

The Gendered Body as Raw Material for Women Artists of Central Eastern Europe in the Post-Communist Decade.

This paper will explore the approach of women artists of the post-communist decade of the 1990s from Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia toward the subject of the concept of individuality; specifically, it will investigate the gendered body of woman as material for their art. One of the premises of my investigation is that the subject of gender and gendered identity in the Central-Eastern European territory has its own variety of nationally understood definitions, all of which can be discussed comparatively.

Furthermore, many of these nation-specific definitions of gender relate to the concept of the human being as an individual within a specific social and cultural environment.

I will argue that the 1990s were a period of self-examination and reshaping for Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia, and as a result, its contemporary women artists remained especially fascinated with gender.

INTRODUCTION

Categorization of art based on its gender-related issues only recently became vociferously discussed for its socio-political correctness that distinguishes the emergence of the label of the “feminist art” within the art created by women artists in many Central-Eastern European countries. One should be aware that a definition of “feminist art” was not a newly-born term in this geographical territory but a term, through the natural sequence of socio-political changes that occurred after 1989, that had loomed rather blatantly, causing enormous social controversy due to the biased understanding of the word’s definition – not only by men, but by the women artists as well.

This Central Eastern European sphere addressed in this essay includes three countries – Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia – as they appear to share a comparable struggle in accustoming themselves to open usage of “feminist” terminology. The pejorative connotation of “feminist” terms only impedes the labeling of the gender-related art created by women-artists.

For Polish, Czech, and Slovakian women artists, their concerns as female artists has always been manipulated by socio-political conditions. The constant suppression of their possession of creative values during the period of the communist regime aroused this rebellious voice, which struggled through the obstacles until achieving its resonance after the fall of communism. Consequently, the dramatic appearance of gender-concerned art created new opportunities for women artists – a faith and the challenge of finding a proper means of artistic execution of their ideas and ideals.

The first step for women artists to undertake is to reclaim the existence of an individual identity within post-communist society. Performance art, installation, video

and photography came to be the most important channels of visual communication with the audience. Since the early nineties, women artists have taken up media such as projections, video installation and video sculpture as a fresh means to explore the social position of women. The application of these new channels can be seen as a specific revolt against traditionalism of the communist period where usage of “untraditional” techniques was seen as deviated import from the “West.” Simultaneously, for this very same reason, the works of the post-communist women-artist consistently return to the contradictions inherent in the supposedly “newly free” citizen of their respective countries.

The opening of the Eastern European borders was followed by unrestrained exposure of this region which for over fifty years had been seen only within the borders of the countries of the Eastern bloc. One consequence of this isolation was that many in the West regarded this sphere as artistically unproductive and uninteresting. Moreover, this misconception created a false understanding of the newly emerging art as not being a product of stylistic progress of the countries own movements, but appropriation of Western styles. Unfortunately, the art of the women artists, since it developed within post-communist revivals, has often been regarded in this way.

Thus, my intention to analyze some of the issues of women's art, with its specific attention to gender of the Central Eastern Europe was provoked by the need to establish its universal importance. This art transmits a certain ideology of the specific conditions based on the historical, as well as socio-political events which either consciously or unconsciously affected the creative environment of the visual arts. As for the Central-Eastern European women artists, their art is a form of communication not only within their own nations, but also outside of the borders of those nations. It is because they want

to tell their stories, expose their suffering, humiliation and constant suppression of their ego as a warning sign against socio-political intrusion into their privacy. The importance of greater exposure of the creative efforts of these artists in the Western sphere can only strengthen the notion of awareness against the dangerous forces that deny or underestimate the symbolism of the art coming from the countries that had long existed in a state of neglect in the Western sphere.

I. TRACING THE SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Looking back at the social, political, and historical events of the past half-century in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, at these countries as they were in their country-specific events, they do share a common element of the struggle with communist regimes. I believe this shared element left an unconscious impression on the minds of the population that suffered a trauma from the years lived under communism, until its fall in 1989. However, as much as being positive – in terms of uniting those who were anti-communists, as there were some who saw communism to be a perfect socio-political system of their countries – an unexpected aspect appeared to be a fair treatment of gender identity. Martina Pachmanova remarked that because of the resistance against the communist regimes, which united people regardless of gender, this resistance was also one of the gender debates on feminism. It is still considered to be a luxurious and unnecessary “adornment” of the politics and culture of the former communist countries. As a result of the long period of deprivation of freedom and independence, a historical collective trauma arose and the consequence of this trauma can be traced to the present.³

³ Martina Pachmanova, “The Muzzle: Gender and Sexual Politics in Contemporary Czech Art,”

