

Gender Check, Feminism and Curating in Eastern Europe: An Interview with Bojana Pejić

Katrin Kivimaa

In 2009–10 Bojana Pejić curated *Gender Check. Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*. Held at the Museum Moderne Kunst Stiftung Ludwig (MUMOK) in Vienna (2009–2010) and Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw (2010), *Gender Check* was a monumental investigation into the place of gender politics in the region's art scenes. Dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the project was intended as a politicised interpretation of artistic practices and their social milieux. This revisiting of official and non-official art from the 1960s and 1970s along with an alternative cartography of the post-socialist period took the form of a large-scale exhibition, public seminars and workshops, symposia, an exhibition catalogue and a reader. Conducted in Berlin in 2011, the interview reflects on the broader context and impact of *Gender Check* as well as on the role of the feminist curator in contemporary Europe.

Katrin Kivimaa (KK): Why was it important to initiate a project such as *Gender Check*? And why do it twenty years after the collapse of state socialism? Among your interviews about *Gender Check*, does the one titled 'Anger of Bojana Pejić' for an online Polish feminist magazine offer perhaps some clues?¹

Bojana Pejić (BP): Between 1989 and 2008 Europe witnessed Germany's reunification, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the bloody dismemberment of Yugoslavia. Twenty-three new nation-states were

born, some sovereign for the first time in history, some constituted through brutal wars. Each 'new' European democracy embraced nationalist ideologies so that state socialism was replaced by state nationalisms married to neo-liberal capitalism and emblematic of 'post-politics'.

Yet this was a period of remaking history. Whereas historians engaged in revising national histories and claiming the nation as the main opponent and main victim of Communist regimes, art historians began appending modernist tendencies to national art histories. In Titoist Yugoslavia, which did not belong to the Warsaw Pact, abstract and modernist art was accepted as official art. Modernist paradigms had been 'domesticated' in theoretical and artistic practices since the late 1960s. In revisiting Socialist Modernism today, East European art historians generally show, alas, an uncritical acceptance of many modernist myths, such as the division between high (i.e. painting and sculpture) and low media (i.e. applied arts), male genius, art as a genderless and also apolitical field.² After 1989 many Eastern European artists, curators and critics took a feminist stance while most male and female historians remained distant from (if not hostile to) feminist interventions. If we agree that there are two art histories, one written in the academic world and the other told via exhibitions, then the feminist rewriting of modernism and its aftermaths in the Eastern European context occurred in exhibition catalogues rather than academic textbooks.³

Gender Check took place twenty years after the demise of state socialism simply because there was an opportunity to do it. In 2007 the ERSTE Foundation in Vienna invited seven curators based in Western and Eastern Europe to propose a project that would mark the twenty year anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain. Five of us responded and the Advisory Board selected my proposal. In the course of my research as chief curator for *After the Wall* (1999), I had learned a lot about feminist artists, critics and curators in our region, and I invested this knowledge-capital in my 2007 proposal. But as I was writing the proposal, I also became 'angry'.

That year, 2007, three large exhibitions involving feminism took place: *WACK! Art and The Feminist Revolution* in Los Angeles, *Global Feminisms* in New York and *Gender Battle* in Santiago de Compostela in Spain. The first included four women artists born or based in Eastern Europe, the second seven and the last one three. Unable to see the shows, I focused on their catalogues in order to understand, firstly, how a younger generation of historians and curators **remake** feminist art, and secondly to find out whether these shows offered insights into the

spatialisation of feminist strategies beyond the West.⁴ The American shows did open to the Third World (represented primarily by artists who live in the First), but as usual, 'our' Second World was bypassed.⁵ This already made one somehow angry, but the question I asked myself was: **how** could a scholar/curator not based in Eastern Europe access 'our' material if 'we' did not research it? 'Embedded' scholars are not necessarily able to proffer a 'better' or more 'truthful' interpretation; and yet familiarity with the art of one's immediate surroundings can be important.

But also there was a lack of information about 'us' (Eastern Europeans) among 'us'. Western and Eastern European feminist sociologists had dealt with gender issues in state socialism but not touched upon visual culture. Conversely, since the mid-1990s many publications have appeared about Eastern European art during the Cold War or later but exclude feminist readings. Some publications do not mention women artists at all.⁶ And finally, many volumes discussing the 'post-communist condition' belong to Russian Studies rather than to Eastern European studies; they tend to privilege Russian (women) artists and obliterate other parts of formerly 'red' Europe.⁷

KK: The working title for *Gender Check* was *Scattered Resistances*, right? It was a suggestive phrase, on the one hand pointing at the historical, if often unacknowledged, resistances of women artists against the imposed model of gender equality during socialism, and on the other at the position of feminism in the region. Should we see these two titles as signposts – one for the initial idea and one for the realisation of this vision? What happened between the first and second title?

