

Tytuł

# There Is Nothing Like Women's Art. Work, Positions and Emancipation of Female Artists in Czechoslovakia during the Normalisation Period

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Abstrakt

In the eponymous survey led by Czech art historian Věra Jirousová in 1993, focused on the positions of female artists in the region, one of the authors stated that there was nothing like “women’s art.” The question of women’s art was (and still is) at stake: Does it really exist? Is it different from men’s art (i.e. art as such)? A common and very general characteristic of women’s works is that they are concerned about specific female experiences in the world. They are not necessarily feminist works. The artist works often with her own corporeality, analyses stereotyped roles and female features, or it can be art mapping the artist’s gender-conditioned subjectivity. Before the Second World War, the situation of women artists in Czechoslovakia was difficult. But after the war, following the forced emancipation of women during wartime and the socialist ideology of equality and participation in the “new society,” a very strong generation of female artists arose. Most of them were part of newly established art collectives, which were very democratic and bound by friendships and relationships. Here, a very interesting phenomenon can be spotted: a high

number of artist couples. Women were respected as partners and mostly did not feel any discrimination. Instead of fighting against social inequality, they were all rather fighting for freedom during the tough normalization era. The conference paper will examine the term “women’s art” and its connotations in the Czechoslovak art scene during socialism. Focusing on the artistic and social milieu of that time, it will try to find out why there were such negative feelings about feminist ideas among female artists of the region, and how the artists perceived their positions and opportunities. Comparing the work of important artists (such as Běla Kolářová, Adriena Šimotová, Eva Kmentová, Nad’a Plíšková and Zorka Ságlová), it will show significant features of their approach and artistic methods, questioning whether there are any similarities or common features that can be interpreted in the context of specific female experience.

Przepraszamy, ten wpis jest dostępny tylko w języku Amerykański Angielski.

## There Is Nothing Like Women’s Art. Work, Positions and Emancipation of Female Artists in Czechoslovakia during the Normalisation Period

I don’t think there is such a thing as women’s art. Although, on the other hand—most art made by a woman is somehow different.’<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of the Czech artist Zorka Ságlová which perfectly indicate the ambivalence about the concept of ‘women’s art’. This term has been and still is – widely used and researched in art theory, its definition is however still unclear.

This paper is focused on the term in its beginnings in 1960s Czechoslovakia, when it was used by Jindřich Chalupický, an art historian and curator, in an attempt to describe and characterise the work of the female artists who were emerging on the scene. It outlines the period, context and situation of women under communism, as well as thereception of feminist ideas.

### The question is – what exactly is women’s art?

In an attempt to explain the meaning of the category of women’s art, we may arrive at several presumptions: works created by women that touch on the specificity of women’s experience are referred to as women’s art: they often work with their own experience of corporeality, with stereotypes, in the form of the roles and qualities assigned to women, or they may be works mapping the author’s (gender) conditioned subjectivity. However, this does not mean that all female artists thematise corporeality through their work; nevertheless, their creativity is indirectly conditioned by corporeality (as men are conditioned by theirs).<sup>2</sup> Women’s art does not necessarily define itself against men. The need to project a ‘female experience’ that is different from men’s is emphasised by feminist art, which promotes the expression of differences and the finding of

women's self-confidence.<sup>3</sup>

## Feminism and art in socialist Czechoslovakia

Although the discourse of women's art is often spoken about in the countries of the former Eastern bloc, feminist art is believed not to have existed there until after the fall of communism. The absence of feminist art in communist Czechoslovakia is justified by several theses: that the creation of politically engaged art by local artists was discredited through state propaganda, and that Czechoslovak female artists who were active prior to 1989 did not then identify as feminists after 1989.<sup>4</sup> Among the main reasons for the absence of feminist art was also the lack of information and dialogue with the West. Another reason was the surviving monopoly of the modernist tradition, and the predominant concept of art as a transcendent category distanced from life, and from social and psychological processes.<sup>5</sup> There was also a common 'enemy' – the regime – against which artists fought together. To oppose the totality 'as one man' seemed more important than addressing gender inequality.<sup>6</sup> In the words of Jindřich Chalupecký, the most important Czech art theorist of the second half of the 20th century, 'there are at least ten female artists without whom Czechoslovak art can no longer be imagined and whose significance no one doubts. And yet there was not and is not a feminist art movement. There isn't one because we don't need it.'<sup>7</sup>

Western feminism was perceived in the communist countries (and even in the post-communist reception of the 1990s period) as too confrontational and aggressive, but at the same time Western feminists were seen as weak women who fought for a structural improvement in their positions, and their problems seemed marginal to Czechoslovak women in comparison with their economic and social situation.<sup>8</sup> Many prejudices against feminist ideas stemmed precisely from the different social environment in which Czechoslovak women found themselves under communism.