Thus, the process of shaping a specific identity – the Eastern European identity of women artists – is deeply rooted in the socio-historical patina created by the incisive marks of each of these countries, native to the women artists themselves. Fifty years spent under communist rule in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia presently call for a strong need for the recognition of the individual voices of its citizens. As for artists, the ultimate goal has been to regain the identity lost in the blaring mass of voices, one that solemnly belongs to the individual artist. The position of women artists in this collective life was subsumed under a shrewd tactic of the communist leaders. What the system offered its citizens was mandated equality: the gender-equality of the labor force. In reality, as Belinda Cooper observed, mandated equality imposed by the state did not offer a public dialogue about the changes in women’s roles, thus sexism and discrimination persisted, both in public and domestic spheres.⁴

Despite “social equality,” offered by the communist government to women by giving them access to high-level education and workplace support, the reality of their social position was highly deceptive, masked by exterior covert governmental manipulation. The official state propaganda claimed to have emancipated women through education, work, and childcare, but in reality had failed to achieve its goals. Overburdened with domestic and occupational tasks, women came to resent the very notion of “women’s rights” as exploitative and ideologically biased.⁵

According to Piotr Piotrowski, a renowned Polish art critic and historian, the communist regime tried to disguise its anti-woman policies by a variety of shams in

ArtMargins (2000) available at <http://artmargins.com/content/feature/pachmanova2.html>, p. 4.

⁴ Belinda Cooper, “Building feminism from the ground up.” *Civnet’s Journal for Civil Society* (August-September 1997), available at <http://www.civnet.org/journal/issue3/cfbeco.htm>, p. 1.

⁵ Elzbieta H. Oleksy, “Plight in Common? Women’s Studies in the New Democracies,” *Outskirts – Online Journal*, available at <http://www.chloe.uwa.edu.au/outskirts/archive/VOL3/commentary1.html>, p. 2.

accordance with the tradition established by the “fathers of Bolshevism.” It was only on the surface that woman appeared to play a significant role in the political, cultural, and national arenas. Women’s lives were ostensibly shaped by the ideology of liberation and equal rights.⁶ The result of the condition as an outsider of the communist sphere could presume that the circumstances had to lead toward the mutinous voice of the women-artists against this myth of homogenous culture. This mutinous voice marked its presence especially in Poland, in the seventies, when artists such as Natalia LL, Ewa Partum, or Maria Pininska-Beres tried to imply in their works elements of feminism, which unfortunately could not find its resonance in their hermetic society blinded by patriarchal belief. Thus in reality, due to the obsolete control of the artists’ funds and the open artistic scene solemnly supported by government the voice of the women artists was always abated.

It is important to acknowledge a specific source of the dilemma that went even beyond the governmental policies: the role of the Catholic Church in Poland. As opposed to the former Czechoslovakia, where the Catholic Church did not play as distinctive a role in the social reactions against the communist regime, in Poland the Catholic Church stood out as a supporter of social striving for political freedom. Izabela Kowalczyk, a Polish feminist writer and art critic, in her essay on feminist art in Poland, made a clear statement about the special historical attribute that the Polish Catholic Church assigned to women.

Woman according to this tradition was represented as a ‘pathetic’ Mother Pole, who nevertheless looked after the Polish home and was a guardian of national values. So in this way the Polish

⁶ Piotr Piotrowski, “The Old Attitude and the New Faith”, in *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), p. 41.

Church strengthened the model of a traditionally passive woman, who can realize herself only in her home and family.⁷

Since the politics of the Catholic Church did not develop such a powerful voice in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the women artists do not seem to engage themselves in aggressive polemics on the subject of the Catholic Church. Simultaneously, if religious symbolism has a presence here, it is usually used as a critical tool in censure of the subject of fundamentalism in faith.

1989 was a significant year of great changes, as Eastern Europe embarked upon the process of socio-political transformation born from the anticipated fall of Communism. Many scholars, including myself, regard this period as the beginning of the post-Communism – a period when Eastern European countries appeared to achieve their political independence and democratization. However, new transformations of the socio-political system brought a new series of problems and responsibilities, burgeoning from the opening of the Eastern borders to the West.

For artists, these new changes evoked a certain self-segregation of their own identities, yet strongly connected with their social surroundings. Individual artists, as the Polish art critic and curator Aneta Szylak points out, have immersed themselves in the redefinition of their personal and national identities, and in the process they have explored social, political, and cultural issues that had scarcely been investigated in the recent past – issues such as the role of religion (predominantly in Poland), and education in the daily life of the individual and of the nation.⁸ The socio-political changes within

⁷ Izabela Kowalczyk , “Feminist Art in Poland Today,” *N.Paradoxa International Feminist Art Journal*, no. 11 (1999): p. 1.

