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

Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

2 Ibid, p. 6.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Research on state feminism is also conducted in Poland in various fields, such as women’s history, history of women’s literature, or history of women’s movements.⁷ As Poland’s involvement in IWY seems a perfect field for this kind of investigation, it has also recently been receiving more coverage in Polish academic literature. From the level of detailed and primary investigation, like the local IWY celebrations in Białystok⁸ or media (women’s press) analysis,⁹ to the more general, and revisionist-theory-oriented research on women’s organisations in the People’s Republic of Poland and the history of for women activism¹⁰ to the comparative global research on IWY celebrations including the Polish case.¹¹ The Polish sociologist Magdalena Grabowska places her research within the wider debate on feminism in Central and Eastern Europe and declares a revisionist perspective, focusing on entanglements between the influences of socialism and liberal democracy in the histories of women’s emancipation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1975 IWY, UN and WIDF

IWY (1975) and then the Women's Decade which ran from 1976 to 1985 were one of the United Nations international celebratory years and decades.¹³ The role of both was twofold. On the one hand, it marked the culmination of years of concerted effort from women, as well as meetings and joint actions. On the other, it was a launching platform for women to voice their concerns and advocate for change on a global scale. In 1972, the UN General Assembly declared this year to be the International Women's Year. Since then the organisational work started to sustain and promote progress on women's rights. This led to the International Women's Conference in Mexico City and the following international women's conferences¹⁴, and, as Ghodsee argued in the above-mentioned fragment, provided a chance to meet, juxtapose and discuss the situation of women from all over the world.

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

13 United Nations International Years –

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

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

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

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

WIDF has been organising international conferences for women's rights since 1945.¹⁶

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

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

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

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

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

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

19 Olcott, op. cit.

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

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

20 Ibid.

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

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

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

It is worth noting that in the 1970s not only WIDF was losing their position in the organisation of IWY; the People’s Republic of Poland also lost its position in the international forum of the WIDF. As the Polish sociologist researching women’s organisations and activism Magdalena Grabowska explained, it was related to the change in international priorities of the for women policies.²⁴ During the first decades of the post-war period the priority was antifascism, peace and the role of women in keeping the world secure – Poles served as witnesses and important figures severely traumatised by the war and Nazism. Then, during the next decades, when the main objective shifted into the direction of general modernisation: work, economic equality, the position of the People’s Republic of Poland in the international women’s movement degraded. However, Polish women remained part of the organisation and participated in meetings and international gatherings. While Polish women activists and politicians remained active in the UN bodies in the 1960s and 1970s, including UNESCO, where they were involved in women’s advocacy,²⁵ their role in the organisation changed over time. Also, the representatives of the socialist countries often initiated and co-authored the most basic UN documents like the DEDAW 1967 and CEDAW 1979.²⁶ During the 1970s the position of Poland and other countries of the region took a step back. As Magdalena Grabowska argued,²⁷ the changes taking place in the global politics of the international women’s movement were coupled with local transformations. In Poland, the depoliticization of the women’s movement took place in the 1960s and 1970s and instead of an “ideological” – a “practical activism” developed, as Grabowska called it. Many post-war women’s activists had withdrawn from political life in the preceding years, and the new “practical activists” replaced the original aim of building political support for women’s equality with strategies to help with the problem of the “double burden” of workers and mothers.²⁸

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

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

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

25 Mrozik, op. cit.

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

27 Ibid., pp. 274–275.

28 Ibid.

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

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

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

The People's Republic of Poland, like many other countries, officially decided to support an international UN resolution for women and initiated the diplomatic actions required to celebrate IWY. The main legal act regulating Polish participation in IWY was the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of 1 August 1974 on the International Women's Year.³¹ Apart from declaring support for the international initiative, it pointed out Polish priorities of the year. This document established an honorary committee³² and included a framework

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

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

These one-and-the-like plans appeared mostly in the internal workflow of documents between officials and unions or organisations. The IWY celebrations in Poland were not widely discussed in the media. However, in the *Nasza Praca* (Our Work) bulletin, issued by the Main Board of the Women’s League³⁸ for the internal use of the branches of the organisation, the listing of activities planned for 1975 appeared twice – in the 1974³⁹ and 1975 issues of the magazine.⁴⁰ In the first case it was the main act – the Resolution of the Council of Ministers of 1 August 1974 on International Women’s Year and a call for proposals. However, a detailed celebration plan was published in the 1975 issue. It was entitled: *Women’s League Programme of Activities in International Women’s Year* and indeed represented the involvement of the Women’s League with IWY. Besides the previously planned Women’s Day (8 March) celebrations and the planned conference at the Institute of Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences – both mentioned in the bulletin issued in 1974 – other forms of celebrations were also listed. The activities and ideas that can be attributed to the Women’s League consisted of meetings, talks and even competitions for children and families, last on the list at 16th position appears: “To organise, together with the Capital House of Culture, a painting exhibition entitled *Portret kobiety* (Woman’s Portrait), as a side event to the proceedings of the 6th National Congress of the Women’s League and the celebration of International Women’s Day – March 1975”.⁴¹