## Gendering communism

The position of women changed radically after the 1948 communist coup. In line with Marxism-Leninism, whose central idea was to achieve classless society, the unequal position of women was considered a phenomenon that did not belong in a communist society.<sup>9</sup> The gender agenda became one of the main policies of the communist state. Although great pressure was placed on women in the form of the so-called triple burden: paid employment, childcare and unpaid domestic work,<sup>10</sup> several laws were established during the 1950s to facilitate gender equality in communist Czechoslovakia, such as legalisation of abortion, liberalisation of divorce, abolition of the legal institution of the 'head of the family'<sup>11</sup> and so on, which were systemic rights that liberal

democracies still had to fight for. <sup>12</sup>

This controlled transformation of the position of women was also reflected in the field of fine arts. More women were admitted to university, and this was also one of the reasons why, at the end of the 1950s, a powerful generation of female artists appeared on the Czech scene for the first time. This first, strong and successful generation of female artists can thus represent the first wave of so-called women's art, as their work is often referred to. Jindřich Chaloupecký was the only theorist at that time who attempted to formulate a concept of women's art <sup>13</sup> based on his experience with the current works produced by the artists emerging on the unofficial scene. He articulated the idea in a positive sense, as an opposition to the traditional understanding of women's art as a designation of women's artistic production, which was built on attributes such as decorativeness, charm or lyricism, in contrast to the universality of high art. <sup>14</sup> He observed that this art was tightly bound to private life, and it was often in a form of a diary. The other significant feature was that many female artists tended to use reliefs and graphics, or other spatial forms and techniques. These artistic tendencies then sourced in intensive consciousness of body and body space. This corporeality led these artists to monumentality in form, lacking the 'typical' features of femininity. <sup>15</sup>

## Female artists of the unofficial scene

In the unofficial art scene, there existed a relative equality between women and men. Although the creative possibilities of female artists remained more limited than those of their male colleagues or partners, mainly due to the need to care for children and the household, female authors made a significant impact and were respected partners, for example, in the newly established art groups. <sup>16</sup>

Naděžda Plíšková (1934–1999) was one of the few Czech authors to practice a certain form of pop art. She was the creator of humorous, ironic drawings and graphics – a scathing commentary on life under communism. Like her husband, sculptor Karel Nepraš, she was a member of the so-called Křižovnická School of Pure Humour Without Joking – a collective of eccentrics, defining itself in contrast to the absurdity of the time through various humorous actions. Besides being a graphic artist, a ceramicist, she was also a poet – she published her verses and prose mainly in samizdat publications. Her poems are very intimate, reflecting her own experience as a wife, lover, depraved woman, housewife, mother, pub goer and so on. Her poems are often very openly erotic, like her artwork. <sup>17</sup> In her work, she chose themes from everyday life that do not belong to high art: the 'pub romance' of the Křižovnická School was close to her – she portrayed typical motifs such as a pint of beer, or traditional food such as pork chops with potatoes (*4 Servings of Tripe Soup Across the Street / 4 Porce dršťkové polévky přes ulici*, 1969; *Small Beer / Malé pivo*, 1971). In her graphic works, she also portrayed domestic reality, in which she ironically paraphrased women's duties and roles: a man, for

example, is represented here by an ironed folded shirt (Mon Mari, 1976).

Běla Kolářová (1923–2010), focused mainly on photography. Her first photographic series, entitled *Children's Games (Dětské hry)*, was created in 1956. An important theme for her was the city's outskirts, as can be seen in the *Prague Periphery (Pražská periferie, 1956–1964)* and *Ohrada (1964)* series. However, she soon discovered new forms of photography: she was looking for a way to capture everyday things and objects that lay outside the world of 'serious' photography, she wanted to show their imperfections, shabbiness and diversity. She thus decided to print them directly onto photographic paper using light, without using a camera, creating a series of traces, or so-called 'vegetages' (vegetáže): various objects such as feathers, pieces of cloth, but also household waste, such as potato or onion peelings and even a milk skin imprinted in a layer of paraffin rubbed on celluloid. After 1962, work with artificial negatives was replaced by light drawing, referred to by the author as 'roentgenographs of circles'. These light drawings were created on paper which was mounted on a rotary machine. It is therefore no longer a trace of material or a controlled trace of light, but a pure light record, with individual differences and details.<sup>18</sup> In other works around the mid-1960s, she began to emphasise objectivity again: she created assemblages, for which she again used everyday, domestic or waste objects. These so-called 'swatches' are assemblages of small objects arranged in geometric patterns: *Swatch of Beer Caps (Vzorník pivních uzávěrů, 1964)*, *Swatch of Poppers (Vzorník patentek, 1964)*, etc. *Hair-L (Vlasové L, 1964)* is created from hair, which was becoming an important material for Běla Kolářová, as were objects from drugstores and related to personal hygiene, such as razor blades (*Sharp Circle / Ostrý kruh, 1967*). During the 1970s, Kolářová continued to create assemblage installations. A special place was occupied by distinctly feminine motifs—assemblages of cosmetics, or created with the help of make-up and other specifically feminine features.