⁸ Aneta Szylak, “The New Art from the New Reality: Some Remarks on Contemporary Art in Poland,” *Art Journal* (Spring 2000): p. 55.

the post-communist decade tend toward a specific need for re-examination of the present critical reality to forge post-communist conditions for Central Eastern Europe that draw a border between modernity, a sense of belonging to a communist aesthetic, and post-modernity of the present time. Piotr Piotrowski, interestingly, equated modernist mythology to universalism. In reference to the model of communist culture he observed:

Modernism did not differentiate art after the sex, race origin. Art was one. This did not require individual negotiations, individual acceptance of one's position according to the sex, race or origin. Indeed no negotiations with the existing reality were necessary. One's declaration was sufficient. But now it is no longer possible. The fall of the totalitarian point of reference resulted in the pluralization of the subject and a feeling of its individuality.⁹

This new socio-aesthetic shift, simultaneously, allowed for the growth of defined interest in and a possibility of the articulation of the gender issue. Moreover, the post-modern appropriation correlated with the increased criticism of the past which included re-examination of the gender equality of both sexes. Interestingly, not too many female and male artists used their sex as a medium of gender expression during the communist regime; however, in both cases, the revival came along rather drastically after 1989. Men, as did women, became heavily interested in using their gender as a form of artistic expression of either their socio-political concerns – Zbigniew Libera, from Poland – or simply sexual homoerotic emblems.

II. CONCEPT OF INDIVIDUALITY: ON GENDER NEUTRALIZATION

Being a woman and 'being' an artist is a relation with the self; perpetually asking yourself a question of self identity. Is this me, or maybe a certain code, inculcated model or psychological script where I try to find myself...

⁹ Piotr Piotrowski, "Sztuka wedlug polityki," *The Negotiators of Art* (Gdansk: Centre of Contemporary Art Laznia, 2000), p. 33.

It may appear that the years of the communist regime – inculcating false ideas of “equality” and deprivation of one’s individuality – cultivated a strong need for post-communist re-surfacing of identity. A discernment of “gender identity” in Central Eastern European countries, however, even in the post-Communist decade, causes a discomfort of acknowledgment among women-artists themselves. Being an artist, not a woman artist being gender-neutral, is highly preferred as a self-identification by some of the women-artists of the Central Eastern European sphere.¹⁰ Such a stance is conditioned by the frightful fact of the untrammelled repression of women by post-Communist socio-politics as well as the polemical influence of both official and unofficial art within the Central Eastern European sphere, which presently enables them to go beyond “gender-neutralization.” Jana Gerzova, a Slovakian art critic, offers an insightful remark about the risk that the unofficial art of the communist decade carried along into post-modernity; it was its own defense mechanism.

One of these mechanisms was the forced need to reinforce homogeneity of the social and civic attitude of unofficial artists. This feeling of civic solidarity pushed back any need for emancipation based on generation, opinion, or gender. It helped to create an illusion of homogeneity even where a clear differentiation was present.”¹¹

Political changes throughout Central Eastern Europe may have brought a new promise for improvement of the exteriority of individual existence organized around one’s bodily functions, but did not necessarily allow enough room for the serious

¹⁰ Here, as an example, I would refer to the statements made on this subject by Polish artist Zuzanna Janin, or Czech artist Jana Vidova-Zackova.

¹¹ Jana Gerzova, “Art and the Question of Gender in Slovak Art,” *N. Paradoxa International Feminist Journal*, no. 8 (2001): p. 76.

liberation of open expression on gender-identity. Paradoxically, marginalization of gender identity only restrains a potential improvement of this stance. I agree with Izabela Kowalczyk on the stance that, as she states: “Contemporary women artists often avoid qualifying their art or labeling themselves as ‘feminist,’ since they are afraid of the pejorative connotations of the term.”¹² In Central Eastern Europe this pejorative connotation of the term is deeply rooted in a definition once shaped during communism, which displayed a “feminist woman” as the one possessing more masculine than feminine features, thus being a deviation of nature – the “other.” Ironically, the change of the political system did not change public approach toward feminism. Unfortunately, present criticism of the issue only prolongs a continuation of the existing social bias toward gender identity of the women within the social sphere of imposed roles.

Do women artists see their surrounding environment differently from men? Shall we categorize art based on artists’ gender? These questions will always follow gender-related discussions. It is not about categorization itself, I contend, but about having the unrestrained choice for those who wish to make it. And in the present repressed stance of the post-communist social trauma, in the countries of the former Soviet bloc, there is a continuing lack of such a choice. *Communism Is Fallen, But Do We Really Want To Be Normal*, asked Dorota Martini, a Polish artist, in her work from 1988-91 (Fig. 1), questioning the social acceptance of human diversity, which includes gender-related, religious, and ethnic classification. Is the post-communist society ready to accept long-repressed individualization? The answer to this question can be addressed by the women

¹² Izabela Kowalczyk, “Feminist Art in Poland Today,” *N. Paradoxa International Feminist Art Journal*, no. 11 (1999): p. 1. Found on-line at <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/kowal2.html>.

artists themselves, who instead of suppressing can expose the possibility of a visual destruction of the existing gender related myopia.

