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

Abstract

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

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

There have been some attempts in recent years to construct a global history of all-women art initiatives, including those undertaken in Eastern Europe.¹ Their objective is to challenge hegemonic art historical narratives that canonise events organised in places perceived as centres of art production and distribution. They have succeeded in – slowly – redrawing the map of all-women art activities, demonstrating that these were organised in numerous spaces worldwide, and yet have revealed numerous limitations of revisionist attempts. These limitations arise from the fact that it has been feminism developed in the United States and Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s that is uncritically and a-historically accepted as the main reference point in considering what is worth incorporating into narratives on art and feminism. Therefore, in the following text, we shall point to how this has affected art historical narratives produced in Eastern Europe and thus made it impossible to incorporate state socialist emancipatory activities undertaken in this region into the history of 20th-century feminist art.² We shall demonstrate that art historiography has developed in Eastern Europe after the political transformation in 1989, and in particular that its anti-communist bias has contributed to the erasure of all-women art activities related to socialist states' politics from social memory and feminist art history.³ Instead, attention was given to those exhibitions and artists that corresponded with the ideas of second-wave feminism, even if the application of Western⁴ concepts have always been considered inadequate. Writing about the development of history of feminism in Eastern Europe, literary scholars Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik claim that:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part one

Feminist positions and post/socialist politics

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

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

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

Snitow’s book is a memoir, not an academic analysis; nevertheless, it offers insightful remarks on the fact that feminists she met at that time in Eastern Europe were preoccupied with the change of the political system taking place in the region. After many discussions with them, she understood that although communism had given women equal civil rights, in the “totalitarian regime”,⁹ this had lost its significance as these rights were violated both in relation to women and men. In this context, she mentions Milada Horáková, a Czech socialist and influential figure in the interwar and post-1945 feminist movement, who was executed in the political trials of 1950.¹⁰ But she also writes about Slavenka Drakulić’s talk at the Socialist Scholars Conference organised in New York in 1990, during which this Croatian writer presented a sanitary napkin, explaining that the unavailability of this and other everyday products, which was humiliating and irritating, was the reason for which the state socialism was supported by few and did not survive.¹¹ For Snitow and other leftist feminists, the strong opposition of Eastern feminists toward the socialist project was a challenge, as it required a rethinking of global leftist politics. It did not, however, shatter their conviction that it is feminist ideas developed in the Western world, transferred through book grants and summer schools, that should be used to develop feminism in the post-socialist world. “Western

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

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

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

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

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

11 Ibid, p. 22.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Development of revisionist research

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

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

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

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

discussions on the Czech feminist delegation's trip to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, which reflected the new distribution of political power after 1989.²¹ The aim of the project initiated by Gender Studies in Prague and gradually joined by other NGOs from Slovakia, Poland, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Ukraine and Germany, was to problematize the claims of a "unified Eastern Bloc" and to show different forms of the concrete realisation of women's emancipation in these countries. This was driven by the idealistic idea that by naming similarities and differences in individual life practices and mutual recognition of cultures, this project would enable a better understanding of the ongoing integration processes in Europe.²² Yet, the strong anti-communist sentiment that prevailed among feminist activists and scholars meant that they left out the question of women's agency within state socialist structures.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A summary of the research conducted in recent years is the work of four authors: Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, Piotr Perkowski, Małgorzata Fidelis and Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, entitled *Women in Poland 1945–1989: Modernity, Equality, Communism*, published in 2020.²⁷ In it, the authors present the results of their research, but also cite a number of studies by other authors, for example, Agnieszka Kościańska, Agata Ignaciuk, Anna Dobrowolska, Natalia Jarska, Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz. What these publications have in common is that they see the emancipation of women in the socialist state as a complex, ambiguous process, the dynamics of which changed under the influence of many factors. What is crucial, women living in the People's Republic are not considered by these authors as mere addressees of propaganda activities and passive objects of policies of the state, but also, above all, as active participants in political, social and cultural life who co-created emancipatory discourses and practices.