Separation from her husband<sup>19</sup> became a new impulse for her – in her work she turned directly to her own existence: the dominant work of this period is a complex of eight large plates from the autobiographical series *Biography of a Popper (Životopis jedné patentky, 1981)*, in which she revises her life and combines private, cultural and historical impulses.

The works of Naděžda Plíšková and Běla Kolářová are very close to each other: both artists were united by their interest in everyday life and metropolitan culture. At the same time, both worked with low and folk culture, which could be understood subversively to the classical understanding of 'high' and 'low' art connoted with sexuality.<sup>20</sup>

Zorka Ságlová (1942–2003) was, like Běla Kolářová, a representative of the so-called

'constructive' or 'objective' tendencies. These were significant in the work of the group of artists who were trying to get rid of the author's subjectivity, working with anonymous geometric elements, and who understood the image as a structure formed from identical elements arranged according to certain rules. Ságlová's three-dimensional objects, formed by a combination of elementary geometric shapes, can be seen as an intermediate link to actions in nature, which she began to perform in the late 1960s. One of the first actions was *Throwing Balls into the Průhonice Pond Bořín (Házení míčů do průhonického rybníka Bořín, 1969)*, in which colourful balls, thrown into the water, created a floating sculpture carried by the wind and waves. The opposite principle – the transfer of nature to the gallery, was performed in the exhibition *Hay, Straw (Seno, sláma, 1969)*. In one room, yellow bales of straw and green bales of dried alfalfa were displayed, in the other room there was a pile of hay that Ságlová and her friends bought and scattered. Visitors spontaneously formed new combinations of hay and straw. They were allowed to enter another world for a while, to take part in something unusual in the city. The installation was accompanied by hierarchical confusion: the low, natural and banal was placed on the pedestal of the high, artistic and celebratory. In 1970, Zorka Ságlová organised an event called *Laying Nappies near Sudoměř (Kladení plín u Sudoměře)*. In a meadow that had once been the site of a famous battle <sup>21</sup> she spread out approximately 700 squares of cotton nappies in the shape of a large triangle on the grass and left them there. In addition to the historical context, the event can also be read as a commentary on the role of a woman, whose daily activities include nappy washing and childcare. <sup>22</sup>

In the work of the following two authors, the body, and especially its imprint, the void that remains after it, resonate strongly. The motif of emptiness appeared in Eva Kmentová's (1928–1980) work since the early 1960s, in sculptures of heads or torsos. In addition to this motif, her works from this period also contain a certain tension of masculine and feminine principles. <sup>23</sup> Gradually, the image of an egg is added, which is then combined with other symbols of birth or revival: seeds, sowing, and so on (*Seed / Semeno, Sowed Landscape / Osetá krajina, both 1966*). Kmentová uses a playful approach employing chance, her work involves touching objects, matter, structure, shape as part of the method of creation and modelling: she began to create reliefs, into which pieces of wood, pebbles, pieces of fabric were imprinted. From imprinting of objects, she moved to imprints of her own body – she cast her palms, lips, feet and mouth, which became a key subject for her. The work *Hands (Ruce, 1968)*, a cast of her own palms that are covered with bullet-like holes – a gesture of opening and surrender, is highly important. They are defenceless hands, wounded and surrendering; <sup>24</sup> this work must also be read in the context of when it was created. <sup>25</sup>

Between 1970–1973, the sculptor was occupied with the theme of suffering and evil – she created finger casts and fist imprints. She often worked with coloured plaster. In *Aggressive Cube (Agresivní krychle, 1970)*, fingers seem to pierce the cube from the inside, a feeling of existential anxiety breaks through from all sides.

Due to a chronic illness, she gradually left her sculptural work and devoted herself to work in paper: paper objects such as *Sprout (Výhonek, 1979)* emphasise again the theme of growth and vegetation. Other tiny paper objects have intimate, even erotic connections – paper dining trays with a soft, slit motif.