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

Exhibitions on the occasion of IWY held in Warsaw during 1975

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

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

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

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

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

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

41 Ibid.



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

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

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

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

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

Another exhibition that might be connected to IWY but represents a different approach to art and promotion of women was organised at *Galeria Współczesna* (Contemporary Art Gallery), in KMPiK, at Plac Zwycięstwa (Victory Square) in Warsaw – an all-women art exhibition, centred around the creative work of female artists⁴⁴ (in a traditional media), and not a topic of portrait. A press review entitled *Ani jednego mężczyzny*⁴⁵ (Not a Single Male) stated that “Warsaw’s female artists decided to show themselves as a distinct artistic milieu, since this was the first time IWY was celebrated”.⁴⁶ Twenty women artists from Warsaw representing painting, graphics, and sculpture showed just a sample of their work. The gallery space was relatively small – only two rooms, thus it was used to draw attention to these female artists and their work rather than arrange a comprehensive exhibition. The reviewer described the artworks as novel and interesting; and the chosen authors as representing a mix of older, already-established female artists as well as the new generation. Unfortunately, no brochure was printed and the gallery’s documentation and promotion of the show was poor or non-existent.

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

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

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

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

46 Ibid.

Republic of Poland – Desa⁴⁷ in Nowy Świat street. The concept of the exhibition was to show women's portraits (paintings) created by Polish women artists. Thus, painting and traditional media again dominated the show. Artists that took part in the show included professional, but not very well known female painters: Halina Bielińska, Maria Bilińska, Lidia Bogusławska–Rompańska, Stefania Brandt, Anna Brzezińska, Iwona Graczyk, Olga Imbierowicz, Aniela Kulesza, Jadwiga Mijał, Maria Urban–Mieszkowska, Irena Weiss (Aneri), Maria Zaboklicka–Budzichowa and Bronisława Willmowska. Their works were accompanied by pottery by Hanna Modrzewska–Nowosielska and textiles by Honorata Blicharska and Karol Broniatowski. However, the connection to state policy should be seen here in the context of the 1970s People's Republic of Poland's turn towards the free market, including the art market, and the opening up of the Desa to an ever-widening group of private collectors (the emerging quasi-middle class during this period of communism).⁴⁸ Published images reveal the traditional, salon-like characteristics of the show, with paintings densely hung on the walls and vases of flowers decorating the exhibition space. Because of the title and the presence of the authorities – representatives of the Polish Women's League at the opening – this show appears to have been connected to the state vision of the IWY celebrations. However, both reviews published in *Stolica*⁴⁹ (Warsaw illustrated weekly) point to the auction house context. One of the reviews notes: "We consider the direction that Desa has taken in its sales policy to be the right one. It represents the elevation of art dealing. Increased sales are accompanied by increased artistic ambition and more careful selection of works."⁵⁰ *Portret kobiety* was described as an elegant, well-arranged, and successful show, but primarily in the context of Desa rather than the situation of women in the socialist state. If it was intended to relate to a celebration, it would be more fitting for Women's Day rather than IWY, as the opening date was March 1975. (Fig. 2).

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

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

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

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

50 *Stolica*, 16 March 1975, 11.

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



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

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

Finally, an exhibition entitled *Ewy* (Eves) was organised by the Association of Polish Art Photographers (Związek Polskich Artystów Fotografików, ZPAF⁵³) at the Old Town Galeria Stara (Old Gallery). It seems to be the best documented of the aforementioned shows. ZPAF printed a catalogue/

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

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

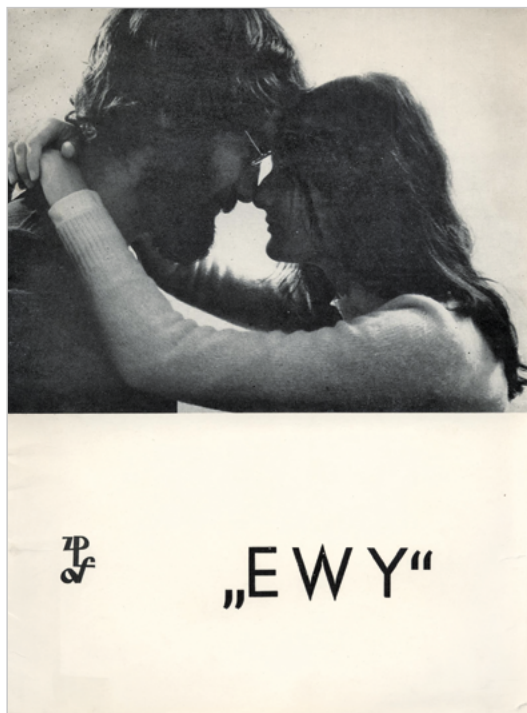


Fig. 3. Cover of the booklet “EWY” issued to the exhibition *EWY* [EVES] at Galeria Stara, Warsaw, 1975.

