of the director’s presentations of the show, including the introduction of my own talk on Ana Mendieta that took place at the Rudolfinum Gallery on 2 December 2014.
- 4 Katrin Kivimaa, “Relevance of gender: Feminist and other practices in contemporary Estonian art.” In: Bojana Pejić (ed.), *Gender Check: A Reader*, Cologne: Walter König Verlag, 2010, p. 291.
- 5 See Jana Geržová (ed.), *Slovník světového a slovenského výtvarného umění 2. pol. 20. století* (Encyclopedia of International and Slovak Fine Art of the 2nd half of the 20th Century), Bratislava: Profil, 1999.
- 6 Jana Oravcová quoted in the transcript of the round table discussion “Behind the Velvet Curtain: Bodies, languages, institutions” that reflected how contemporary Czech and Slovak artists deal with the issues of gender and various social and cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity, and that also focused on gender politics of galleries, museums, art schools, and (under)representation of women in public art institutions (organized moderated by Martina Pachmanová in the Brno House of Arts, 14 January 2010). In: František Kowolowski (ed.), *Formáty Transformace 89–09. Sedm pohledů na novou českou a slovenskou identitu. Sborník (Formats of Transformation 89–09. Seven Views on the New Czech and Slovak Identity)*, Brno: House of Arts, 2010, p. 136. Translated from Slovak by Martina Pachmanová.
- 7 For a complex analysis of a reticent relationship of women artists to feminism in East Central Europe, especially in the Czech Republic, see Alice Červinková, Kateřina Šaldová, Barbora Tupá, “Bez názvu: Mozaika ženských uměleckých aktivit na přelomu tisíciletí” (Untitled: Mosaic of Women’s Art Activities at the Turn of the Millennium). In:

- Hana Hašková, Alena Křížková, Marcela Linková (eds.), *Mnohohlasem: Vyjednávání ženských prostorů po roce 1989* (Polyphonically: Constructing Women's Spaces after 1989), Prague: Sociological Institute 2006, pp. 205–220.
- 8 Besides galleries that programmatically (albeit not declaratorily) do not exhibit local women artists, there is an apparent absence of debating gender issues at art schools where – significantly – more students are female, while the majority of art teachers are male.
  - 9 For more detailed analysis of the ambivalent relationship of Eastern Europe to Western modes of feminism see, for instance, Martina Pachmanová, “In? Out? In between?” (note 1).
  - 10 Suzana Milevska, “Feminist research in visual arts.” In: Mara Ambrožič, Angela Vettese (eds.), *Art as a Thinking Process: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*, Venice: Sternberg Press, 2013, pp. 171–172.
  - 11 “Domáci produkce se točí v kruhu” (Local art production is in vicious circle) (interview with Petr Nedoma by Sylvie Šeborová), *Artalk.magazine*, <http://artalk.cz/2015/06/25/domaci-produkce-se-toci-v-kruhu/>, retrieved on 2 September 2015. Translated from Czech by Martina Pachmanová.
  - 12 Marina Gržinić, “The performative and the political in global capitalism.” In: Katja Kobolt, Lana Zdravković (eds.), *Performative Gestures – Political Moves*, Zagreb: Red Athena University Press, 2014, p. 195. For the role of gender in curatorial practice in Eastern Europe and conservatism of local art institutions, see Suzana Milevska, “With special thanks to: Balkan Curator, *first person feminine*.” In: Mária Orišková (ed.), *Curating “Eastern Europe” and Beyond: Art Histories through the Exhibition*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang – Bratislava: VEDA, SAS Publishing House 2013, pp. 177–185.
  - 13 See Marina Gržinić, “From transitional postsocialist spaces to neoliberal global capitalism.” *Third Text*, vol. 21, no. 5, 2007, p. 563–575.
  - 14 Katrin Kivimaa, *Gender Check*, Feminism and Curating in Eastern Europe. Interview with Bojana Pejić in: Angela Dimitrakaki, Lara Perry (eds.), *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013, p. 178.
