



Institute for Women and Art

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*Project Abstract*

## **Gender Aspects of Art Education**

### **Introduction**

In my life and work I often face the following questions: How can I combat gender prejudice and stereotypes regarding feminists and feminism? How can I redress the imbalance between the sexes within the (art) institutions? These aims take a particular shape within the framework of my experience as an art historian teaching for several art institutions in the Czech Republic.

Usually, when I ask my students whether they think that gender matters in the context of art production or art pedagogy, they tend to dismiss the question as irrelevant. In their eyes, what matters (or should matter) is the objectively assessed quality of art, not the gender of its maker. And yet, there are stories that describe a reality very different from the gender-neutral ideal. They record plain sexist behavior but also the deeply rooted prejudice regarding the alleged female artistic inferiority. As Martina Pachmanová, a colleague of mine at the Academy of Art, Architecture, and Design recalls: "It is still possible to hear today that it is not necessary to pay so much attention to female art students because they will sooner or later end up in the kitchen." (Tupá 2005).

After 1989, gender became (and remains) a highly problematic issue in the Czech Republic. The states of the Eastern bloc "missed out" on various western social and culture movements, including the Second Wave of Feminism in the 1970s. Moreover, women in post-socialist countries lived under different circumstances than those in the West (such as equal access to education and employment leading to a relative socioeconomic independence from men or on the other hand the state promoted forced employment wrapped up in feminist slogans). As a result, the emancipatory effects of feminism remain elusive and controversial in the Czech Republic.

As an assistant professor of art history at the Academy of Art, Architecture and Design Prague, I have often lectured on gender issues in art in East Europe, topics central to my doctoral thesis, which I successfully defended in September 2010 at Charles University. In my lectures I have confronted several challenges. Firstly, I had to position myself as a "feminist," and as a result face the prejudices and misunderstandings of my students and colleagues. Secondly, I have tried to come to terms with the (sometimes frustrating) impact of gendered interaction between the lecturers and their female and male students. This is especially important in the context of art academies where gender imbalance among the staff members remains an ongoing fact, especially in more traditional disciplines such as painting and sculpture. Finally, one of my underlying goals as a pedagogue is to analyze discourses relating to feminist art and art produced by women and to demonstrate the relevance of this material to the work and lives of my students.

Given these challenges, I have developed an acute interest in the role of gender in the field of art education. At present, the best opportunities for this course of study come from abroad, where the many prejudices of Czech and East European society no longer apply. Whereas Czech academics tend to disregard gender as a fad or foreign import, the long term expertise in feminist theory and art practice and the institutional support of gender sensitive pedagogy within the US academia grants professional as well as personal support to the proposed research project.

The aim of my project is to analyze the intersections of gender and art pedagogy in the US context and apply my findings within the framework of Czech art institutions. I intend to research the changing position of women artists within the institutional hierarchies and explore the gendered interactions between the lecturers and students. Furthermore, I seek to analyze the various approaches to lecturing

on feminist art and art made by women. In order to do that I will be using interviews (existing as well as my own) conducted with the founders of feminist art pedagogy, and today's faculty and students of art institutions, information retrieved from biographies, and study of practice and theoretical background of feminist pedagogy. From a broader perspective, this project aims to enhance our understanding of relations of gender and art education in the post-socialist environment.

## **Background**

My research is based on the premise that art academies, more than other higher education institutions in the field of humanities, are governed by male dominated hierarchies, and tend to favor masculine or even macho models of conduct. This specificity of art education stems from historical notions of art creation that was – with some minor exceptions – coded as a masculine domain pertaining to the gender specific notion of genius – a capacity unavailable to women (Pachmanová 2002). Another problem for women art professionals posed the institutionalized exclusion of women from prestigious disciplines in art education as for instance painting from the nude model (Nochlin 1971). As Johann Zoffany's painting *The Academics of Royal Academy* (1771-72) demonstrates, only men were allowed to study and sketch the male nude models. The few members of the academy who were women were not allowed to be present; they are instead seen as portraits hanging on the wall. The modes of art education have indeed changed considerably since the times of early art academies, starting with the democratization of art education in the early 1900s followed by a significant increase of numbers of professional women artists during the 1970s, and the growing cohort of female students in the ranks of today's art academies. At the same time, the gender biases underlying art education have been systematically critiqued by various second wave feminist artists, who have helped to introduce gender-conscious methods of art education that highlight the many inequalities in the arts. Such critiques gave birth to consciousness rising groups and women-only study programs and workshops, such as the Feminist Art Program in Fresno or the New York Feminist Art Institute (Meyer 2010).

Contemporary feminist pedagogical strategies share the premise that pedagogue should be a guide, not a domineering authority. Unlike traditional training in the arts, which tends to be abstract and depoliticized, the feminist approach prefers experiential and political grounding and to question the authority of the teacher who (in the 1970s US context as well as in the majority of Czech art institutions today) usually happens to be a white, heterosexual man. While some of the proposed methods of feminist art pedagogy became widely recognized, and are applied in today's teaching practice in the Czech context, the political dimension of the gendered experience and its relation to power is still considered ill suited or irrelevant to art production by many of my colleagues. Art evaluation is not considered political, but rather "objective truth," and the premise that gender in art is intrinsically related to social power is frequently ignored. Another challenge tackled by feminism that stays predominantly unanswered in the context of Czech art academies and in the post-socialist countries in general (but also in the majority of art institutions in the West) is the acknowledging of female role models, be it female artists from the past or today's women artists and teachers.

