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# Female Art through the Looking Glass

**Suzana Milevska**

This text is attempt to consider the problems of understanding the difference between male and female ways of creation with consciousness but the result is not going to be any final and clear distinction. My argument about how gender is treated in the work of Macedonian artists follows from the debate on the pages of the Nordic magazine *Siksi* in three recent issues.

The discussion started when the British feminist art critic Katy Deepwell published the text "Sassy, or not?" in the winter issue of the magazine in 1996. The text was a critical essay on the exhibition *Body as Membrane* (Kunsthallen Klaedefabrik, Odense, 1996). Starting with the comparisons both between 1970s and the 1990s feminist art and across different national socio-economic structures she tried to locate the differences mostly between European and Anglo-American reception of women's art. The main point she argued was that recent body and performance art and its revival could offer a possible site for gendering the art against the neutralized art made by women. The danger, according to Deepwell (returning to Lucy Lippard's arguments from the 1970s) is that the reception of the most female art dealing with the body is caught in the vicious circle of being narcissistic and exhibitionist given that it is seen as arising from a neurotic dissatisfaction with self. The key question in this debate becomes whether the main aim of the art of women is able to escape the patriarchal structures of interpretation and whether it can offer any possibilities of liberation. The critique of representation and stereotypes of femininity often work differently both for male and female reception of this problematic.

The best proof that this question is not easy to answer is the fact that after the

publishing the text by Katy Deepwell, the magazine received several articles. The most striking was the text by Kristine Stiles ('The Empty Slogan of Self-Representation', *Siksi*, Spring, 1997) whose essay was cut from the catalogue of the exhibition *Body as Membrane* that was the main subject for Katy Deepwell's article. The reason that her article was censored (or edited as it was argued in the another occasion at The New Museum for Contemporary Art in New York where a similar act of "censorship" happened) was the too "angry and defensive" tone of the essay that criticised the way that the participants of the show were perceiving and representing their own bodies. How female art is perceived by others is its central question. The perceiving the female art by the audience and professionals is a problem that goes together with the conception and perception of the artists themselves because they are part of the same context.

When we talk about the differences in various social and national environments for the reception of the same artworks, I would like to stress that in the polemics that I started with it was not mentioned the biggest difference that could be seen in today's art and art theory is the difference between the feminine art in the Western world and that in the Eastern European societies. Some of the arguments of the last published text in *Siksi* ('Fishy Bodies and Closed Minds' by Tania Orum (*Siksi*, Summer, 1997), I believe, could be used more generally. Namely, the most important problem that arises in each society considering the representation of the different sexes is not only who has the power to represent but also how deep is established the semiotics of meaning that directs the way the signs are read "as if it produces the same signifying structure whether created by men or women"(Orum).

The art critics from the Eastern post communist societies often use as a differential point between West and East, the fact that the legal status of the women in the communist societies was much more developed and their social rights were taken care of. The laws and social policies were in favour of a new developed image of the women not only seen as mother and wife but also as an equal creator of the new society. This made-up character was needed in order to employ this half of the society in the hard battle for new values. Women were seen as being mothers and as the central pivot of education in the less developed societies and the government of the new empowering state was clever enough to use these strategies as the best way to raise a new generation. The only problem is that this division of the power of representation did not change the chain of signification as this was established much deeper than the vision itself.

In the East, the main victims of the dissimulating power of this deliberation of representation are the women artists themselves who do believe that there is no need for reflection on the gender difference. Not taking account of the fact that there is no law which can create a site for identification and subjectivisation, they avoid any issue which relates their works with everyday life. This is almost the totally opposite practice to the one in the West where the radical approach of the feminists caused a paradoxical emerging of their discourse in a vulgar exploitative system of signification.

This brief outline of the differences in the perception of the female art within different social contexts does not sound very optimistic. It seems that the arguments offered in the Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 1997) may shed some more light on this non-decipherable puzzle. She examines the question how it is possible that, even given in their own hands the power of representation, this can turn into a prison for the women by considering the thesis that for constitution of the subject an external power is needed. The formation of the self is conditioned by the existence of some forceful power that creates the consciousness and the conscience (psyche) itself which then anchors that power within subjectivity. This vicious circle had been used in the so-called "socialist" societies: in so far as the power of representation was deliberately given up and this caused a deprivation of this external power which would help the women to establish a critical view of the gender policy.

In what I have just said, I am not negating the possibility for exceptions to this general rule. There are some women who deal with strong socially engaged issues in their art work but the motivation for this creative method comes from a mostly metaphysical and mythic approach toward gender and the question of female art creators lies often outside of this argument: whether it is the only way to court the foreign art institutions or curators or it is a subconscious following of trends. I am not saying that an honest feminist approach is not possible at all but I am only trying to find the reason why whenever asked about their art as being female the most prominent female artists in Macedonia and in other Eastern countries answer that they feel their art is sexless and does not have anything to do with the fact that they are women.

This issue is not only relevant because of the contemporary flourishing of the art created by women but also because there were several events that signified that the female artists from Macedonia at this moment are often present in the international and local art scene. Namely, artists as Aneta Svetieva, Zaneta Vangeli and Iskra Dimitrova are very often presented at some major exhibitions abroad, and, alongside these women, at the group exhibitions in the country a very high percentage of the art works are by women artists. Recently (in 1996) there was a big international group exhibition organized both in Skopje - Macedonia and Providence - USA which included only female artists.

This project had a particularly typical feminist title chosen by an artist, it was called *Liquor Amnii (Amniotic Fluid)* and the work of the artists included raised many questions. The Macedonian artists were included in the two exhibitions held in 1996 in the Old Turkish bath Cifte Amam during the Skopje Summer Festival and in Providence at the bank of the Providence River during the Convergence X Festival. The artists were for the first time put in a position to explain their work to the audience when the Mobius artists group organised a lecture on the project at their Art Center in Boston. A further lecture on the project was organized at SCCA in Skopje

on the artists' way back to Skopje, after the accomplishing of the whole project. It is very important to state that the Macedonian artists' presentations of their works differed from the presentations by the American artists in terms of the importance they gave to the issue of gender in their work: while most of the works by the American artists: Margaret B. Tittmore, Meredith Davis, Marilyn Arsem, Cathy Nolan and Mary Novotny Jones were dealing with some social or historical problems connected with the gender difference, the Macedonian artists Zaneta Vangeli, Iskra Dimitrova, Mirna Arsovska, Margarita Kiselicka Kalajdieva and Nora Stojanovic did not put emphasis on this difference but they presented their work as dealing with mostly symbolic, mythological and artistic structures and concerns. Only Nora Stojanovic, who was the youngest and least experienced, was influenced by her foreign colleagues and during the stay in USA she changed and expanded her project and its discursive explanation to the examine how the representation of women in the male and patriarchal societies was largely treated as flesh. More typical however of the indifferent approach to the feminist issues is Aneta Svetieva, who represented Macedonia at the Venice Biennial 1997, and in the program on local TV A1 "Ars Futura" she claimed complete negation of the importance of her sex in her art concepts.

Gender and sexual difference would be discussed more if this intimate approach should be taken as only relevant interpretation of an account of the art works themselves. Namely, the art cycles by Aneta Svetieva *The Beauty and the Beast* which explicitly deal with the question of the fear from the other, or Iskra Dimitrova's project which examines ambivalence in the sexual difference in her work *Androgin*. Many others could also be interpreted as influenced by women artists who proclaim their work as feminist. Still, the thesis of this short text is not to argue for any relativistic interpretation but to highlight the individual conceptualisation of gender or sexual difference by the artists themselves.

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