BP: The research results as such necessitated the abandonment of my original title. For *Gender Check*, twenty-four art critics, art historians and artists were invited to research their national art histories and propose artworks and textual sources. The research covered a time span of about fifty years: we had to 'excavate' art and criticism produced during the last thirty years of state socialism and explore the first twenty years of the democratic period. We looked at the so-called official art of socialist realist norms and a post-Second World War period of state socialism when the 'woman question' appeared resolved. These works point to the state-promoted egalitarian gender policies and women's emancipation under socialism, showing, for example, women performing traditionally male professions. They were included in the first part

of the exhibition, entitled 'Socialist Iconosphere' (which also included artworks that critiqued the official vision of new society and negative effects of women's emancipation).⁸ Therefore the term 'resistance' could not be attached to all art included in the show. In the second part of the exhibition, 'Negotiating Personal Spaces', we showed works of the socialist era where resistance became manifest as sexual politics: exploring bodily subjects, questioning socialist puritanism, critiquing representations of 'woman' in visual art and mass media, and in some cases undermining the normative heterosexuality characteristic of state socialism.

My working title, *Scattered Resistances*, drew on the anthology *Scattered Hegemonies*, exploring transnational feminism and the effects of mobile capital in the postcolonial context.⁹ Whereas postcolonial theories, feminist ones included, were and still are helpful for destabilising Occidentalism, in Eastern Europe wrestling with the 'West' has had a different dynamic: during the Cold War, the 'West' was both an object of desire and source of potential danger; today however nationalist ideologues who dominate the public and media sphere manifest their anti-western sentiments not because they are against global capital per se but because capital's 'empire', to use Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's term, threatens the nation.¹⁰ And yet globalisation did not end the nation-state. In our smaller nation-states that, unlike the USA, are not global players, the nation-state is imagined more in terms of the nation than of the state. Thus, the survival of the nation appears as a demographic problem to be cured by non-working mothers, pro-life parties, anti-abortion policies (the anti-abortion bill passed in Poland only in 1993) etc. Feminists questioning these policies are accused of importing foreign ideas that destabilise the nation (just like socialists believed that 'capitalist feminism' was not needed because they had 'solved' the 'woman question'). Last but not least, homophobic attitudes abound in the new democratic states. Female and male artists, shown in the third part of the show, 'Post-Communist Genderscapes', address these issues critically.

KK: Were you satisfied with the critics' and/or the public's response to the exhibition? Did reception differ in Vienna and in Warsaw? Did *Gender Check* generate any wider debates, or inspired other exhibitions, projects etc.? In short, how would you assess the impact of *Gender Check* in the region and beyond?

BP: As we had many video pieces, *Gender Check* was a demanding exhibition, requiring visitors to invest time. It was really a huge presentation, featuring five artist groups and 222 solo artists. In Vienna, the anxiety that the Western public would somehow fail to understand the show proved unfounded. In Warsaw the show was certainly well attended.

As per the curatorial proverb, 'now that the exhibition is finished, I know what kind of exhibition I wanted to make'. Only after a show is installed a curator can see the mistakes as well as the possibility of different dialogues between works. Exhibitions are spatial narratives: they work (or not) in space and you need to live with them, eavesdrop, as I often did, on visitors' whispers and comments. Spatial conditions in MUMOK and Zachęta differ and so arguably there have been two versions of *Gender Check*. Certain segments of the show, and particularly contemporary pieces, sat much better in Warsaw than in Vienna.

As regards the impact of *Gender Check*, when I proposed the project to ERSTE Foundation, my secret wish was to somehow bring together feminist art historians and curators of a younger generation, one 'scattered' across Eastern European geographies, who write excellent texts and curate important exhibitions in their own countries but who had never worked together or even met. Our project initiated personal contacts and new networks. To date, it has resulted in two exhibitions on art of the Soviet period curated by researchers who participated in *Gender Check*. You, Katrin, co-curated *The Soviet Woman in Estonian Art* in Tallinn and Laima Kreivytė co-curated *Woman's Time – Sculpture and Film* in Vilnius.¹¹ When museums in Eastern Europe prefer to not put the art of that period on display, both exhibitions managed to offer a feminist perspective on the representation of women in Soviet times.¹²

KK: There were also voices claiming that *Gender Check* failed to critically analyse the European/global processes of neo-colonialism that determine regional, local, or indeed individual conditions in which works of art as well as the whole exhibition have been produced. The representative and canon-making nature of the show was criticised as well. Would you like to respond to these criticisms and perhaps expand on the main aims of the project as well as its (most important) contexts?