Griselda Pollock declared that we are searching for ways to acknowledge the “spaces of femininity” and their subjective temporalities in the rhythms of women’s lived experience within and against the hierarchies of sexual difference as that is configured in complex social formations of class, race and sexuality.¹³ In the same sense



Fig. 1: Dorota Martini, 1988-91, oil on canvas.

the search for woman’s own identity as an individual is relevant to Pollock’s statement. Simultaneously, the path of ‘gender-neutralization’ applies to the reflective notion of neutering and depriving oneself of memo-sexuality: a crucial element of Freudian psychological contemplation.

For Polish artist Zuzanna Janin (b.1964) investigation of art based on the gender or social strata is an anachronism. In an interview she stated: “The fact that I was born a woman, was not my choice. The fact that I am an artist was solemnly my choice...I do not tell ‘feminine stories,’ as I do not understand the meaning of ‘feminine stories’ because they never interested me.”¹⁴ Such an attitude of the “gender-neutral” positioning of some “new generation women artists” I relate to a unique identification as a “neutered victim of a social stance.” Being a woman artist does not identify or imply a predilection to make a specific feminine-related art, but rather, in the post-communist society, it should accent the need to establish freedom of interpretative choice based on the goals

¹³ Griselda Pollock, *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Reading* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 8.

¹⁴ Excerpt from an interview by Przemyslaw Jedroski, “Patrze Na Swiat Jak Patrze”/ “I look at the World as I Look,” *Arteon* 18, nr. 10 (2001): p. 34.

and aspirations of the artist herself. And since this choice is not yet present in this geopolitical sphere, we should strive for its presence, not sustain its absence.

It is evident for the viewer of Janin's works that the artist herself had to be aware of the issues associated with women, especially with her piece *Sweet Girl*, from 1997 (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Zuzanna Janin, *Sweet Girl*, 1997, wire and cotton candy.

The work resembling a girl's silhouette made out of copper wire and cotton candy, was shown at the all-woman exhibition, *Maskarady*, at the IX Festival Inner Spaces in September 2001, in Poznan, Poland.¹⁵

Ironically, the show itself propagated the idea of exposing various stereotypes associated with women. The leading agenda of the exhibition, to which Izabela Kowalczyk made reference in her review of the exhibition, transcends a question posed by Judith Butler on distinguishing specific features for either man or woman. If there is a sphere in Janin's work, which specifically deals with embodying

stereotypical ideas of woman's exteriority, her role is to be a sweet girl. The use of cotton candy, a material lacking substance or permanence, renders unavoidable any escape from the passage of time. A sweet girl is the artist's transparent implication of the "external" self-portrait suspended in the surrounding space.

In a similar sphere of claimed gender-neutrality is artist Jana Vidova-Zackova (b.1961), Slovakian born, now living in Prague.¹⁶ For Zackova, there is no difference between the art of men or women.¹⁷ The artist disregards a sexual difference as being a

¹⁵ Other artists who participated in the show were: Katarzyna Kozyra, Anna Baumgart, Elzbieta Jablonska, Paulina Olowska, Dorota Podlaska, Joanna Rajkowska, Jadwiga Sawicka, Julita Wojcik, and Monika Zielinska.

¹⁶ National identity is a new dilemma which appeared after the split of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993. Since many artists born in Slovakia moved to Czech region I will always refer to them as Slovak working and living in Prague.

¹⁷ An opinion expressed in the inquiry published in *Revue Labyrinth*, nr. 1-2 (1997): p. 118.

factor indicating potential characteristics assigned to the specific gender. Unfortunately, the eternal world – a world existing outside of the object and its artist – assigns a particular role to each sign. Thus, it is rather problematic to view Zackova’s video from 1992, titled *Meditation*, which displays various shots of the kaleidoscopic images of woman’s lips (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Jana Vidova-Zackova, *Meditation*, 1992, video.

This erotic rendering of the subject of the lips was deliberately turned by the artist into an “object of desire,” as the lips are often associated with such a rendering.

Intentionally or not, Zackova’s choice of subject matter does not ask to be classified as “feminine,” yet, at the same time, it evolves around the “feminine.” Hence, I perceive the artist’s implication of the woman’s lips to function semiotically, to be read within the cultural ideology of patriarchal society as a symbol of sensual, erotic or sexual representation. For that matter the gender of the artist becomes diffused, because the subject begins to function on its own – as a sign.

