

Gender Roles in Revolt

Bojana Pejić, curator of the exhibition "Gender Check", talking to Matthias Dusini about the Fall of the Iron Curtain and its effects on gender roles

INSIGHTS: *Twenty years ago was the Fall of the Berlin Wall. Do you remember what you were doing that day?*

Bojana Pejić: Of course. I was in Norway at the time and for some reason or other I called Berlin that day. That's when I found out that the Wall had come down.

And?

Bojana Pejić: Of course I thought it was an important event, even if we didn't feel the existence of the Berlin Wall all that much in socialist Yugoslavia. We hoped at the time it wouldn't affect our country so much. We were wrong. Two years later the Balkan Wars started.

Did artists feel the effects of '89 directly?

Bojana Pejić: It's too naïve for me to say there were direct consequences. November '89 is a symbolic date, it marks the so-called "turnaround", the "Wende". December brought the Romanian Revolution during which Ceaușescu was killed. For Bulgaria, 1990 was more important, for Yugoslavia 1991. The fall of Lenin's statues was also gradual, first happening in the years after 1989. People had other priorities. It was more important that artists could focus on themes that were previously taboo because of censorship or self-censorship.

For example?

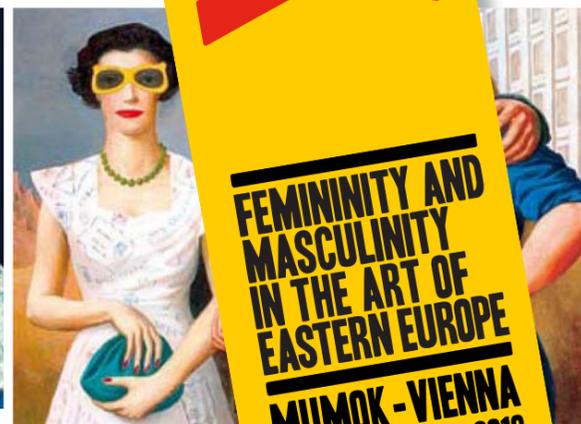
Bojana Pejić: Violence in the home, for instance, was never addressed as a theme in socialist countries. In my research for "Gender Check" I have found only two works that deal with patriarchy in the domestic sphere. Or the rights of homosexuals, a red-hot topic right up until today. Only in the mid-nineties did gays and lesbians demand their rights for the first time. Even if these rights were stipulated by law, there has always been and still is a strong vein of homophobia in post-socialist countries. Another topic cropping up in the mid-nineties was migration. The super-theme is democracy. As soon as there is democracy you can go out onto the streets and strike, but you can also organise prostitution and the white slave trade.

Is it possible to say what themes particularly interested artists, women artists as well?

Bojana Pejić: Abortion was a major topic for East European women artists. One of the first laws of the socialist era Parliament wanted to abolish was, of all things, the abortion law. In Poland, abortion has been forbidden since 1993.

And how do you want to approach these social and political themes in the exhibition?

Bojana Pejić: The aim of our project is a retrospective interpretation of the socialist era. And we want to do this through an analysis of the way gender roles were constructed – both in official and also non-official art. It's not meant to be a sociological analysis. Though feminist theory was responded to and reviewed in some academic circles in Eastern Europe, the ideas were actually taken up first and foremost by women artists. So we are not far removed from art if we talk about a topic like abortion.



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Veronika Bromova, *Girls Too*, 1996
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Katarzyna Kozyra, *Olimpia*, 1996
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Wojciech Fangor, *Figures*, 1950
Muzeum Sztuki/Museum of Art, Lodz © Wojciech Fangor

Vladislav Mamyshev-Monro
a photo from the series *Secret Materials*, (Politbureau portraits)
"Lev Nikolaevich Zaikov"
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Andris Grinbergs
The Model and Others, 1988
© Andris Grinbergs

Communism promoted equality of the sexes. Did it work?

Bojana Pejić: It did for me. I got the same pay as my male colleague. And I was put on an equal footing with men when I applied for a job. Inequality started somewhere else. Women had to bear more of the burden in socialism. They had a job and a second job when they got home: cooking, washing, family. And if they wanted to take part in political life, a third load was added.

Was feminism actually something western?

Bojana Pejić: The relationship between state socialism and women's lib was a liaison dangereuse. Official women's organisations said: we don't need feminist ideas from the West, where there's inequality between men and women. We solved the problem already in the October Revolution – a real sneaky argument. For there actually was a vote for women very early on. But there were women's groups in Yugoslavia that were hounding out the truth behind the patriarchal aspects of socialism. How is work shared in the private sphere? Who

works the washing machine? They had to expect attacks from the Communist Party. The accusation was that they were importing western ideas.

We have been experiencing a globalisation of contemporary art during the last decade. Does the label "East European" still have any justification?

Bojana Pejić: There are indeed plenty of East European art historians who ask why we are still talking about "Eastern Europe". My reason is as follows: if you read an American book on feminism and art, you will primarily find articles by American art historians writing about American artists. Of course, because they know them best. Why shouldn't we address what was happening with us and what we know best about? We are still looking primarily at western avant-garde and history. And forget what we are doing. A Czech art historian has no idea what a female Bulgarian theorist is working on. "Gender Check" aims to show what we have in common.