## **Objectives**

The core objective of my project proposal is to research the history of gender pedagogy in art in the United States. This research will involve intensive archival and library research, combined with a series of interviews with teachers and students. My goal is to envision and formulate new teaching methods and methodologies, which I can subsequently apply in Czech art academies. To be sure, the experiences of American women artists do not easily translate into the Czech context, just as western economic theories did not easily translate into the East bloc after 1989. Nevertheless, as a Czech female academic, I am highly qualified to oversee this translation, comparing and contrasting the western experience with the experiences of women artists and academics in the Czech Republic. My aim is to maintain connection with the lived practice of art and of education, and address issues that are relevant not only within the given framework of art education, but also within the society in general.

Four main leanings can be identified within my research. Personal – concerning opinions regarding one's own gender and its influence upon the interactions within the artistic pedagogical framework; practical – comprising of concrete methods of gender-sensitive teaching; historical – mapping out the evolution of matrilineal history of art, coinciding with the inclusion of women teachers in the academia; and epistemological – assessing the feminist perspectives on production of knowledge concerning the role of gender in the context of art education.

These four interlinked approaches generate distinctive means and topics of inquiry:

1) In the interviews and auto-biographies, I will tackle the following questions (among others):

How does the interviewee reflect on gender issues in art education?

How does she/he cope with the various effects of gendered interaction between students and the lecturer (issues of favoritism, gender stereotyping)?

2) Based on personal testimonies and biographies, I will assess and analyze gender conscious teaching methods used by art teachers and their student's responses to the explicitly stated feminist stances of the pedagogues and to the feminist perspectives on art in general.

3) I will follow the careers of women artists from their position outside of the system of educational institutions to that of authorities.

4) I will summarize feminist methodologies that informed gender sensitive pedagogy and explore the disputed issues regarding teaching on feminist art and art made by women. I.e. How to promote women artists and resist the grand narrative of the Canon that it seeks to deconstruct? How to teach about feminist art and art made by women and avoid turning it into another sort of "-ism"?

## **Methodology**

My research is interdisciplinary, bridging the realms of art history, women and gender studies, and pedagogy. It utilizes methods of feminist epistemology and oral history.

Firstly, I plan to conduct interviews targeting the personal experience of the founders of feminist art and art history who started their careers in the 1960s and 70s as outsiders and provocateurs aiming at disruption of the given status quo and subsequently gained status and corresponding authority such as Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Faith Wilding (with whom I discussed the topic during my research visit to Chicago in September 2010), Mary Beth Edelson, Cindy Nemser, Nancy Azara from the New York Feminist Art Institute (whose papers are based at Rutgers), Anne Swartz, Judy Brodsky, Martin Rosenberg (both based at Rutgers), and Martha Rosler (who currently teaches at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University) among others. Secondly, I will interview selected younger pedagogues (both man and women) and graduate students at Rutgers, at School of the Arts of Columbia University and the Steinhardt School of New York University whose response to the themes of gender in art education process and feminist art will most likely differ in many ways from the perception of their older colleagues.

I will rely on my experience of interviewing Czech women artists I gained during the fall semester 2010 when I taught an experimental course aimed at collecting oral histories of key Czech and Slovak women artists. The development of this course was funded by a grant of the ERSTE Foundation.

In the Fulbright research project I intend to utilize also personal narratives and biographic materials on the work and lives of individual women artists, art pedagogues, and feminist art historians published in print and recorded on film as well as oral histories accessible in archives and online. I find the method of oral history the most pertinent to the discussed topic, since it abolishes the traditional hierarchical relationship between the researcher (whose position is constructed as objective and authoritatively structuring the material) and the interviewee (who is conceived as an object of the inquiry and a source of information that has to be mined out). The feminist methods of collecting oral histories on the other hand stress the non-hierarchical relations between the historian and the interviewee (Berger Gluck and Patai 1991). During my short study visit to the US that preceded the implementation of the above mentioned course, I have conducted preliminary research in collections of the Archive of American Artists in Washington DC, Oral Histories of Iowa Women Artists in library of the Iowa University, Gloria Orenstein Collection and NY Feminist Art Institute Oral History Project housed in Special Collections of Rutgers University, researching oral histories of women artists and art historians. Within this research I have concentrated on their gender specific experience as students as well as pedagogues. My proposed Fulbright project directly capitalizes on the outcomes of the abovementioned preliminary research.

In order to frame my findings with more quantitative data, I intend to search archives of the Women's Caucus for Arts and the New York Feminist Art Institute for information regarding the employment of women in art education from 1970s onwards.

## **Significance**

Prior to the 1970s, one of the highest compliments a female artist might hear from her teachers and critics was that she "painted like a man". In 2010, the situation seems different but, as many women teachers attest, not necessarily in all aspects. Especially in the post-socialist countries many women art teachers and students still struggle with sexism and gender biases (n.paradoxa, vol. 26/2010).