In response to gender-neutrality Martina Pachmanova introduced the term *muzzled*, from the title of a show of six Czech and six German women-artists in Prague, June 1994. Pachmanova used the term of *muzzled identity* as a specific metaphor describing the situation of those who maintain such a stance. Pachmanova states that “*muzzle* is used as a metaphor for various power and ideological mechanisms whose aim is to restrain feminist consciousness among contemporary Czech women artists and to

control their socially and culturally ‘inappropriate’ gestures that could disturb the dominant patriarchal order.”¹⁸

The term itself can be easily used as an informal definition of the gender neutrality of not only Czech women-artists, but of all those from the Eastern bloc who proclaim this position. Moreover, it should be admitted that these artists allow themselves to be manipulated by social views, or rather allow themselves to be “muzzled.”

It is this conscious awareness that I find to be perplexingly irritating; it is as disturbing as the process of manipulation itself. Self-marginalization, as I would call this approach, only allows a continuation of the existing biased undertones. In fact, it is evident that through neutralization certain women artists take an easier approach, perhaps a foolish one, in displaying their art in the male-dominant environment. Can gender neutrality exist? Michel Foucault claims that “Deployment of sexuality... established this notion of sex.”¹⁹

III. THE ISSUE OF WOMAN’S IDENTITY

Attitudes toward representation of the female body as a subject occupies a great portion of the art created by Central Eastern European women. The increased interest in the problems concerning the female body can be attributed to the changing socio-political climate in recent years. In Poland, Katarzyna Kozyra (b. 1963) who represents the younger generation of women artists, through her work revives a discussion of issues of identity, female biology and physicality in order to abolish the pre-existing social framework of Polish homogenous culture.

¹⁸ Martina Pachmanova, “The Muzzle: Gender and Sexual Politics in Contemporary Czech Art,” *ArtMargins* (2000) available at <http://artmargins.com/content/feature/pachmanova2html>, p. 2.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, quoted in Simon During, *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 341.

Most of Kozyra's works oscillate around exploitation of the reality of the contemporary body living within a visualization of the present social culture. The pondering over one's relation to his/her own body, its subjectivity and the social debates evoked by the visual dissimilarity of the presented bodies, are notoriously raised in the works of the artist. Her critical juggling with the social and cultural norms of "difference" and their acceptance and place within the surrounding reality have earned her a reputation as one of the "controversial" artists.

One of the artist's crucial piece with gender-related implications is *Olympia* of 1996. The work is comprised of three different photographs and a videotape (Figs. 4, 5, 6). Adopting the original prototype of Manet's *Olympia*, Kozyra similarly manifests the conflict of a socio-political nature as directed toward politization of an individual. Kozyra's figure of Olympia, as opposed to Manet's representation of an "anonymous" model, is a representation of the artist herself – a self-portrait of a transformative construction. The first image comments upon the social construction of identities of women in society, similar to the idea of Manet's courtesan. The second portrait is an artist's parody of an "original" idea, implemented by the allowance of an auto-bibliographical note. The representation of a healthy female body is substituted by a sick body that was affected by chemotherapy, which the artist herself had to undergo while she was struggling with cancer. The third picture from the sequence - *Olympia-Old Lady* – refers to the issue of time, to the history of an individual and her own personal history as it exists within the norms of society.



Fig. 4: Katarzyna Kozyra, *Olympia*, 1996.



Fig. 5: Katarzyna Kozyra, *Olympia After Chemo*, 1996.



Fig. 6: Katarzyna Kozyra, *Olympia-Old Lady*, 1996.

Thus, the last representation encounters a viewer with the issue of the gaze. Is a viewer comfortable with looking at the raw representation of the bodily experience of repugnant, rather than the idealized, beauty of a female body? It is Kozyra's pure comment on the stereotypical perception of woman's body in our culture as a source of visual satisfaction to fulfill the needs of a male gaze; it is a gaze to which the artist attributes specific attention. In her essay *Whose Body? Whose Desire?* Leonida Kovac comments on Kozyra's intention that the model's gaze constitutes the principle visible link between the private and the public space, between the two zones separated by bourgeois ideology which nevertheless share a common territory, or rather, object of exchange: a woman's body.²⁰

Simultaneously, Jana Zelibská (b.1941), a prolific woman artist from Slovakia, successfully creates powerful statements about oscillation of the woman's role within her society. In the video installations *Sisters I* (1997) and *Sisters II* (1999) the artist shifted her attention toward psychological study of the relationships between women. (Figs. 7, 8). Taking into account a process of growing up, Zelibská defined a psychological picture of mutual relationships among young girls. A strong emphasis placed on the reactions among these young girls, meticulously exposed by the close-up of the operating video

²⁰ Leonida Kovac, "Whose Body? Whose Desire?," *N. Paradoxa International Feminist Art Journal*, no. 6 (2000): p. 23-24.

recording, indicates the artist's intention to exert a potential need of returning to the honest body language of the young girls. Undertaking a step of going back to the roots of our childhood memories will allow us to understand the shaping process of ourselves; it will detect the core of the fear and anxiety imprinted upon in the mind of a grown-up woman.