BP: As is known, globalisation is a process induced by the post-socialist condition, and we had to deal with it *after*, and not before, 1989. *Gender Check* was even seen to partake of the 'neo-colonial' ambitions of ERSTE

Foundation, which funded the project. Or we were told that gender is an outdated category and contemporary feminism could only deal with queer positions, a rather disputable assumption. Even if our project had not partly been about situating, and critiquing the position of, Eastern European art in globalisation, a careful look at the contemporary pieces in the show would register female and male artists' evident interest in globalisation. Artists did address capital and gender, mapped the global space of sexual labour, poverty and pornographic imagery, deconstructed nationalist ideologies promising to 'protect' the 'nation' from galloping globalisation.

I am fully aware that Eastern Europe is not a unified whole; none of the countries in question practised state socialism or currently experiences democracy in the same way. Nonetheless, how come that the women artists who worked in the GDR, Hungary, Soviet Latvia, or Macedonia (as a former Yugoslav republic) are still excluded from their national art histories? The *Gender Check* project suggested that 'we' had more in common than we had ever thought!

We did not however publish an exhibition guide, contextualising each work. This was a shortcoming. But could we not consider *Gender Check* as a (temporary) **context** for artworks originating in different countries and timeframes? The show was also contextualised through guided tours, always popular. The catalogue did not list the exhibited works, also a shortcoming, but this list is now available online.¹³

I do not know whether *Gender Check* is, or will become, a canonical exhibit. And as Hal Foster once put it, 'today the canon is less a barricade to storm than a ruin to pick through'.¹⁴ *Gender Check* was simply the first project inquiring into the (post-)Second World while attempting multiple connections through its given geographies. We only scratched the surface. If it becomes a 'canon', well, this canon, like any other, exists to be undone and deconstructed.

KK: The power of the contemporary curator has been widely discussed. For *Gender Check*, you worked together with a team of researchers, each of whom pre-selected artists and works of art on a national level. On the other hand, your exhibitions can come across as one-(wo)man-curated statements, displaying a strong curatorial vision. How do you see yourself as curator? And more specifically, as [a] feminist curator? How has your personal history of having been born and grown up in socialist Yugoslavia shaped your identity as feminist curator, art critic and scholar?

BP: Whereas getting hold of material was a 'democratic' process in the sense that each of the researchers from 24 countries proposed artworks from their country of origin, it is also true that I used (or abused) my power and responsibility as the curator of an international exhibition. I tried to respect choices but curating an exhibition, be it large or small, national or international, has little to do with 'democracy'. When you curate, you actually perform an un-democratic act: you make certain **professional** decisions (as the researchers themselves made), you include and exclude, and you do this to arrive at a more or less consistent narrative. Yet the structure of the exhibition and its thematic sections were not preconceived but based on the material received. So, let's say that I have come to self-identify with a 'position of authority, in a way that exposes the illusions of that position without renouncing it'.¹⁵ It's easier to undermine this illusion with self-irony and humour. And there is an old slogan from post-1945 Yugoslavia: 'We are building the railroad and the railroad is building us'. Each exhibition project requires a level of openness and is a process of learning and unlearning.

As for the feminist curatorial 'hand', here is an example. When selecting artists for *After the Wall*, which featured contemporary art from post-communist Europe in the 1990s, I was not looking for women artists. Rather, I was after artworks which could help us understand the 'dialectics of normality' in the freshly established, Eastern European democracies. The democratic condition revised the relationship between the private and the public, which has shaped our relation to history, to nationalism and to the body. And so in the end, the show was found to have 'too many women artists'! Someone even asked why I included a woman artist who cast in porcelain (sic!) political performances of her male colleagues, since she was 'just' an applied artist. Let me then paraphrase Goddard: The issue is not to make **feminist** exhibitions but to make exhibitions **in a feminist way**.

