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Feminist Art in Poland Today

Izabela Kowlaczyk

Feminist art functions today in a specific political context in Poland. There remains a big discrepancy between feminism in the West and East. After 1945 the Polish government propagated a notion of woman that was created by the dominant communist ideology. Women became an objects of social and political manipulation. The tendency of women to take an active role in the job market in the years 1947-54 and later in the 1960s was initially the government's response to a deficit of workers, especially in the services and trade areas of the job market. But when deficit didn't exist, after 1955 and in the 1970s, the government invoked the so-called primary role of woman, that of being a mother and wife as women's role in social life. Women's situation in the employment market has never been good in Poland. Women have consistently been discriminated by a lack of access to some areas of employment and to high earnings. They have frequently been employed in areas that were not privileged in the economic politics of Poland (for example, as teachers now).

In spite of a strong rhetoric about "women's equality of rights" propagated by the communist Polish government, the real situation of women was bad. Slogans like "women's equality of rights" created the communist fiction under which Polish society operated. When we talk about an aversion to feminism in countries which had communist regimes, we must also reflect on special place of the Catholic Church in the history of Poland. The Church symbolised many people's aspirations to political freedom. The church itself stood in opposition to the communist system. The Church circles consolidated the opposition. These circles carried on a memory of insurrection in Polish history which attributed a special position to women. Women 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 Church strengthened the model of a traditionally passive woman, who can realise herself only in her home and family.

In the 1970s and even 1980s the Polish socio-political background was not favourable to feminism. The feminist art that appeared was influenced by Western feminist tendencies, which unfortunately often resulted in simplified imitations that did not refer to issues rooted in Polish reality. Moreover Polish artists have not come up with feminist programmes and theory related to their own unique position. Some of the most prominent women artists have denied having any connection with feminism. This trend however was connected with lack of a public art discourse in Poland, and a lack of critical tendencies. The situation started changing after the collapse of communism in 1989, when feminism started developing a more fully self-conscious programme of artistic actions. Defining own identity, question of body and lately analysing ways of disciplining body through consumer's culture are the main questions of feminist and critical art in the 1990s. I should add that I prefer the notion of "critical art" as it seems to me more precisely.

Contemporary women artists often avoid qualifying their art or labelling themselves as "feminist", since they are afraid of the pejorative connotations of the term. Some of them, for example, Zofia Kulik and Katarzyna Kozyra are not afraid to confirm that they have connections with feminism, but there are only a few, as Alicja Zebrowska says, who wish like herself to be feminist artists. The situation is more complicated, because also some male artists deal with problem of woman's social position in today's society. I mean here Zbigniew Libera, first of all. His video untitled *How to train little girls* (1987) and his work *Universal Penis Expander* (1994) which is ironic critique of phallogocentric culture, one can define exactly as example of an emerging 'critical' feminist art. The term "critical art." is more useful, because this art. is connected with new threats for human freedom created by a culture based on consumption (that is relatively new in Poland and has only developed after 1989).

1989 was the year of great changes towards capitalism and the date of an emerging consumer culture. This date is taken as the date in which the former East opened itself to the West, and started to be free after forty years of communist power. However new threats have been appearing and they are now the main subject of critical artists working in the 1990s, which include some strong feminist artists among others. The power of the conservative political forces in Poland and authority of the Catholic Church are examples of these new threats. Both claim, in different ways, to return to traditional values, traditional families and to foster the model of a passive woman for whom the most important values must be: family, home and children. Political parties often now appear to create a situation in which the very real problems of women don't exist or are mentioned only to be dismissed as marginal problems. The result of this kind of rhetoric are amongst others: the current ban on abortion, the lack of public education on sexuality or contraceptives, the limited

money for actions against the maltreatment (violence against or rape) of women, the lack of hostels for women who are homeless or have escaped their families and discrimination in the employment. Nevertheless, because of these conservative tendencies, a new critical and feminist art has started developing.

Discussions about the morality of art are more and more popular in today's art criticism in Poland. There is a hidden tendency to restrict artistic freedom, to limit actions that the more conservative forces in our society regard as not in conformity with dominant or general political tendency. The censorship of radical artistic actions started to be way of calming down all controversial problems. Before 1989 there were kind of political censorship in the field of art, this included attempts to not finance or give opportunities to artists who engaged in any substantial critique of the system. The effect of this kind of censorship was the silencing or erasure of critical art. After 1989 more of today's contemporary art functions in the marketplace. Art institutions face new problems today with regard to spending taxpayer's money. Krzysztof Wodiczko said already in 1986 (October) that the biggest threat for art in today's consumer culture is that of the big corporations and private sponsors who because of their ties with political interests do not want to sponsor controversial art, as this image contradicts their political interests. The consequence of this is a limitation of artistic freedom of expression.

Given this background, I want to offer some feminist and critical tendencies in the Polish art and give examples of how this art has been censored or silenced.