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

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

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

56 Ibid.

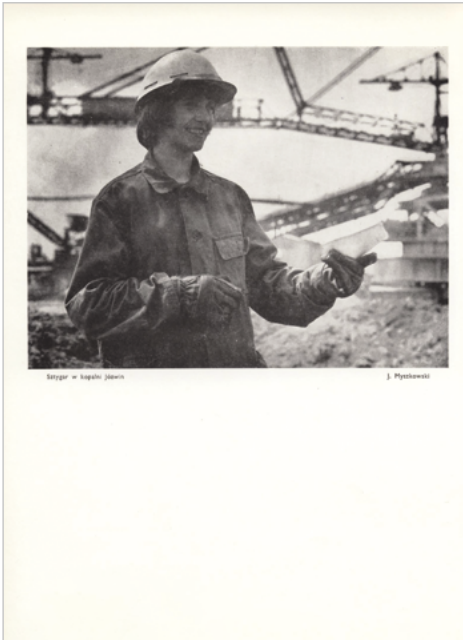


Fig. 4. Page from the booklet “EWY” issued to the exhibition *EWY [EVES]* at Galeria Stara, Warsaw, 1975. Signed: J. Myszkowski, *Szttygar w kopalni Józwin* [Foreman at the Józwin mine].



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

likely to have been official or driven by celebration, although in the case of *Eves* it seems to have been an occasion to present the association’s members’ work. In his introductory text, however, Kłosiewicz firmly stated that “this exhibition intends to present the situation of Polish women in the modern world to a global forum. Particularly in those areas of the world where humanist political assumptions are only just being assumed and local conditions or unjust social mechanisms – most often – do not spare women. ZPAF’s current presentation is a response to this call. This fact defines the nature of the show, as well as the scope and selection of its visual information”.⁵⁷ Neither *Ewy* nor *Kobiety* exposed Polish women’s problems or their actual experiences. In both cases, a critical approach was not adopted. The panorama of women’s portraits was created primarily by male photographers⁵⁸ (Fig. 4; Fig. 5).

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

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

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

The exhibition that never happened – *Polskie Artystki* (Polish Female Artists) at Zachęta The Central Bureau for Exhibitions⁵⁹

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

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

60 Ibid.

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

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

Jaworska's letter (dated 7 February 1975) seems to be crucial in this case. In it the art historian complains about the lack of response and the lack of further and concrete action taken by the president of ZPAP, who was the initiator of the exhibition. However, in her first letter on the 1975 exhibition, she already admitted that her involvement in the project would be difficult and that she could only agree to a limited scope of work, due to other professional and private commitments. At the time of the early arrangements, between 1974 and 1975, Jaworska was about to travel to London for a month-long stay. In addition, in 1974, due to the death of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences director Juliusz Starzyński, Jaworska had to take over some of his work and administrative duties. On top of this, she was elected chairwoman of the International Association of Art Critics⁶² (AICA) and was responsible for organising the association's congress planned for autumn 1975.

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

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

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

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

“what is still, in a rather vague way, called an ‘author’s exhibition’”.⁶⁴ Thus, one can conclude that the art historian was intentionally abandoning the more personal concept of the exhibition in favour of a more traditional form, in this case an exhibition of female artists of various disciplines and of members of various sections of ZPAP. So, the exhibition would have had the character of a salon⁶⁵ and it would have been more important to present outstanding works made by women, and not necessarily items merely featuring women as subject matter. Nevertheless, Jarowska expressed her awareness that maybe this kind of author’s thematic exhibition, meaning an exhibition presenting her statement regarding the situation of women artists, would be needed, but at that time she was not able to undertake such a task.

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

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

The exhibition aims to:

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

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

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

⁶⁴ Ibid.

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

⁶⁶ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

70 *Wystawy sztuki kobiet*, op. cit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

77 Ibid., p. 5.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

79 LL, op. cit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 320–324.

⁸¹ Ibid.

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

⁸³ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

86 Sokołowska, op. cit., p. 97.

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

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

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⁸⁷ *Biuletyn Informacyjny ZPAF*, 1975, 6(26).

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