Now in my sixties, I belong to a generation that did not have curatorial studies – ubiquitous today. Back then, it was learning by doing. I worked twenty years in the Student Cultural Centre (SCC), which performed the function of an ICA, affiliated to the University of Belgrade. Since its foundation in 1971, gallery curators – first Dunja Blažević and later Biljana Tomić – established an intensive international programme through which I met Gina Pane, Ulrike Rosenbach, Joseph Beuys, Natalia LL, Gisliind Nabakowski, Art & Language and Ana Mendieta in the SCC gallery. In 1978, SCC organised the international conference, *Comrade-Woman: Women's Question – A New Approach?*, the

first ever feminist meeting in a socialist country. Yugoslavs could travel abroad since the early 1960s and saw a lot of art. SCC hosted conceptual art, performances, screenings, discussions. I was regularly writing art criticism, reviewing shows held in Yugoslavia and abroad. In the late 1980s, I started to contribute features as well as reviews to *Artforum*, which proved helpful when I came to Berlin. For twenty years now, I have been a freelancing, diasporic post-Second Worldist.

KK: In the interview with Amelia Jones included in this volume, Angela Dimitrakaki asked her to reflect upon the distinction between **all-women** and **feminist** shows. Can this distinction inform feminist curatorial strategies in parts of Europe where a history of feminist (art) movement is missing?

BP: I wanted to avoid two things from the very beginning. First, I did not want to make an all-women exhibition. The term 'gender' is somehow still associated with women, to the extent that many project researchers sent artworks just by female artists! This had to be reviewed. During the socialist period a number of male artists questioned the concept of male genius and some resisted a heterosexual norm (central to the socialist worldview) by picturing gay and lesbian relationships. This is why – and that was the second thing I wished to avoid – I did not want an image of a man-woman couple in the exhibition poster.

Since the 1970s hundreds of publications about women's art have appeared in Anglo-Saxon countries. Not all of them include feminist interventions, but many do. In any case, we know enough about Western women artists, we know who did what in Los Angeles or New York in the 1970s. What we do not know is who did what in Kraków or Skopje, Tallinn or Tbilisi. In Eastern Europe, women artists' genealogies are still in progress. So, in **this** context, all-women exhibitions can be useful, even if they risk being branded essentialist or 'separatist'. For example, an exhibition in Hungary and a book in Macedonia inquire into women artists' practices but avoid feminist readings – despite both projects including artists who are feminists.¹⁶

What may be seen as questionable is an exhibition with 'feminist' in the title but which includes work by women artists who never claimed to be feminist. It has happened in America. And I am tired of reading interviews where Eastern European women artists state that they are not feminists because their prime concern is to make 'just art' – art untainted by 'ideology'. Funnily enough, most such artists do not object

to feminist readings of their practice and so take part in 'ideological' feminist exhibitions. Their attitude – not exclusive to Eastern Europe but globally shared – fits perfectly the consensus of neo-liberal 'post-politics', 'post-feminism' included. As late as 2005, in research conducted in the Czech Republic one interviewee, perhaps an artist, exemplified this attitude, confessing: 'I use that word, feminism, only intimately and when it is dark'.¹⁷ [please confirm if the words in this phrase should be capitalised, as per the title of the production/essay.]

KK: Is there a place for feminist curating – or art scholarship – as a **programmatic** and **continuous** practice in the countries of Eastern Europe? Or is feminist curating highly dependent on the individual positions of curators and the circumstances of particular cultural/national contexts in which they choose or happen to work?

BP: *Gender Check* could happen only because it did **not** try to invent Eastern European feminist art and theory but acknowledged their existence. The objective was to offer both art and theory a common platform. Even though thirteen new essays were commissioned for the catalogue, the articles reprinted in *The Gender Check Reader*, which had been originally published between 1988 and 2008, demonstrate that 'situated knowledges' were produced in most post-socialist cultural milieux.

The crucial part of the *Reader* is the 'Chronology', listing articles by scholars, art critics, curator and artists. We see that in some countries there is continuity while elsewhere feminist voices are limited to one or two names. In Eastern European cartographies, feminist **moves** – be they academic, artistic, theoretical, or activist – are carried out as scattered resistances that are not just locally meaningful. So, although the word 'feminism' is uttered not too often and in the dark, these resistances do signal that *eppur si muove*!