After initial work in the spirit of lyrical abstraction, Adriena Šimotová (1926–2014) turned to figurative work – focussing her attention on the most banal human situations, their mundaneness. It was based on everyday 'women's activities' (applying make-up, putting on stockings, combing hair) or on situations she typically found herself in. In the 1970s, Šimotová's work changed radically, after she witnessed the slow and painful death of her husband, the painter Jiří John († 1972).

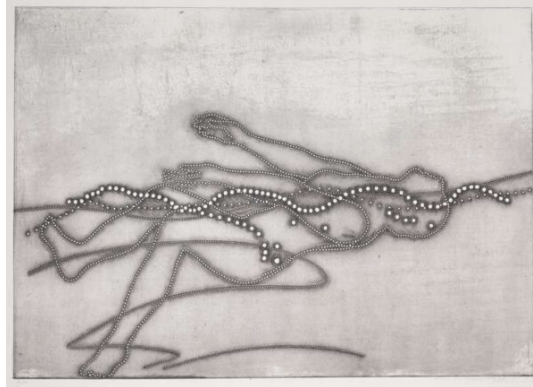
It is mainly a general change of view on life: from the side of its disappearance and extinction, the weight of loneliness, which seems to be the most serious human situation. The atmosphere of the works, figures and environment changes, the medium also changes definitively – Šimotová gives up the traditional possibilities of painting and drawing: she empties the surface of the paper, leaving several clear motifs – a prone body, the profile or outline of a head, or protruding feet.<sup>26</sup> She creates textile images – reliefs, cut or trimmed and then formed on the surface of a board, that has been carved, bent or folded. In the 1970s, the most frequent subject of her research was what defines and restricts human existence and its limits. At the end of the decade, she replaced textiles with paper, which she could manipulate even more subtly, and made one of her most important works – figures carved and torn from layers of paper, often from a whole roll of it, partially unwound (*From Somewhere to Elsewhere / Odněkud někam, 1984*). It was thus possible to go through the layers of paper as in a book, and read the variants of lines and the presence or absence of a colour record, by which they differed.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1990s, Šimotová began to focus on frottaging things from her surroundings: she frottaged objects around her: tables, chairs, doors.

*The Magic of Things (Magie věcí, 1991)* series is a set of pastel frottages of the most ordinary things, seeming to be monumental, as if they were living their own, sacred life. The table occupies a very important place, as a place of togetherness, a place of meeting and of sacrifice.

Subsequently, she frottaged the human body as well, creating an intangible imprint of existence on

paper. Through the imprints of hands, faces or other parts of the body, she made traces of the human body, as well as of previously inanimate objects. In the record of that touch, a unique emotional experience is contained, a harmony between two subjects.<sup>28</sup> Traces of touch on the human body are an expression of fleetingness and transience. At the end of her work, she gradually returned to the theme of ordinary everyday things – thus, the series *Chair for an Angel* (*Židle pro anděla*, 2004), *Clothes Hangers* (*Ramínka*) or *Cooker* (*Sporák*, 2005) were created.



Alena Kučerová, *Water Surface*, 1980, print from a perforated sheet, courtesy National Gallery Prague



Běla Kolářová, *Picked Out Threads II*, 1961, artificial negative, courtesy Egon Schiele Art Centrum, Český Krumlov





Eva Kmentová, Hands, 1968, plaster, courtesy Museum Kampa, Praha

In her graphic works, Alena Kučerová (\*1935) also focused on capturing everyday life. Unlike Šimotová or Kmentová, however, this was not a life of existential distress, but rather the poetics of everyday life, the joy of life, and motifs of free time and rest could be found in it. In her graphics, Kučerová looked for new techniques. One of them was perforated metal plates, which arose out of material hardship. As she could only afford cheap, tough metal sheets that were too hard to be engraved on, she chose perforation as a means of processing them. These plates gradually became separate objects and were installed as a dominant element in the works. The figures are then reduced to a basic contour in these graphics. They rest or walk, frequent motifs are swimming and having fun in the water, saunas or relaxation. At the turn of the sixties and seventies, Kučerová began experimenting with surface colouration and applied colour to the plates: she painted them with aggressive colour combinations –yellow, red and orange were among her favourites.

In the 1970s, animals became the central motif of the graphic works: horses, initially (*Gradivo*, 1970), then, deer, ducks or rabbits. In addition to animals, figurative work is still present – this time, the figures are in motion (*Restless Children – Summer Day / Neposedné děti – Letní den*, 1979). In the 1980s, landscapes came to the forefront of her work, especially the familiar Elbe landscape, in which Kučerová captured the atmosphere and movement. Radical perforated contours give way to finer graphics, in which the small perforations are complemented by shades of grey (*Two Ditches/Dvě strouhy*, 1984). Alena Kučerová is still working: in her assemblages, she ‘recycles’ old metal plates, into which she incorporates perforated drawings and natural products, such

as twigs.