Fig. 7: Jana Zelibská, *Sisters I*, 1997, video.



Fig. 8: Jana Zelibská, *Sisters II*, 1999, video.

For Zelibská, this childhood exploration only evinces the claim of identity-shaping as being evidently constructed by the socio-cultural ideals that are deeply imbued within the internal structure of every society. Zelibská's representation in the video recording of spontaneous dialogue about intimate experiences between two young girls inevitably questions the nature of gender stereotypes. The vulnerability of the nature of these young girls is, unfortunately, left for the future deconstruction and alterations by social traditions and environment.

The Czech artist Veronika Bromová (b.1966) belongs to a group of first-generation artists of the new Czech Republic, who routinely use computer animation as an artistic tool in their creative process. The artist creates her artistic dialogue with the viewer through usage of predominantly computer-assisted photomontages, as well as installations. An extensive application of the figure is used by the artist to represent a condition of the human being within, often questionable, identification of reality.

Bromova represents deformation of corporeal forms as well as her own body as being tormented to discuss the theme of women issues.

In 1996, Bromova presented a cycle of digital photographs titled *Views* (Fig. 9). Here the artist portrays an interest in the theme of pornography and voyeurism. The crotch, exposing muscles and tendons, demonstrates the idea of exposing the interiority of a woman's body as an essential part of the exterior veil which is the object of the sexual desire. "I just allowed myself to uncover its physical reality of which we do not know anything, I de-eroticised it."²¹ This physical reality was portrayed by Bromova through the literal employment of the human body. De-constructed to its internal ingredients, the body will no longer serve as an object of desire, as it is brought into a basic form of its own being which may repulse the notion of sexual fantasy.

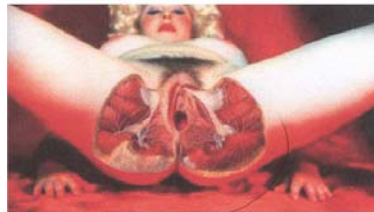


Fig. 9: Veronika Bromova, *Views*, 1996, digital photography.

IV. THE POLITICS OF FOOD: THE FEMALE BODY AS A CONSUMER AND AN OBJECT OF CONSUMPTION

Socio-political changes after 1989 in the Central Eastern European bloc awakened a specific awareness among women artists that it is a reduction of the woman's body to being an object of consumption as well as a consumer itself, controlled by the imposed norms of the newly emerging consumer culture. This awareness was greatly induced by

²¹ Interview with Tereza Bruthal, published on-line in *G Newsreel*, "Worlds Tempting Marked 'Top Secret,'" p. 2. Found at http://www.igalerie.cz/texty/oo1_en.php3.

the influence of Western globalization that brought with it something essentially unknown under the communist dictatorship, consumerism.

Women artists of Central Eastern Europe probably become preoccupied with the artistic battle against consumerism because they had been aware of the imminent danger of the consumer politic. One such an approach was that the body was chosen by consumptive culture to be a decisive and vulnerable element for manipulation. Women, especially, become the most vulnerable victims of these schemes, since their visual expectations are always induced by the cultural canons of a scopophilic nature. Paradoxically, women even allow themselves to be engaged in such activities. Thus, it will be fair to agree with Kaja Silverman who observed that, “Most of the time, we desire what our culture tells us we should desire. As Heidegger would say, we are absorbed in the ‘they’, displaced in relation to our subjectivity.”²²

In September of 2000, renowned Polish art curator Anda Rottenberg organized an exhibition titled *Postindustrial Sorrow*. Among the artists exhibiting on the theme of a “global supermarket” was Joanna Rajkowska. Born in 1968, Rajkowska belongs to the most engaging group of women artists to appear on the Polish art scene in the second half of the nineties. Her video installations, as well as cans containing “the essences” of the artist’s body, consistently aim for the intellectual provocation of the audience, intended to awaken a heightened sense of human existence, an awareness of self and others. These 0,33 liter cans, resembling cans of soda, filled with the artist’s own body secretions, were presented in the show under the title *Satisfaction Guaranteed* (Fig. 10). Ironically, Rajkowska’s cans were displayed – just as their counterparts in the store – in the

²² Kaja Silverman interviewed by Martina Pachmanova. An interview published in Pachmanova’s book *Vernost v Pochybu* (Prague: One Woman Press, 2001), p. 62.

refrigerated case lent by the Coca-Cola Company. Among the cans containing fluids from different parts of Rajkowska's body is one batch titled *kok*, embellished by a picture of a young girl's crotch, which contains coconut milk and is supposed to evoke erotic stimulation (Fig. 11). Rajkowska addresses here a specific destructive evolution of cultural consumption which leads to the insipid consumption of one's own body. Thus, the boundaries between the consumer and the object of consumption are blurred.



