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Gender Minefield: The Heritage of the Past

Edit Andras

This paper, which examines attitudes to feminism amongst art communities in former Eastern Europe, was given at the opening symposium for the exhibition *After The Wall: Art and Culture in post-Communist Europe*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 16 October-16 January 2000. The exhibition of 140 artists (40% of whom are women artists) from 22 countries was curated by Bojana Pejic. (see interview with Bojana Pejic in *n.paradoxa's* print edition *About Time* Vol. 5, Jan 2000).

The historical and artistic course taken by Eastern Europe (the region understood in the broadest sense) has not simply been rougher than its Western counterpart; a graph of its development would look different altogether. While the Western model is a succession of phases logically and regularly superseding one another, the eastern model is one of long periods of rigid stagnation followed by dramatic breaches and intense, abrupt movements. Moments of coincidence or concord between the two can create a mirage, a false sense of synchronicity potentially deluding both sides.

Once the Wall fell, one could easily think the region's separate course of development was over too. Yet, the landscape is far from serene; instead, it looks like a 'landscape after the battle', scattered with unexploded mines left behind by previous periods on both sides of the Wall. Granted, our side has more mines: there was neither a chance, nor a method to clear them. And who was going to bother with mine clearance while the battle was raging anyway. And there was a battle, and its fronts were many. Real battle first gave way to an imitation performed according to a set choreography. After the political transition, there came the fronts of an imaginary battle in people's minds. For conditioning has a way of working long after circumstances have changed.

As is obvious by now, the political opposition and the counterculture mirrored

the way official power worked; they were equally militant, arrogant and intolerant. Their soldiers stood in close formation on this side of the trench and soldiers were obliged to surrender gender, racial and ethnic identity. Deviation and difference were tolerated neither by the opposition, nor by the state ideology. In the spirit of internationalism, socialism promised a homogeneous and neutral society, where differences in gender, race, ethnicity, class and culture are all eliminated. Socialism and its welfare policies did cut back gender-based economic discrimination, but this happened at the cost of the state appropriating the so called "women's question" and degrading it to an economic one. In the fight of the opposition too, any kind of division was subordinated to the shared struggle. If solidarity and loyalty were the unwritten law of the opposition, adherence to the party line was the explicit order on the other. While official art held out the bait of a share in institutional power, underground art offered the glory of ethical superiority. There was a choice in this dual culture, but only between these two sides; no other positions existed, at least not publicly. Even a passing neutrality was the transient luxury of later times, the increasingly long periods of cease-fire.

When the cold war began, modernism was the dominant art paradigm on both sides of the wall and it was counterculture that became its heir behind the wall. The art officially promoted was socially committed, accessible, realist and narrative; so not only radical avant-garde works with their tacit political criticism but indeed any kind of abstract art became forbidden. Modernism posited art as universal and undivided, above nations, society and even life. This only left good and bad art and the mythified concept of quality was supposed to tell the difference. Whatever passed beyond the narrow modernist system of values and concept of art ran the risk of being sentenced without appeal, of being labelled weak or not even worth judgement.

Thus, the social-political context and the paradigm of art were a double shell that excluded any kind of difference. During the long period of isolation, survival strategies and the local sign language were refined into an ever-growing sophisticated system that permeated all the space within the shell. Information could only pass through if it coincided with the local state of affairs or could at least be given a reading that made sense within this structure. This mechanism was all right by the West too; in fact, for a long time, the charm of the East was exactly this similarity with a touch of refined opposition. Though more and more small cracks appeared on the shell, the basic structure remained the same for decades and shaped the artistic approach of several generations.