  - 15 A rare exception was Yugoslavia (mainly Croatia) where existed a viable feminist scholarship even before East Bloc fell apart. A crucial point about the historical “leap” was made recently by Mirek Vodrážka: “We miss the experience of the second wave of feminism, not on the level of the theoretical discourse (theory can be studied in a couple of semesters) but on the level of life practice ... When we compare it with the transformation that occurred in the Western societies on the level of identity politics, whether it concerned black people who fought for their rights, Native Americans, or finally even women, in our [Czech] society we miss lived (and experienced) politics of new social bodies thanks to the long-lasting low participation of people (women and men) in the public sphere.” Mirek Vodrážka quoted in: František Kowolowski (note 5), p. 143.
  - 16 “Pop Goes Politics: Martha Rosler Interviewed by John Slyce,” *Dazed & Confused* 54, May 1999, p. 75.
  - 17 Angela Dimitrakaki, “Space, gender, art: Redressing *Private Views*.” In: Angela Dimitrakaki, Pam Skelton, Mare Tralla (eds.), *Private Views: Spaces and Gender in Contemporary Art from Britain and Estonia*, London: Women's Art Library, 2010, p. 40. The exhibition *Private Views* was originally produced for the Estonian Art Museum in Tallinn in 1998.

- 18 Hildtrud Ebert, "Where are the women artists? An attempt to explain the disappearance of a generation of East German women artists." In: Bojana Pejić (note 3), p. 191.
- 19 The term "Velvet Revolution" is used by Czechs to describe the non-violent transition of power in former Czechoslovakia that started on 17 November 1989.
- 20 Pavlína Morganová (ed.), *Někdy v sukni: Umění 90. let* (In a Skirt – Sometimes: Art of the 1990s), Brno: Moravian Gallery, Prague: Prague City Gallery 2014, p. 10. English translation of the Czech original from the exhibition catalogue.
- 21 A telling example of such disproportion was a large survey exhibition of Czech art *Ostrovny odporu: Mezi první a druhou moderností 1985–2012* (*Islands of Resistance: Between First and Second Modernity 1985–2012*) that took place in the National Gallery in Prague in 2012: only 16% of exhibiting artists were women.
- 22 Pavlína Morganová (note 18), p. 7.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 7.
- 24 Alice Červinková, "Emancipace bez feminizmu?" (Emancipation without feminism?), Translated from the Czech by Martina Pachmanová. In: *ibid.*, p. 61.
- 25 Mirek Vodrážka quoted in: František Kowolowski (note 5), p. 140. As for the specialization, gender agenda apparently continues to be a "business" of specialized curators in Eastern Europe, most of whom are women. Not only that such compartmentalization separates gender issues from broader discourse of art but it also makes it easier to keep critical and subversive potential of gender politics under control. Translated from the Czech by Martina Pachmanová.
- 26 See Susana Milevska, *Capital and Gender*, Skopje: Museum of the City of Skopje 2001; Angela Dimitrakaki, "'Five o'clock on the sun': Three questions on feminism and moving image in the visual arts of non-Western Europe." *Third Text*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2005, pp. 269–282.
- 27 See, for instance, Paweł Leszkowicz, "National secret: Gay art in Poland." In: Bojana Pejić (note 3), pp. 245–249.
- 28 See, for instance, Tal Dekel, "Body, gender and transnationalism: Art and cultural criticism in a changing Europe." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2009, pp. 175–197.
- 29 There are only five museums or cultural centers devoted to Roma that are currently located in Europe: Belgrade (Serbia), Brno (Czech Republic), Heidelberg (Germany), Murska Sobota (Slovenia), and Tarnów (Poland).
- 30 In the Czech Republic, many Roma children are sent to special remedial primary schools without receiving an approved mental/brain diagnosis; up to 35% of children in these types of schools are Roma and the chance that they will reach higher than elementary education is infinitesimal. Consequently, less than 1% of the Roma population has a university degree and 85% of Roma are unemployed.