Fig. 10: Joanna Rajkowska, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, 2000.



Fig. 11: Joanna Rajkowska, *Satisfaction Guaranteed – fragment*, 2000.

Woman, represented here as an object of consumption, is particularly vulnerable for becoming a victim. What is perceived as her culturally assigned role as man's prey allows her to dissolve into a product of visual and consumptive digestion. Moreover, Rajkowska's cans are pure metaphors for an awareness of the exploitation of the female body.

Slovakian women artists also responded to the theme of consumption with great zeal. Jana Zelibská, using video as an interpretative tool, executed a work about the social construction of the beauty myth in her work titled *On Diet*, 1997. The food and diet are the artist's central subjects that expose a constructed norm induced by social stereotypes, more aggressively implemented by the emerging consumer in a capitalist society.

Rosemary Betterton made an interesting observation that, a specific tension between

repression and release is inscribed especially on the bodies of women through eating – the use of food as opposed to alcohol is for her still clearly gendered. Femininity and the consumption of food are intimately connected and being fat is taken to signify both loss of control and a failure.²³ This loss of control is present in Zielibska’s piece under the implication of bulimia. Zielibska juxtaposed in her installation piece two video projections: one on a “small” screen and a “big” one projected on the wall, directly above a pile of food. The young girl presented in the video deliberately overeats and repeatedly throws up, to invoke an ironic trauma of the body which becomes a focus of cultural anxiety. Maud Ellman asserts that:

It is through the act of eating that the ego establishes its own domain, distinguishing its inside from its outside. But it is also in this act that the frontiers of subjectivity are most precarious. Food, like language, is originally vested in the other, and traces of that otherness remain in every mouthful that one speaks – or chews.²⁴

In the Czech Republic consumerism and globalization have also been widely represented by Katerina Vincourova (b.1968). Her installation pieces comment upon a crisis of the individual’s identity, manipulated by the growing power of the media which dictates the values for society. Vincourova’s work *Call* (1999), a pneumatic construction made out of textile and PVC, ironically comments upon the impact of globalization’s growing effect on our everyday lives (Fig. 12). It can be seen to represent a Baudrillardian collapse of the borders between the public and the private spheres of human existence and the resultant crisis of identity. This Baudrillardian concept has a very special societal resonance within the countries of



Fig. 12: Katerina Vincourova, *Call*, 1999.

²³ Rosemary Betterton, *An Intimate Distance: Women Artists and the Body* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 131.

²⁴ Maud Ellman, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (London: Virago, 1993), p. 53.

the former Eastern bloc. The long-awaited fall of communism, a system which destroyed the sense of one's individuality, was supposed to promise the rebirth of the new and less constrained identity. Paradoxically, the new socio-political changes only brought, unexpected as a final effect, an epidemic of consumerism which contributes to isolating an individual from others, and even offers a gender identity in exchange for a total dependency from consumerism. The motto of the politic of consumerism, "the more one possesses, the freer one can be," is only a systematic tactic for self-enslavement. As a result, our self-identity will become a product of simulated reality.

V. ON FAMILY VALUES

For the women artists of the Central Eastern European sphere the family, or more likely coping with the problems assigned to the cultivation of socially-constructed family values, is a topic more broadly touched upon than by their sisters in the West. The importance of artistic articulations, thus, arose from the need to expose physical and psychological abuse present within the circle of one's own family. The subject of children, the relationships among spouses and their traditional role placement within their family often constitutes the subject matter of their works.

Comparatively, for Polish-born Anna Baumgart (b.1966), artistic broaching of this subject is confined to the various representations of woman. Baumgart penetrates the subject of the role of woman-lover or woman-mother and her relationship with a daughter. What is the role of the mother in the process of her child's development? Who shapes the psyche of the child: the mother or society? These are some of the questions which Baumgart addressed in her 1998 video titled *Who's Talking?* (Fig. 13). The child –

a little girl – is perpetually asked about the value of love for her mother. “Do you love your homeland as much as your mother who nourished you?” is a question raised in the video, which rhetorically refers to the insinuation of the system of values imposed on the child through social institutions, such as school.



Fig. 13: Anna Baumgart, *Who's Talking?*, 1998.

This process is rather problematic for Baumgart, who recognizes that the interference of systems coming from the outside may intrude on the equilibrium of family relations. Thus, this psychological entrapment of the child's perception may cultivate a barrier, which consequently will separate the child from the influence of its family. Moreover, the system, which will become a surrogate parent for the child, will shape that child according to its set schematics. As a result, the child will join the circle of “perfect” citizens – deprived of his/her own individuality.