One of the most controversial artists is Alicja Zebrowska. Her video installation untitled *Original Sin* recalls a bible story from the *Book of Genesis*, where the first woman, Eve, stands accused of humanity's fall and exile from the paradise. Her punishment is that she was subordinated to man, and she was condemned to give birth in pain, and her sexuality identified as threatening or as something shameful and attributed as sinful. Alicja Zebrowska in her work broke down with this stereotyping vision of woman's sexuality. She showed how a woman's vagina experienced pleasure without the participation of man. The film shows a vagina provoked by fingers and an artificial penis. Zebrowska recalls first erotic experiences, playing with a female friend. The important point of the film is a conflict between the sexual pleasure on the one hand and feeling the shame at the nakedness and the sex on the other hand. These scenes were preparation to the most important sequence of the video: simulation of childbirth, but instead of a child in the opening of vagina it appears the head of Barbie doll. As one Polish critic suggested the vagina for Alicja Zebrowska becomes a place for the creation of her identity. 'The vagina does not want to be treated like an internal penis, like the reproduction of male sexual organ, does not want to accept its non-autonomous position, which is expressed in the passive acceptance of active sperm and the breeding function.'

To analyse this work we should take into account the Polish context in which the film was made and first shown: the ban on abortion introduced in 1993 (*Original*

Sin is 1994). This was followed by the closure of any possibilities for sexual education and a renewed treatment of woman's sexuality as something shameful, a social taboo or something restricted to the private sphere. Zebrowska showed that the "private is political", that woman's sexuality is the object of manipulations and law's regulations, treated in Catholic morality as correct only in the context of a heterosexual family, where the aim is giving a birth to children. This system creates as different all kinds of other forms of human sexuality relegating them to the margins and stereotyping them as not proper or naming them - "sinful". As Foucault claimed sexuality is always controlled by the dominant system of power. However revealing this truth maybe, it is not comfortable for our society. *Original Sin* by Zebrowska was shown during the *Anti-bodies* exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw. It was the object of several attacks by those who considered it to be breaking down morality and as pure pornography. For me, there is an interesting play with pornography in Zebrowska's work, but she breaks with the modes of pornography, because her work doesn't give sexual pleasure to viewer, instead it often gives a form of visual pain. (It would be interesting to interpret this in terms of the Kristeva's notion of "abject"). There were also legal trials to block the *Antibodies* exhibition and postpone its travel abroad and the exhibition was also refused financial support by a famous foundation.

Another important figure in Polish art is Zofia Kulik, who represented Poland at the Biennial in Venice in 1997. In her large photo-tabloids, she presents various structures of domination and subordination connected with patriarchal system. The basic motif of her art is the male nude and he is situated between different signs and symbols directly connected with different systems of power. The man in her works is represented in the role of both oppressor and victim (he is a ruler, master, leader and in the same time: a slave, warrior, subject). He is passive and anti-individualised, he is represented as only one small cog in the big machine of power. In this way Zofia Kulik shows the form of internalised power described by Foucault. Showing this man in conventionalised poses, he is unmasked by his nakedness and covered in ridicule. Kulik reveals an artificial and vulnerable character in a social order based on constructed hierarchies which use only physical force and ideal types for self-legitimation. Hence, she ridicules the patriarchal culture, mocking the system of subordination that it created. The artist shows the invisible power that can rule our attitudes and activity. She reveals something of which we often are not conscious, it means: our place in different forms of system and power, our entanglement in power mechanisms. In the world defined by this way we are attached to different systems since the moment of our birth, we are taught to be obedient to such sorts of power as State, church, parental and patriarchal powers. Zofia kulik presents to the eyes internal structures of power and their functioning in our consciousness. In May this year, a major exhibition of Zofia Kulik's art took place in the National Museum in Posnan. However the work made especially for this exhibition and for the Museum was censored and the effect of this was that the

main space of the Museum big hall stayed partly empty. The work designed for the main entrance hall was titled *Both Home and a Museum*. In the central place of the hall stood the obelisk and on the walls, Kulik had placed photos of a close-up of male genitals from classical sculptures in The Hermitage in St Petersburg. These photos proved to be extremely controversial for the Museum's director so much so that he ordered the guards to remove them without the artist's knowledge or consent. The director said that this work could be shocking for visitors. He didn't even agree for cover pictures of genitals with fig's leaf ! Consequently Zofia Kulik dismantled the rest of the work - a central sculpture which included an obelisk. I suppose that there could be also different reason for this act of censorship. This work was very critical of the institution of the museum in so far as it showed it as an institution of power - an institution as described by Douglas Crimp in his book *On the Museum Ruins*. But the work *Both Home and Museum* also showed the phallogocentric power of the museum, where the private is excluded in its notion of public. The museum excludes Others and denies or discounts gender, class, culture differences in its own vision of history. Douglas Crimp argues that 'art was made to appear autonomous, alienated, something apart, referring only to its own internal history and dynamics.' Finally in leaving an empty entrance hall in the Museum during Zofia Kulik's exhibition, the Museum confirmed itself as a significant sign of the power of the museum to chose its sacred objects.