Meanwhile, the modernist paradigm began its slow collapse in the West, a process to which feminism made a significant and early contribution by questioning the elitist attitude and monolithically, formalist concept of art characterising modernism. The movement of the first generation of feminist artists was something Eastern-European counterculture could easily recognise as its twin except in a more "particular" version, and this unwanted pretender to the throne was majestically

rejected. The rejection was uniform; not even women found the tenets of feminism relevant, partly because they enjoyed certain state policies, partly because they were equal members of the opposition. In addition, an internal feud is the last thing one wants in a state of war. Besides, within the framework of modernism, the perspective offered by women joining forces, the feminist art movement, seemed equally alarming to women behind the wall: instead of admittance to a universal culture, it was the nightmare of slipping back into an underrated subculture. The second and third generations of western women artists opposed modernism in the spirit of postmodernism. Yet, their language of art informed by poststructuralist philosophy was so alien to the East that it could not effectively cross the line. So the arguments of the intense generational debate anatomising the questions of gender on the other side of the wall were bounced right back by the dual system of rejection. Virtually nothing came through, the discourse remained unknown and countries behind the wall tend to lack even a word for its central term, gender.

When the Wall fell, a tremendous flood of information poured in, burying the earlier system of values. And everything came, the valuable and the worthless, the historic and the cutting edge all mixed up, and even those who had the most solid footing were overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of this flood. Society, intellectual life and individuals were all frantically searching for bearings and the shock gave way either to a self-therapeutic escape to the past (see the election of various socialist governments) or the explosive resurgence of what had been repressed (see the increasing prominence of moderate and extreme nationalist ideology).

As for art itself, the fall of the wall did not bring a paradigm shift, nor a real dialogue with the West on equal terms. First it was the alternation in power and internal rivalry of the polarised opposition that cast a shadow over artistic life. As it turned out, the opposition was far from homogeneous and the rifts appeared along the old liberal-nationalist (or *zapadnik-slavophile*) faultlines. 'Artistic restitution' was in full swing; positions and retrospective exhibitions were conferred like state decorations. This too silenced all voices questioning apologetics or its proportions and timing. And the view of art adopted by the people newly in office was naturally nothing but the good old view forced underground, which therefore accrued quite a bit of ethical capital, one which could also be easily adapted to the new front lines. So mental walls were erected, not between but within regions this time, for who needed a cacophony of voices when the battle was raging on so many little fronts now! While the former opposition retreated to Potemkin villages, refusing to acknowledge that the world and art had totally changed, a new generation appeared on the scene. This more tolerant generation was socialised in and after the political transition, a period without walls; the global art scene was a natural connection for them, for they worked in a similar spirit. So the conflict between modernism/avant-garde and postmodernism appeared as a generational conflict. Even this younger generation is not quite free of the ghosts of the past: they move freely, but it's a

minefield they move on, because there was no time for mine clearance. And for lack of intellectual continuity, this generation lacks the command of theory they could have attained in a world of successive dominant discourses.

When the Wall fell, women outside the confines of the Potemkin villages were free to focus on their creative work without the pressure of the fight for power. If their male contemporaries had a better chance of getting the spoils of redistributed power as long as they kept their old weapons, women could turn to up-to-date issues in art much more openly. The appearance of numerous women artists was a novelty in a region where art used to be dominated by men and these women did not even encounter institutional resistance, which could lull them into a false sense of having to face none of the mental resistance western women artists had to confront. There were two reasons for this half-hearted "leniency". Firstly, for the historical reasons explained earlier, there was no tradition of open gender-based discrimination. Secondly, the gender aspects of these works were informed by the fluid gender categories of the 1990s and appeared in such a sophisticated and delicate way that the environment, being utterly unreceptive to problems of identity, simply did not "get them." The result is incongruity: gender aspects appear in the works at times virtually concealed by various camouflage techniques, at other times openly to the point of brutality; yet, in self-reflection and statements of intention, gender is glaringly absent. "Feminine art" with its 19th century origins is considered as inferior and amateur is awkwardly avoided or obsessively and loudly rejected; so is oppositional women's art with its essentialist overtones, and the categories of feminism, still seen in the east as a purely political movement, fare no better. Add to this the total absence of any complex analysis of local gender relations; no wonder, since there is neither a philosophical-psychological background, nor a sophisticated language, so what is left is the crudest, historically discredited categories. Therefore, while the local works keep in touch with global art, even if this is not always obvious at first glance, interpretation and thinking about art are tied to an earlier paradigm and discursive phase, that of modernism. As for the youngest generation, they have reasons of their own to avoid discourse of gender. As it is clear from their works too, they no longer identify with the oppositional, essentialist attitude of the 1970s, with which their works would still be identified if gender aspects were emphasised in interpretation. Moreover, as mainstream artists, they fear their "success" would be compromised by identifying with a marginal group with multiple bad connotations in this region. This fear is not unjustified, given the popular old backlash argument that their success is the result of the passing fad of women's art rather than the quality of their works. Since this magic word has not been deconstructed here, it is still the most powerful weapon these artists have to face. No, there is one yet more powerful. A more conscious gender-related message, a critical attitude, an analytical approach, deviations from the formalist creed, the deconstruction or demolishing of the gender status quo and--God forbid!--narrative, committed works can even earn

