

Martina Pachmanová is Associate Professor at the Department of the Theory and History of Art at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design (UMPRUM) in Prague. As a researcher, writer and curator she specialises in gender, sexual politics and feminism in modern, post-war and contemporary art and visual culture. She is an author and editor or co-editor of numerous books and exhibition catalogues, including monographs on forgotten Czech female modernists related to their retrospective exhibitions.

pachmanova@vsup.cz

Originally published as: **Martina PACHMANOVÁ, “Mlčení o feminizmu a ženskost jako výtvarná hodnota: České umělkyně očima Jindřicha Chalupeckého”, *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, vol. 7, 2013, No. 14, pp. 34–42.**

Translated from the Czech by Phil Jones.

SILENCE SURROUNDING FEMINISM AND FEMININITY AS AN AESTHETIC VALUE: CZECH WOMEN ARTISTS THROUGH THE EYES OF JINDŘICH CHALUPECKÝ MARTINA PACHMANOVÁ

1

Piotr PIOTROWSKI, “Rámování střední Evropy”, in: Pavlína MORGANOVÁ – Terezie NEKVINDOVÁ – Dagmar SVATOŠOVÁ – Jiří ŠEVČÍK (eds.), *České umění 1980–2010: Texty a dokumenty*, Prague: VVP AVU 2011, p. 323.

In his 1998 article “The Framing of Central Europe”, the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski wrote that “the art of Eastern and of Western Europe speaks a similar language but in reality communicates different meanings dictated by a ‘frame’ that we activate”.¹ When examining what form art history took during the Cold War and the language in which was written, it is important to consider not only the differences between the concepts and rhetorical

devices deployed each side of the Iron Curtain, but also the terms that were marginalised and silenced and their social, cultural, and ideological “frames”. This text examines a key concept of post-war Western theory that was excluded from both official and unofficial discussions about the visual arts in Czechoslovakia – feminism. It argues that Czech art historians and critics ignored the diversity of feminist art and feminism throughout the whole of the 1970s and 1980s, not for any lack of information, but because of ideological and gender prejudices. Taking as my case study the handful of texts by Jindřich Chalupecký devoted to women artists (especially to Eva Kmentová), I show how the Western feminist art discourse of the seventies and eighties was neutralised in Czechoslovakia through the promotion of “femininity” in art. Nevertheless, Chalupecký remains one of the few Czech theoreticians of that time to take any interest at all in the contemporary art being created by women.

In the West, the debate around feminist art really took off at the end of the 1960s and accompanied the emergence of outstanding women artists who were also self-avowed feminists (Judy Chicago, Martha Rosler, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Rosemarie Trockel, Hannah Wilke, etc.). Behind the Iron Curtain, meanwhile, the theme was ghosted out of existence, and not only in Czechoslovakia. As many of the texts in

the recently published catalogue accompanying the large exhibition *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* at MUMOK in Vienna show, a similar situation pertained in most countries of the former Eastern bloc.² There were many reasons why debates on feminism and gender remained sidelined in Eastern European art circles for so long, and the following are just an example: a lack of information and genuine dialogue with the West; a lack of solidarity between women and collective efforts to achieve change; the burdensome legacy of the modernist tradition and the prevailing concept of art as a transcendent category disdainfully indifferent to life and social and psychological processes; scepticism regarding “-isms”, which conjured up the spectre of a new totalitarian-ism; a complete lack of faith in political art, discredited by the propaganda of the communist regime; and an entrenched sexism and misogyny permeating all layers of society.

Nevertheless, at the end of the 1960s some distinguished women artists were active in the Soviet satellite states, whose work was remarkably close in spirit to that of their Western counterparts. These artists drew on traditional female symbols, materials and techniques in order to undermine the dominant male canon, though none explicitly professed an allegiance with feminism.³ Theory too failed to initiate a meaningful debate on feminism or the gender policy of culture and art behind the Iron Curtain. Debates on the topic of political freedom and autonomy were directed primarily against the totalitarian regime, while the patriarchal organisation of society, be this on the level of the governing nomenclature or the “enemies” of the regime, was ignored. A similar disregard for gender characterised the art discourse. As the Hungarian art historian Edit András noted in 1995, “the almost complete denial of any conscious approach to the issue, of its theoretically grounded research and artistic analysis, became even more evident during the 1980s, when even on the international scene the earlier revolutionary zeal of militant feminism faded and the second generation emerged: people approaching the topic with a certain distance, with a more analytical and philosophically stronger new strategy”. Amongst artists, curators and theoreticians in this part of Europe, good art was one and indivisible and could only be judged on the basis of general and

2

Bojana PEJIĆ (ed.), *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (exh. cat.), Cologne: König 2010.

3

Here I would mention at least Ali-
na Szapocznikow in Poland, Jana
Želibská in the former Czecho-
slovakia, and Sanja Iveković in
Croatia.