Notes

- 1 'Anger of Bojana Pejić: An Interview on the Occasion of the Gender Check Exhibition at the Warsaw's Zachęta Gallery', by Izabela Kowalczyk, Dorota Łagodzka, Edyta Zierkiewicz, *Artmix* 24 August 2010, <http://www.obieg.pl/artmix/18402>, accessed 27 February 2012.
- 2 A notable exception and an excellent mapping of modernist tendencies on the other side of the Berlin Wall is Piotr Piotrowski's *In the Shadow of Yalta – Art and*

- the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 3 Edit András was the first to attempt a feminist deconstruction of modernist myths in dealing with Hungarian contexts. See András, 'A Painful Farewell to Modernism: Difficulties in the Period of Transition' in Edit András and Anna Bálvány (eds), *Omnia Mutant; XLVII International Biennale of the Visual Arts – Hungarian Pavilion*, exhibition catalogue, reprinted in Bojana Pejić (ed.), *Gender Check: A Reader: Art and Theory in Eastern Europe* (Vienna: Erste Foundation, Museum Moderne Kunst Ludwig/MUMOK, and Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2010), pp. 115–25.
 - 4 See Bojana Pejić, 'Why is Feminism Suddenly So "Sexy"? Analysis of a "Resurgence" Based on Three Exhibition Catalogues', *Springerin* 8.1 (2008), <http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft.php?id=54&pos=1&textid=2025&lang=en>, accessed 12 January 2012.
 - 5 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 Bojana Pejić (ed.), *Gender Check. Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, exhibition catalogue (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig and Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2009), pp. 241–8.
 - 6 See Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). None of the male authors who wrote about Eastern European art mentioned women artists. In contrast, the authors who discussed China and Cuba wrote extensively about women's works.
 - 7 For a feminist critique of these attitudes, see Katrin Kivimaa, 'Present Histories and Missing Voices' in *n.paradoxa: an international feminist art journal* 11 (January 2003), pp. 88–90. Reprinted in Bojana Pejić (ed.), *Gender Check. A Reader*, pp. 193–6.
 - 8 The exhibition comprised three main sections: I. Socialist Iconospheres, II. Negotiating Personal Spaces, III. Postcommunist Genderscapes. I was subdivided into 1) Private Realities, Personal Resistances, 2) Heroines of Work: Emancipation and Discontent, 3) Women at Work, Men at Work, 4) Remaking the Past after 1989. II was subdivided into Representing Women: Latent Feminism versus Old Stereotypes, 2) Politics of Self-Representation, 3) Women Artists Appropriate 'Universal Art' 4) Couples, Relationships, Loves 5) Heroic Male Subject Reconsidered 6) Performing Gender/Performing the Self. III was subdivided into 1) The Politicisation of the Private, 2) Femina: Identity, Spectacle, Masquerade, 3) Nationalism and Critique, 4) Convention and Transgression, 5) Capital and Gender.
 - 9 See Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (eds), *Scattered Hegemonies* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 7.
 - 10 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in Okwui Enwezor *et al.* (eds), 'Globalization and Democracy' in *Democracy Unrealized – Documenta 11_Platform 1* (Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2002), pp. 323–36.
 - 11 See Katrin Kivimaa and Kädi Talvoja (eds), *The Soviet Woman in Estonian Art* exhibition catalogue (Tallinn: KUMU Art Museum, 2010); Laima Kreivytė and Elona Lubyte (eds), *Woman's Time – Sculpture and Film*, exhibition catalogue (Vilnius: National Gallery of Art, 2010).
 - 12 See Piotr Piotrowski, 'New Museums in Eastern-Central Europe: Between Traumaphobia and Traumaphilia' in Claire Bishop and Marta Dziewańska (eds),

- 1968–1989: *Political Upheaval and Artistic Change* (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), pp. 149–66.
- 13 A list of artists exhibited in *Gender Check* can be consulted at <http://www.erstes-tiftung.org/gender-check/exhibition/list-of-artists/>, accessed 24 March 2012.
 - 14 Hal Foster, 'Dialectics of Seeing', in Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (eds), *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Culture* (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002), p. 215.
 - 15 Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 22.
 - 16 See Katalin Keserű (ed.), *The Second Sex: Women Artists in Hungary, 1960–2000*, exhibition catalogue, English version (Budapest: Ernst Muzeum, 2000); Sonja Abadžieva, *Deep Breathing: Aspects of the Woman's Discourse in 20th-Century Macedonian Art* (Skopje: Skenpoint, 2001).
 - 17 In Alice Červinková and Kateřina Šaldová, "I Use That Word, Feminism, Only Intimately and When it is Dark..." (from an Investigative Interview), *I have capitalised this as it is from a title of a production/essay; please confirm upper or lower case!* *Umelec* 1 (2005), https://www.divus.cz/umelec/article_page.php?item=1106, accessed 28 February 2012.