- 31 The term was first used by Piotr Piotrowski ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall to describe the former East. "There is no doubt that the historico-geographical coordinates of Central Europe are in a state of flux," he wrote "We are experiencing both historical and geographical transformation, that we are between two different times, between two different spatial shapes." Piotr Piotrowski, "The grey zone of Europe." In: David Elliott, Bojana Pejić (eds.), *After the Wall: Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe*, Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1999, p. 36.

- 32 Jovana Stokić, “Un-doing Monoculture: Women Artists from the ‘Blind Spot of Europe’ – the former Yugoslavia.” *ARTMargins*, 10 March 2006, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/8-archive/532-un-doing-monoculture-women-artists-from-the-blind-spot-of-europe-the-former-yugoslavia>, accessed 16 November 2018. See also Ileana Pentilie, “Zur einer bestimmten Identität – der Fall Südosteuropa.” In: Pavel Liška (ed.), *Grenzgänger*, Regensburg: Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie Regensburg, 2006, pp. 36–55.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Erika Litváková, Tamara Moyzes: Všade som menšina (I am a minority everywhere), (interview), *SME*, 4 April 2015, <http://kultura.sme.sk/c/7730665/tamara-moyzes-vsade-som-mensina.html#ixzz3fuA0N1Gg>, accessed 16 November 2018. Translated from the Slovak by Martina Pachmanová.
- 35 Izabela Kowalczyz, “Vizualizing the mythical Polish mother.” In: Bojana Pejić (note 3), p. 219.
- 36 For other projects by Tamara Moyzes and Roma Kale Panthera, see <http://www.tamaramoyzes.info/>.
- 37 Audre Lorde, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” In: C. Morraga, G. Anzaldúa (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981, pp. 95, 97.
- 38 As several authors cogently argue, the act of self-production of otherness maintains the stereotypical notion of Eastern Europe as marginal and/or peripheral. The self-colonizing metaphor was first used by Alexander Kiossev, “Notes on the self-colonising cultures.” In: *Cultural Aspects of the Modernisation Processes*, Oslo: TMV Skriftserie, No. 15, 1995.
- 39 Beata Hock recently tried to deconstruct the hegemonic universalism of Western feminism and proposed new perspectives on how to trespass the automated applications of the concepts and categories of Western art and art history and/or criticism on/in Eastern Europe. See Beata Hock, *Gendered Artistic Positions and Social Voices: Politics, Cinema, and the Visual Arts in State-Socialist and Post-Socialist Hungary*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013.
- 40 Tímea Junghaus, *Meet your Neighbours: Contemporary Roma Art from Europe*, Open Society Institute, 2006, p. 6.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 The exhibition series *Roma Body Politics* was focused on the visual representation and participation of Roma – and especially Roma women – in the mass media, art and public life, and took place from March through June 2015 in the Gallery 8, The Roma Contemporary Art Space in Budapest, located strategically in the city district mostly populated by Roma inhabitants.
- 43 Zdenka Badovinac, “Schengen women.” In: Pejić (note 4), pp. 202–203.
- 44 As *Gender Check*, the so-far largest project dedicated to mapping gender politics in visual arts in Eastern Europe exhibition (see note 1), and the collection of texts in the accompanying reader (see note) clearly demonstrate, the scholarly research, curatorial projects, and theory that thematize the body, sexuality, and feminine and masculine identities in socialist and post-socialist art are predominantly delineated by nationalities.
- 45 Sanneke Huisman, “Call the Witness: An Interview with Mária Hlavajová.” *Metropolis M*, 27 May 2011, <http://metropolism.com/features/call-the-witness/>, accessed 16

November 2018. Vis-à-vis the current massive influx of immigrants that triggers a fear of social disorder, unemployment, and terrorism and reinforces the already existing nationalism and racism (a superiority complex about nationality and race has been growing enormously in Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism), the need for transnational identity seems even more urgent.