4

Edit ANDRÁS, "Contemporary (Women's) Art and (Women) Artists on Water Ordeal", in: *eadem* – Gábor ANDRÁSI (eds.), *Water Ordeal*, Budapest: Óbudai Társaskör 1995, p. 41. For more on this subject see: Martina PACHMANOVÁ, "In? Out? In Between? Some Notes on the Invisibility of a Nascent Eastern European Feminist and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Art Theory", in: PEJÍČ (ed.), *Gender Check: A Reader. Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, Cologne: König 2010, 37–49. I shall use the term "gender" as a critical category related to the social and cultural constructs of masculinity and femininity. The term "sex" will here refer to the traditional understanding of the roles of men and women as natural and based on biological determinants. In applying this usage I will be mindful of the fact that the first of the terms was not used in Czechoslovakia prior to 1989.

5

Pavlna MORGANOVÁ – Dagmar DUŠKOVÁ – Jiří ŠEVČÍK (eds.), *České umění 1938–1989: Programy / Kritické texty / Dokumenty*, Prague: Academia 2001.

purportedly objective criteria, and not through the prism of gender.⁴

András's words could apply equally well to the situation in the former Czechoslovakia. Information on Western feminist art and important women artists simply failed to reach the country. This applied both to the more relaxed period of the latter half of the 1960s, when Czech art magazines systematically and without censorship addressed themselves to contemporary art around the world, and to unofficial publications that appeared during the period of normalisation. Just how marginal a role was played by the feminist and gender discourse on both the Czech and Slovak art scenes in the twenty years leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall is amply demonstrated by the anthology *Czech Art 1938–1989*: amongst the more than one hundred and thirty artistic and aesthetic movements represented in the index of this large publication one searches in vain for a single mention of feminism or feminist art. And however misleading the terms "women's" or "female" art are, not even they are to be found in the anthology.⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that many women artists left an indisputable mark on the Czech and Slovak art scene from the 1960s onwards, there was no reference made whatsoever to a feminist and/or gender-based agenda.

The only theorist who from time to time examined women's art and attempted to grasp and reflect upon the phenomenon in his writings was Jindřich Chaloupecký. However, he did not view the "woman question" as involving emancipation, politics and social change, but as an existential and above all a highly aesthetic question. Chaloupecký explicitly rejected feminism, lumping it in with all other ideological programmes that, he maintained, created obstacles to free art. In his opinion, Czech women artists and women in general had no need of feminism. Yet in his reflections upon female art he repeatedly drew a clear line between West and East (in this case represented by Czechoslovakia), and made no attempt to disguise the scepticism and animosity he felt,

not only for feminist art that crossed the boundary separating art and politics, but for any theoretical postulates. He perceived theory (be it feminist or other) and the articulation of protest (based on femininity or anything else) as the manipulation of art from without, as fake objectivity, and above all as a brake on the artistic authenticity that emanates solely from internal necessity.

Chalupecký places Czech women's art in direct opposition to feminist art in the West, and only speaks of Western women artists in his text "Smysl moderního umění" ("The Meaning of Modern Art"). Though he makes brief mention of Lynda Benglis, he devotes most of his attention to Eva Hesse, one of "the most astonishing figures in modern art".⁶ He cites both artists in connection with the new expressivity of "post-minimalism", and though both Hesse and Benglis, the latter especially,⁷ rehabilitated many of the technical procedures and soft, often fluid materials that were stigmatised as feminine (latex, textiles, ceramics, etc.), and both openly espoused feminism, Chalupecký conspicuously, albeit somewhat vaguely and without any justification, rejects this. "Feminism in art disappeared into the same sexism against which it sought to do battle," he writes.⁸

In not one single other of his many texts on contemporary art does Chalupecký mention Western women artists, not even when the aesthetic and intellectual proximity of Czech or Slovak women artists to their Western counterparts was undeniable.⁹ Chalupecký was supremely well versed in world art, and, as we see in "The Meaning of Modern Art", familiar with the contemporary output of its female representatives. His stance was not the result of ignorance, so much as a conscious or unconscious fear of the radicalism of Western women artists. For him the importation of feminist activism was as undesirable as the importation of feminist theory, under the influence of which he felt that Czech women's art would lose its authenticity and purity. The mythification of Czech art as an example of uncorrupted self-contained creativity was a common feature of his texts. During the 1970s and 1980s, notwithstanding the oppression practiced by the communist regime, Chalupecký did not

6

Jindřich CHALUPECKÝ, "Smysl moderního umění" (1971), in: *Cestou necestou*, Jinočany: H & H 1999, p. 150.

7

In addition to minimalist sculptures, Lynda Benglis was also involved in activist feminist art.

8

CHALUPECKÝ, "Smysl moderního umění", p. 150.