## Conclusion

The term 'women's art' is thus complicated and superfluous in current art-historical discourse. Nevertheless, we can identify several features that can define the work of female authors.

Since the 1960s, there have been artists on the Czechoslovak scene who have emphasised a new intimacy and a more personal, less

formalistic language. The body, erotic desire, records of everyday events, the intertwining of abstract lyricism with naturalism, disinterest in the function of art, work with non-artistic and transient materials and inner reflection on the relationship between the sexes are all certain specific issues that we cannot find in the work of male artists of that time. Seen from today's perspective, Chalupecký's ideas about the specifics of 'women's art' of that time were quite right. There certainly were common areas which these authors were focused on, and these tendencies were something new in the field of post-war Czechoslovak art.

Thinking about the similar trend of the great increase of female artists in Western art in the 1960s, it can be considered as a historical paradox that the beginning of the disintegration of traditional patriarchal culture and the traditional roles of man and woman largely overlap with the beginnings of a totalitarian regime, which clung to conservative values and sought to minimise upheavals in society and culture in Central Europe. <sup>29</sup>

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  11. This institution, established in the 19th century, ensured the husband (or the father) a decisive position in the family. See more in Marie Černá, 'Women under Socialism: What Degree of Emancipation?', *Cahiers du CEFRES*, 30 (2016), 75–86 (p. 77). ↵
  12. Ibidem. ↵
  13. Jindřich Chaloupecký, 'Duše androgyna 1977', p. 241. ↵
  14. Cf. Marianna Placáková, 'Československá zkušenost jako východisko', p.34 ↵
  15. Jindřich Chaloupecký, 'Duše androgyna 1977', pp. 241–243. ↵
  16. The ban on groups was cancelled in 1956. In the same year, the Máj 57 art group was established and was soon followed by other groups, such as Trasa, UB 12, Křižovatka and others. ↵
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  18. Jiří Valoch, *Běla Kolářová* (Litoměřice: Galerie výtvarného umění, 1997). ↵
  19. Jiří Kolář signed Charter 77, which made him a dissident. In 1979, he received a scholarship to West Berlin and from there he left for Paris, where he remained. Běla Kolářová returned to Prague to settle property matters and received permission to travel to Jiří four years later. ↵

20. Cf. Martina Pachmanová, 'Three Wishes of Běla Kolářová', in *Gender Check*, ed. by Bojana Pejić, pp. 137–143. ↵
21. The Battle of Sudomer took place in 1420, between the Hussites and Catholic knights and nobles. A legend claims that the Hussite women helped win the battle by spreading their headscarves on boggy ground. In the morning mists, enemy riders pulling heavy artillery tripped over those scarves and sank into the mud. Unable to move, they became easy targets for the Hussite soldiers. ↵
22. See more in Jiří Valoch, 'Cesta tvorby Zorky Ságlové', in *Zorka Ságlová*, ed. by Milan Knížák (Praha: Národní galerie v Praze, 2006), pp. 16–22 (p. 20). ↵
23. Marie Klimešová, Eva Kmentová (Litoměřice: Severočeská galerie výtvarného umění, 2003), p. 14. ↵
24. See more in Jindřich Chalupecký, 'Příběh Evy Kmentové', in *Eva Kmentová. In Memoriam*, ed. by Jindřich Chalupecký, Jiří Šetlík and Polana Zoubková (Praha: Jazzová sekce, 1982), pp. 2–8. ↵
25. In August 1968, the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops began. ↵
26. Cf. Jiří Šetlík, *Cesty po ateliérech* (Praha: Torst, 1996), p. 199. ↵
27. 7 Jiří Valoch, *Co mizí a co zůstává* (Brno: Dům umění města Brna, 1996). ↵
28. Tereza Bruthansová, 'Celistvost v rozdvojení', in *Adriena Šimotová*, ed. by Pavel Brunclík (Olomouc: Muzeum umění, 2006), pp. 261–263 (p. 261). ↵
29. Cf. Martina Pachmanová, 'Dílo Evy Kmentové a tradice "ženského umění"', in *Téma Eva Kmentová*, ed. by Marie Klimešová, Jiřina Kumstátová and Alena Beránková (Litoměřice: Galerie výtvarného umění, 2004), pp. 45–54 (p. 53). ↵

### Kateřina Štroblová

Przepraszamy, ten wpis jest dostępny tylko w języku Amerykański Angielski.

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