The Czech artist Mila Preslova (b.1966), similarly, through a very direct deployment of its context in her photographic installation, focused on the socially assigned roles of woman within her domestic environment. *Woman in the Household*, 2000, is a series of ten photographs representing a woman dressed according to her appropriated household tasks (Fig. 14). Preslova displayed the woman as a target of social objectification. Her work is an exposure of the unmasked role of the woman within her family. Woman is portrayed as mother, worker, lover – slave of her mundane duties.



Fig. 14: Mila Preslova, *Woman in the Household*, 2000.

Simultaneously, this pondering found its resonance

in Slovakia. Anna Daucikova, apart from her other works concerned with the subject of self-identification as the *femme*, is as intensely involved in rendering the family as a subject. In her *Untitled* piece from 1999, Daucikova exemplified the potential “family picture” of an already inscribed role of both sexes essential for the ideal functioning of the family (Fig. 15). Through a simple sketch overlapping the central photographic image



Daucikova implied social establishment of a schematic for
The perfect example of the family. What is apparent, real
and functionary?

Fig. 15: Anna Daucikova,
Untitled, 1999.

This comparative overview reflects an assertion of Amelia Jones about the female body expressing itself in the rhetoric of the pose, due to its passiveness imposed by conventionality of the social roles, which is inclined to absorb meaning from the outside.²⁵ Jones’s view challenges the problem of social insinuation targeting the vulnerability of women based on the traditional politics of sexual identity. The problematic stance for Central-Eastern European women was the fact of consistent denial of the allegedly existing social pressure. Thus, with the passage of time woman’s body increasingly became an instrument of social manipulation. For this very reason the direction taken by women artists of the post-communist decade toward self-recognition was a way of discovering their true social identities as well.

VI. DEFINING ATTITUDES OF THE WEST TOWARD CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE

²⁵ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 121.

In the early thirties, Jan Mukarovsky – a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle – observed that in order to adequately analyze a linguistic or visual sign one has to take into consideration a specific code or “social fact” which cannot be separated from the work of art itself. Moreover, the key to the understanding of the work of art must be sought not in its internal organization but in the relation of this organization to the underlying code.²⁶ The process of tracing this code has to be regarded in relation to specific external impulses coming from the surrounding environment of the artist. It can often take the form of myths and memories – either personal or collective. Regardless, the understanding of this notion will allow the viewer to fully appreciate a value of the work of art. Unfortunately, this conception appears to be problematic not only for the viewers or critics from the “outside” borders of the cultural sphere of Central Eastern Europe, but also for those from the region itself.

Do works of art by women artists from the post-communist countries share identifiable aspects with their counterparts from the West? The answer to this question is not a simple one. Inevitably, certain formal and aesthetic aspects can be traced as common, just as the continuing fight for woman’s emancipation is a global one. It is not the intention of any of these women artists to produce works of a nationally-inbred sentiment, but to expose a broader aspect of the social injustices related to the issue of gender. Hence, usage of globally understood language is seen to be rather an imperative in the successful support of global conversation. On the other hand, the elements that differentiate “Central Eastern European” aspects from the “West,” are, as I prefer to call them, the *conditional elements* – residing in both the consciousness and unconsciousness

²⁶ John Burbank and Peter Steiner, eds., *Structure, Sign, and Function. Selected Essays by Jan Mukarovsky* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. xvi.

of the artist's mind – which navigate the social symbolism of the work. These *conditional elements* are socially derivative; they are the essential distinguishers of the East-West difference.

How different is the approach of contemporary women artists to the issue of gender and feminism within the sphere of Central Eastern Europe as opposed to the Western? In contrary to the United States, where feminism does not have to be political anymore since it already attained a defined and even institutionalized political power, Central Eastern European feminism is presently in the state of socio-political turmoil. Although Central Eastern Europe just recently embarked upon its journey within the subject of feminism, it should not be forgotten that earlier, but unsuccessful attempts had been made. Traditionalism and misconception of the term “feminism,” deeply rooted within the Central Eastern European art world of the 1970s and 1980s, did not allow female artists to visually express their thoughts on gender. Indeed, even some bleak attempts undertaken by Natalia LL, from Poland, to address the subject of gender was discussed without using a word “feminism.” Not surprisingly, the body and character of the works of art by Central-Eastern European women artists in the post-Communist decade have less subjective, but more objective thematic quality, circumscribing the socio-political essence of their living environment.

A significant value of these artworks only serves as the emblem of the universal idea of the struggle for a stabilized nation deprived of a painful burden carried on from the past. Hence, the attempt of women artists of this sphere is to become “internationalized” – to become universal rather than national. Let us hope for their voice to be heard, as well as understood.

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