9

The only Slovak woman artist whose work Chalupecký follows systematically is Jana Želibská. See for example "Nultý čas" (1975), in: *Cestou necestou*, p. 189; "Duše androgyna" (1977), in: *Cestou necestou*, p. 242.

10

Jindřich CHALUPECKÝ, "Příběh
Evy Kmentové", in: *idem* – Jiří
ŠETLÍK – Olbram ZOUBEK (eds.),
*Sborník k poctě sochařky Evy
Kmentové (1928–1980)*, Prague:
Jazzová sekce 1982, p. 9.

11 *Ibid.*

12

Jindřich CHALUPECKÝ, *Nové
umění v Čechách* (1988), Jinočany:
H & H 1994, p. 112.

regard the isolation of Czech artists as a handicap, but as an opportunity and inducement. In Czechoslovakia "the modern artist remained free in his [sic] studio, where he was responsible only to himself and the necessity that led him to art. [...] That which seemed to be a disadvantage and was so burdensome for many artists, to the Czech artists was a great opportunity".**10**

In an anthology in honour of Eva Kmentová, the Czech sculptress who died at the untimely age of 52, Chalupecký wrote:

Women's art in the Czech lands (though not in Slovakia) has carved out an important place for itself and is far from being the marginalised rarity it used to be. On the contrary, many female painters, designers and sculptors are central figures on the Czech art scene. The participation of women in modern art is in line with global trends, though it differs substantially from these trends. It was not the outcome of feminist protestation, and though it contains many elements specific to itself, it was not born of a manifesto. The femininity of this art is simply the outcome of the necessity and spontaneity from which it arose.**11**

In a similar vein, in his book *New Art in the Czech Lands* Chalupecký maintained that Czech female artists

occupy a space no less important than male artists and need no feminist programme to accomplish this. Elsewhere women are provoked by habitual oppression, but this is not so in Czechoslovakia. In public they suffer the same obstacles as their male counterparts, and all of them share the sense of friendly solidarity this gives rise to. In addition, art has not been burdened down by theory in this country. Women can create as they wish, without having to justify and defend their originality before anyone. Only in terms of numbers do female artists differ from their male counterparts, since the demands of life itself easily divert them from concentrated creative work.**12**

On the one hand, Chalupecký denies the existence of gender inequality, while on the other, his reference to the difficulty women have in finding

time to focus on creative work is an unwitting admission that the situation of men and women in art was different. Women are sidetracked from art by life, i.e. motherhood, their duties as carers, the household – in short, by concerns altogether immanent, mundane, secular and private. When Chalupický speaks of the “intertwining of the artistic and human fate”¹³ as a trait characteristic of the work of Czech female artists, he is not referring to a transcendental realm, but to a trajectory that ends in the banally quotidian and physical, i.e. to social, biological and psychological predestination. According to Chalupický, a work of art by a woman springs primarily from her physical life “as a kind of organic ectoplasm”.¹⁴ It is on this basis also that he extrapolates the features common to the work of female artists, writing that “they are bound more than men to their private existence. This in itself leads to their art being marked by the autobiographical. Moreover, they share certain means of visual expression. They are intensely aware of their bodies and the space they inhabit, and for this reason mostly express themselves through sculpture, relief and printmaking, for printmaking is also relief. Pure painters [...] are the exception rather than the rule.”¹⁵ Though these comments revamp many gender clichés, they are not sexist in intent. Chalupický may be vehemently opposed to Western feminism, but he is unstinting in his admiration of the work of Czech women artists and attempts to understand it within the context of Czech (though not global!) art of that time. Nevertheless, he attributes different meanings to it than to male art, which tellingly needs no such modifiers since it represents the incarnation of Art in its purest form.

In his essay “Art and Transcendence”, devoted to Marcel Duchamp, Chalupický muses at length on the question of what the artwork actually is. As the title suggests, he declares real art to be linked with transcendence, with a sphere that goes beyond the conventional world and points “only to the inexpressible, invisible, to silence, to something forever absent”.¹⁶ Art according to Chalupický is not associated with any particular way of life and exists outside of any opinion, since it goes beyond judgement into the sphere of the “transcendental I do not know”.¹⁷ “There are no necessary or sufficient signs by which we might recognise the work of art,