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

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

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

26 Ibid. 19.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part two

All-women exhibitions from totalitarian and revisionist perspectives

Poland

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Because of the scarcity of archival materials related to the 1952 show, it is very difficult to reconstruct to what extent its organisation and participation in it (including the creation of specific works) was an initiative of women sharing the party's vision of emancipation of women. The exhibition curator – Carlotta Bologna⁴⁶ – in her memoirs written in her nineties did not mention this exhibition nor her activities in the artists' association, although in one of the reviews she is indicated not only as the exhibition's organiser but also as its initiator.⁴⁷ This illustrates one of the problems that a historian working on this kind of exhibitions faces: many women artists, curators and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Czechoslovakia

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

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

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

So far, no similar exhibition project has been organised in the Czech Republic, such as the aforementioned *Polish Women Artists* (National Museum in Warsaw, 1991). This may be due to the smaller size of the Czech art scene and/or to the specific political development of Czechoslovakia after 1968, in which Czech and Slovak woman artists had seldom come into contact with Western feminists and feminism (compared to Natalia LL, for example). As a result, their position was less informed than some of their Polish women generational colleagues by references to second-wave feminism, which most Czech art historians interpreted as the absence of feminism on the local scene before 1989.⁵³ This is also the reason why, in recent years, Czech feminist art historians have concentrated their research mainly on the interwar period and the period after 1989.⁵⁴ They saw no possibility of interpreting women's agency on the art scene under socialist conditions.⁵⁵

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Recent art-historical assessments have therefore tended to distinguish between “unofficial” artists who produced “good quality” art outside the framework of political engagement during state socialism, and the “official” artists, whose politically engaged art was supposed to be of poor quality and unworthy of recognition.⁵⁹ In 2022, for example, the centenary of the birth of the twins Květa and Jitka Válová, two of the most important Czech post-war artists, was marked by a major retrospective that interpreted their work and their political stance as strongly anti-communist and in complete opposition to the socialist regime.⁶⁰ Their work, which depicted smelters at work in the ironworks in their industrial hometown of Kladno in the 1950s, had a strong political context, and they themselves exhibited in exhibitions promoting women’s emancipation before 1989.⁶¹ On the other hand, interpreting the political positions of individual women artists today is undoubtedly difficult, not only because their individual political positions have changed over time, but also because they have been overlaid by the experiences of the late 1970s and 1980s and especially the post-1989 period, when an increasingly apolitical or anti-communist attitude prevailed in Czech society. From the research material available today, it is certainly possible to reconstruct the basic background of the all-woman shows promoting women’s emancipation that were organised by official institutions during state socialism, and there were quite a few of them.

After 1948, in socialist Czechoslovakia, small associations with different interests and priorities were gradually banned or merged with newly emerging mass organisations. The organisation *Circle of Women Artists*, founded in 1917, that brought together women artists and promoted their work to the public in the interwar period,⁶² held its last exhibition *We Are Building Socialist Prague* in 1951.⁶³ From then on, the main organiser of large women-only exhibitions was the mass women’s organisation, whose name, structure, and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

70 Volavková, op. cit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Croatia/Yugoslavia

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

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

76 Z. Kostka, *Žena v současné tvorbě. Výsledky výtvarné soutěže k Mezinárodnímu roku ženy* (exh. cat.), Prague, 1976.

77 Some of these projects also involved male artists and had male curators. See R. Roubíčková, "Žena v současné tvorbě", *Mladá fronta*, 30 March 1976, p. 4.