At the same time as the censoring of Zofia Kulik's exhibition in Posnan, work by Katarzyna Kozyra was being shown in a public place, and attempts were also made to censor Kozyra's work at the Bathhouse in Gdansk. Katarzyna Kozyra was the chosen representative of Poland at the Venice Biennale where she showed her new work *Men's Bath House*. She is always treated by the media as a very controversial and even scandalous artist. Her art displays old, ill, "natural" bodies. Her controversial actions (like *Women's Bath House*) force viewers to examine their attitude to their own body. She also reveals that the "beauty" is a social construction and the fact that the ideal of a woman's body is constructed according to the social relations. *Women's Bath House* (1997) - Kozyra in Budapest filmed women with using hidden camera. It showed contradiction between poses knowing from European culture (she quoted *Women's Bath* by Ingres), that would be seductive, erotic and poses of women who are unconsciousness of an observer, they are completely different in the way in which they dried themselves off, move about, combed their hair. All discussion about *Bath House* centred on the issue of Kozyra's having transgressed people's personal rights. However this work rises also question of media ethic, which regularly uses everyday people's private experiences and where human rights are violated all the time. In her new work for Venice, she also filmed in Budapest, but in a *Men's Bath House*, where she came into characterised as a man. Her early piece *Olympia* (1996) was produced about her own illness with cancer and her long-lasting therapy. This fragment of her biography and her direct reference to the Manet painting - because

of the scandal that it too gave rise to when it appeared - form the thematic background for this work she then made namely, the problem of identity with an illness and the breakdown which takes place during illness of not just a bodily existence but a human one.

Kozyra's *The Bonds of Blood* work was made in 1995 but shown first in May this year on the billboards in the Programme of the Open Gallery, a project of a commercial firm from Posnan. This work was first created under the influence of events in former Yugoslavia and its images are a symbolic metaphor of deadly rivalry and combat over ethic and religious ideologies. The two sisters' naked, unprotected bodies are depicted against the background of the great symbols of Christianity and Islam. Naked and devoid of all attributes these figures of women are powerless and defenceless. The models are the artist herself who was ill at the time and her crippled sister. Kozyra portrays the symbols of the great ideologies and exposes the way they conceal their potential aggression against humanity. As critic Malgorzata Lisiewicz wrote: 'By highlighting the link between the sisters, the artist voices her protest against men's domination and patriarchal power expanding its rule through the church and religion. Thus the bonds of blood, with the woman subjects in their centre, become an antithesis of the fraternal struggle carried out by man.' The moment of placing *The Bonds of Blood* on the billboards was not without wider significance - it was moment at which there was a revival in the ongoing conflict between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians. The work by Katarzyna Kozyra had already earlier evoked protests by amongst others: representatives of Polish Red Cross and Catholic Action. Representatives of them said that it was irresponsible/ blasphemous to put naked figures of women between symbols of Red Cross and of other religious systems. The firm which led The Open Gallery and which chose *The Bonds of Blood* came to a compromise and covered the portraits of women with big stripes of paper. The work thus stayed completely illegible.

These are only few examples in last few years from Poland. I could also mention the *Aids and Me* exhibition where eleven artists attempted to represent what they think and feel about Aids: including their fears of being infected, or the acceptance of people with aids and an understanding of their dramatic situation. One of the works was also by Katarzyna Kozyra. She showed a man as a victim in a special Polish and Catholic context - his pose was in relation to an iconography of Christ. The image showed the hypocrisy of current Polish society which declare itself to be Catholic, but is reluctant to help people with Aids and does not condemn people's protests against shelters for homeless with Aids in their neighbourhood. The exhibition was closed after three days. Another example would be that one of Serrano's work *Piss Christ* was not shown in the Contemporary Art Centre recently or that the curator of the Polish Pavillion resigned from Zbigniew Libera's work *Lego - Concentration Camp* at the Venice Biennale in 1997 (This work is closely related to the problem of commercialisation every aspect of history in our culture in a Shindler's

List manner, following Spielberg).

This blocking of radical artistic actions is supplemented by the endless discussion of morality in art. Some critics, connected with traditional or Catholic periodicals accuse many of the new phenomena in art of being evil and transgressing all moral norms. They are also nostalgic for the traditional art, like painting and avoid most of the contemporary critical art even denying that it should have the status of art. Their discourse evokes instead a "universal order of things" and an "unchangeable ethical code". In fact, the responses to the art of the 90's reveals the hypocrisy of a society that doesn't want to talk about the body, human sexuality, Aids or moments of trauma in our history. It reveals many double standards in our society today and deconstructs the privileged place of some groups while highlighting the marginalisation of others.

Izabela Kowalczyk lives in Posnan, Poland.

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