13 *Ibid.*

14 CHALUPECKÝ, “Smysl moderního umění”, p. 150.

15 *Ibid.*

16
Jindřich CHALUPECKÝ, “Umění a transcendence” (1977), in: MORGANOVÁ–DUŠKOVÁ–ŠEVČÍK, *České umění 1938–1989*, p. 385.

17
Ibid., p. 384.

CHALUPECKÝ, "Smysl moderního umění", p. 150. The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir was highly critical of the contingency of gender to the meaning of transcendence and immanence in her book *The Second Sex* (1949). In 1966, Jan Patočka wrote in the preface to the Czech translation of the book: "It is certainly not immoral to examine the philosophically undeniable fact that Man is a physical creature. This means that he is determined by his sex, and that this determination applies to both sexes as equally as the indivisibility of his spiritual existence, i.e. his freedom from the purely instinctive and immanence in a purely vital sphere. Distinguishing roles, ascribing to one sex a fate involving freedom, overcoming and transcendence, and to the other to be confined in immanence, is the great historical lie that de Beauvoir unveils both in social life from its very beginnings and in the supposed adoration of woman in the myths that men spun around her and forced upon her by means of their symbolism, their dominion, their power." Jan PATOČKA, "Doslov", in: Simone de BEAUVOIR, *Druhé pohlaví*, Prague: Orbis 1966, p. 398.

save for one, and that is negative: artworks are objects or actions the meaning of which resides above and beyond the world of practical life."**18**

It is clear from his remarks on the theme of women's art that the values that Chalupecký spotlighted in the work of his female contemporaries such as Eva Kmentová, Adriena Šimotová and Alena Kučerová were different to those that featured in the art of transcendence. The work of these artists was present and tangible, qualities it shared with the art of many other women who managed to combine the role of wife and mother with that of professional artist. In the conclusion to his tribute to Eva Kmentová he is quite explicit on this point: "she stood out amongst Czech female artists for the supremely feminine character of her art. One might even go so far as to say that the value of her art qua art derived directly from its femininity."**19**

Though Chalupecký does not specify in detail what he means by the term "femininity" or "feminine", he adamantly links the work of female artists working at that time to their gender. By refusing to view their work as manifestations of a feminist discourse, he denied them political power, i.e. the opportunity and confidence to undermine the patriarchal norms applied to art and culture in general. And by emphasising women's grounding in the female body and female psyche, he by definition prevented them from participating in the highest form of art, which he believed was de-gendered or genderless. This perspective was shared by the artists

themselves, almost none of whom claimed allegiance to feminism. Their immediate enemy, as I have said, was totalitarianism rather than patriarchy (even though the communist apparatus was patriarchal, as, indeed, was the dissident circle or "grey zone"), and to have proclaimed a sympathy for feminism would have disqualified their work in the eyes of (mostly male) critics and artists. However, as Chalupecký's emphasis on femininity shows, they were unable to escape the stigma of being the second sex.

Chalupecký did not dispute the importance of women in post-war Czech art. It would not be exaggerating to say that he loved what he called female art. However, this was true only on condition that it was apolitical art and the incarnation of the eternal feminine. He did not entertain the idea that the female principle might be the opposite of the male, but, following Jung, perceived them more as two poles of a single universe. He was convinced that the consummation of the utopian dream of a harmonious relationship between both principles was essential if humankind was to survive.

20
CHALUPECKÝ, *Nové umění
v Čechách*, pp. 124–125.

“Carl Jung discovered the female in man and the male in woman: anima and animus,” he wrote in his book *New Art in Czechoslovakia*.

Perhaps the anima is the seat of creativity and animus the organising spirit, the inseparable twins Chaos and Cosmos, the yin and yang. Women are not to be the equal of men, but to bring to the world something that men are not up to and that perhaps our age lacks. We live in a world that has from the beginning been dominated by men and their physical superiority. This is manifest in the dominance and inflexibility of ideological thinking. But if in the age of mechanisation physical superiority is losing its significance as the dangerous predominance of the male organising spirit, is there not a space here for women and is she not needed now more than ever before? [...] Current political events remain a projection of the male spirit and threaten to destroy our civilisation. Art must begin from elsewhere and return to the creative forces of the female spirit of the human androgyne. Women are best placed to attain Breton’s *écart absolu*, the complete deferral of irresolvable problems and falsely posed questions beneath which our civilisation is crumbling. They do not even have to take into consideration this male misfortune and can draw their truth and power from elsewhere.²⁰

At the end of his reflections upon female art, Chalupecký finds himself beset by a kind of intellectual schizophrenia. The organising spirit transcending the ordinary world, i.e. the principle of male transcendence, he claims is the source of the discord and ideological schisms that can only be overcome by a return to female values, to chaos and the principle of

female immanence. So finally, notwithstanding Chalupecký's aversion to feminism, the feminine is shown to be a political and even revolutionary force.

However, it must not seek to overthrow the patriarchal order, but to bring humanity back to its mythical and archetypal androgynous unity. Though this Jungian idea might appear idealistic, it shows that Chalupecký indirectly rejected gender binarism as a historical construct. Like Simone de Beauvoir, whose *The Second Sex* had been available in Czechoslovakia from the latter half of the 1960s, Chalupecký accepts what Jan Patočka writes in his afterword to this bible of feminism: "woman is not the second sex. In her core she is the same transcendent, consciously free, personal, creative being as man, but alienated for historical and existential reasons."**21**