them the dreaded label of "soc-real". And there is more where this comes from: the pollution and poisonous gases like Eastern-European sexism whose heavy smell permeates every layer and sphere of society, a scathing and often quite vulgar misogyny often used from positions of authority, and the instant ostracising and professional discrediting of anyone said to be associated with gender or feminism-related issues - methods and devices that have long become unacceptable in the west. At the same time, it is still often heard that this is an internal affair of the west which has nothing to do with us.

The West, traumatised at first by losing its image of the East and without bearings itself, first supported phenomena in which the earlier clichés lived on, for the suddenly chaotic scene was impossible to grasp. Feminists, however, and first and second generation feminists in particular, could easily have a *deja vu* experience of the original fronts and the battlefield left behind a good twenty years before. The "barbarian wilderness" inspired their missionary zeal, and being marginalised locally, they were more than happy to export their ideas, as if time could be stopped. If the historical background, context and language were different, if the rallying cry of "sisterhood" could no longer move masses even in the East, these seemed minor obstacles in the euphoria of the day. The generation dominating the western scene at the time was hardly that enthusiastic: they were annoyed and confounded by the chaotic and bizarre mix of problems they thought were long obsolete. The advice that easterners had better take a few crash courses in current feminism and "catch up" to be potential partners in conversation once again ignored the differences in context. Eastern Europe was gradually slipping into the category of "Other" and the familiar machinery began its work: authoritarian patronising combined with stereotyping as a substitute for getting to know the other. Meanwhile, the voices claiming discursive incompatibility and failure of communication were just getting louder and more impatient in their exclusion of the region from the global scene and its debates. In this light, of course, the embrace of modernism with its promise of equality or the eager connection to the global scene without trying to untangle unsolved local problems suddenly seem to make more sense. But these choices only increase the distance between the regions. Granted, you could even take a risk, start walking, and you might not even step on a mine; actually, if you look from far enough, you could even think these mines don't exist at all. Another charming alternative is to talk about the gender aspects of Eastern Europe and immediately find yourself in a cross fire in no-man's land.

The Eastern-European model with its long periods of rigid stagnation, followed by dramatic breaches and intense abrupt movements has a vicious flaw. There is the price of deformity and inconsistency to be paid for phases skipped and for paths never taken step by step. The Region is, of course, far from homogenous, its borders too have a way of shifting now to the west, now to the east, then they occasionally shut a little tighter, say, to the south, and the moment of slowing down varies.

Accordingly, the phenomena outlined here are not equally and uniformly present everywhere; metaphorically speaking, mine frequency and timing varies significantly within the region. But one thing is sure: no mine-free zones yet, and that includes the gender front.

for further work by Edit Andras who works in Budapest and in New York see:
Edit Andras & Gabor Andras *Vizproba : Water Ordeal* (Exhibition catalogue, Obuda Club Gallery, Budapest, publisher: Obudi Tarsaskor, Budapest, 1996)

And Edit Andras 'Representation of the Body in Contemporary Hungarian Art'
Andras Gabor (ed) *Erotika es Szexualitas a Magyar Kepzomuveszetben / Erotics and Sexuality in Hungarian Art* (Budapest: League of Non-Profit Art Spaces, 1999).

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