Unfortunately, it is not just in the art departments where the old habits persist but also in the realm of

art history that often resists the challenges posed by feminism, and last but not least in the context of the art market and the galleries' and museums' exhibiting policies. It is on each of these institutional platforms where women artists are neglected and their work overlooked and undervalued. My intention is to address this critical need of counteracting the discriminatory practices and stereotypes among the Czech artists, pedagogues, and art students. As for now, there is not a single published study that would cover the issue of art pedagogy and gender in the Czech Republic. I understand my survey of the history and present of feminist art pedagogy in the US as a necessary requirement for a pioneering research further investigating the issue at my home institution as well as at the other Czech art academies. Following my research on gender matters in curating (Štefková 2009), I intend to analyze yet another component of mechanisms of women's exclusion. I believe that my study of the process of teaching art from gendered perspective will deepen theoretical understanding of the issue at stake as well as my personal ability to pursue methods of gender-sensitive teaching. I seek to capitalize on my experience gained in the US after my return to the Czech Republic. By facilitating discussion on the topic of gender with students and teachers alike, I hope to challenge biases concerning feminism among Czech artists and our society in general.

### **Evaluation and Dissemination**

Besides of this utilization of methods and perspectives of gender conscious pedagogy in my regular teaching practice, I would like to offer my home institution a course on the history of feminist art. The findings will be submitted for publishing to international and Czech art journals (ARTMargins, Umelec Art International, Notebook for Art, Theory and Related Zones, Praesens, Flashart) and journals concentrating on feminist scholarship (such as SIGNS, Feminist Studies, and n. paradoxa). While in the USA, I hope to lecture on the topic of comparison of the US and Central European context at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. Finally, I would like to publish the transcribed and translated interviews in Sociological Publishers House. In all cases the support of Fulbright scholarship will be credited.

### **Justification for Residence in the United States for the Proposed Project**

Given the long-standing tradition of US feminism combating prejudice toward women in general, the rich and diverse history of women in visual arts in particular, and the pioneering role of the American women artists in feminist pedagogy, I consider my residence in the US crucial for the successful realization of my research project.

The Rutgers University is an institution with a continuous history of support and outstanding record of research of women in arts. It has a broad variety of facilities that would provide my research with unique academic and institutional background. During my preliminary study visit at Rutgers in September 2010, I have visited the Institute for Women and Art and met with its directors, professor Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin Ph.D. (who has kindly offered to sponsor my stay), Marianne Gaunt, the head of the Rutgers University Libraries, Julie Langsam, assistant professor at the Masson Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers, and Marilyn Symmes, director of the Morse Research Center for Graphic Arts and curator of the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum in New Brunswick. I have presented my proposed project on Gender and art pedagogy and discussed the situation in fine arts education in the Czech and US contexts. Besides of the Institute that specializes in interdisciplinary study and promotes exhibitions and publication on women and art, there are also other highly relevant institutions housed at Rutgers. Key role in the realization of my project would play the Miriam Shapiro Archives for Women Artists collecting artists' papers and records of visual art groups related to feminist art i.e. Heresies Collective, New York Feminist Art Institute, the Dana Women Artists Series – the oldest continuously running gallery exhibiting women artists -, as well as of many individual artists. The lack of women pedagogues in the university type art education in the Czech Republic corresponds with the agenda of two other institutions residing at Rutgers, the Margery Somers Foster Center, archival collection focused on women's leadership, and the Institute for Women's Leadership, examining and advancing women's leadership worldwide. Also based at Rutgers is Women's Caucus for Arts, founded in 1972, whose archives could provide me with crucial information regarding women in art education. While at Rutgers, I would certainly cooperate with Women's and Gender Studies Department and Douglass Residential College running core course on knowledge and power for women students.

## Duration

Given the amount of material, I would like to cover and the fact that some of the interviews and research would have to take place outside of New Brunswick, the optimal length of the research stay should be ten months.

## Other

My experience in teaching in English goes back to 2000 when I started lecturing for the Council on International Educational Exchange, an American study abroad program. Between 2006-07 this experience included teaching at the Anglo-American University in Prague and since 2007 lecturing for the M.F.A program at the Academy of Art, Architecture and Design. I am also familiar with the format of studio visits and lecturing at the US art institutions. I was an invited lecturer at the Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, and delivered a lecture on Czech contemporary critical art at the Steinhardt School of New York University. In 2009, I have participated at the Midwest Slavic Conference 2009, Columbus University, Columbus, Ohio, at Roundtable on David Černý's Entropa. I am a co-founder of the NGO c2c Circle of Critics and Curators and the eponymous gallery that since its founding in 2006 initiated and housed more than two dozens exhibitions. In 2009, c2c Gallery cooperated with the Hermitage Gallery Chicago on two exhibitions held in Chicago. Given this experience, I intend to use the planned research stay in the US for promotion of Czech art in the US while simultaneously searching for potential institutions and individual artists that could become partners in my future exhibition projects of American art in the Czech Republic.

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