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

(and especially due to civil war) a repatriarchalisation of society: patriarchal culture as a long-lasting structure criticised by Yugoslav feminists and de-institutionalised by the socialist state⁷⁹ was now officially proclaimed and re-institutionalised. It was not until 2020 that the first historical overview of art created by women artists was opened in the Art Pavilion in Zagreb. Under the title *Zagreb, City of Female Artists / Works of Croatian Women Artists from the End of the 19th to the 21st Century*,⁸⁰ it featured works by 54 women artists, from the late nineteenth century to contemporary ones. Although locally marked as presenting artists who “left an indelible mark in the history of the art of Zagreb”, it was rather national in scope having in mind that Zagreb had been the artistic and cultural centre of Croatia, as well as one of three urban/cultural centres in socialist Yugoslavia. Although a relatively wide historical span of the exhibition was structured in 3 parts (1. from the late 19th till up to WWII; 2. post-WWII and the following decades; 3. from the early seventies till today), art history-related texts in the exhibition catalogue did not follow this logic: they almost all referred to the first half of the 20th century, to the first all-women exhibition (in the same institution) in 1916,⁸¹ to the first professional association of women artists,⁸² or the first public debates on art produced by women. It is the interwar period that was researched and interpreted as important for feminist interventions in the local art scene, and we were left with the conclusion that after it up until the 1990s there were no exhibitions or phenomena that would be of feminist importance. On the other hand, the socialist period was seen as highly problematic, due to the absence of autonomous women artists groups or initiatives, the lack of women artists even in neo-avant-garde groups and and “either in those forms of collective activity that at that time were marked by the need to democratise art”.⁸³

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

79 Burcar, op. cit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Although not uncommon as a format, politicising exhibitions that would praise the role of women in the socialist project were rarely organised by state socialist women's organisations in Yugoslavia.⁸⁵ One was organised by the Women's Antifascist Front in 1949 in Belgrade, under the title *Women of Yugoslavia in Building of Socialism*,⁸⁶ and the Union of Women's Societies was involved in the preparation of a series of exhibitions *Family and the Household* from 1957 to 1960 in Zagreb. The latter has been well interpreted from the standpoint of urban development, design and housing culture in socialist Yugoslavia,⁸⁷ although not from a feminist perspective, and the first is completely ignored. As some rare research shows, the cultural activities of state socialist women's organisations took place at the municipal and workplace levels, and in that sense continued the politics of the Women's Antifascist Front, hand in hand with the expansion of the self-management system from 1953.⁸⁸ The self-management alternative to the Soviet type of socialism, a Yugoslav experiment, certainly brings in an important aspect to the comparative perspective proposed in this text. The Soviet-Yugoslav split in 1948 severely affected the state women's organisation and its international activities. In 1949, Yugoslavia was expelled from the Women's International Democratic Federation, and from that moment on, the Yugoslav women's organisation started its own international connections, particularly with women's organisations in the Global South. As Soviet-Yugoslav relations warmed again in the mid-1950s, and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

90 Prokopová, op. cit., p. 2.

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

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

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

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

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

⁹³ Ibid.

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

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

A retrospective exhibition of the Photo-Club Split revealed that its two women members, Karmela and Anka Marasović, organised a Women’s Day exhibition in 1962.⁹⁶ Recent research into activities of photo-clubs shows that in the 1970–1980s, they are characterised by collectively organised presentations and exhibitions of women photographers.⁹⁷ All this calls for further research into this collective exhibition phenomenon, now with hindsight and beyond the narrow confines of art. While art historians tend to emphasise that Women’s Day exhibitions are less important for a feminist art history since being instructed from “above”, in fact, they were self-organised by artists’ associations, cultural centres and communal organisations and more open to participation and reception than curated ones. It is because of this that we can start seeing them differently, as exhibitions from “below”.

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

The Exhibition of Sculpture in 1972 brought together 12 women sculptors from the late 19th and the 20th century in Croatia for the first time.⁹⁹ Unlike other Women’s Day exhibitions with modest catalogues, containing only lists of participating artists and exhibited works, this one had reproductions.¹⁰⁰ The curatorial statement¹⁰¹ openly pointed to gender asymmetry in sculpting, for a long time exclusively male-dominated, and emphasised its recent development and especially women’s contribution to it. The second, *Northern Croatian Painters Born in the Second Half of the 19th Century* exhibited works from the private art collection of Dr. Josip Kovačić,¹⁰² conceptualised as a view of that

95 Šeparović, op. cit., p. 205.

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

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

98 Šeparović, op. cit., p. 206.

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

100 Ečim, op. cit., p. 51.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Un/parallel histories of all-women exhibitions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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