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**Image** [modified]: Ewa Partum, Women, the Marriage is Against You, performance, Women's Art Festival, ON Gallery, 1980, courtesy Izabella Gustowska.

# Feminist art and art history in state socialist Poland, as seen through all-women exhibitions

A arte feminista e a história da arte no estado socialista polonês, visto através de exposições exclusivamente femininas

Agata Jakubowska\*

## ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the relationship between feminism and the art world in state socialist Poland. Contrary to the narrations that are centred around the second-wave feminism developed in the West, this essay concentrates on the significance of the socialist project of the emancipation of women. Its meaning is demonstrated through the study of all-women exhibitions, more precisely of three shows that were organised at those moments when women's issues were intensively discussed in Poland: *Women Fighting for Peace* (Cracow, 1952), *Women's Art Festival* (Poznań, 1980), and *Polish Women Artists* (Warsaw, 1991). The main questions addressed in the analysis are what discourses on women and women artists influenced the art world at a given period and how they evolved concerning the changing political situation. The study shows that the socialist project of women's emancipation played an important role, both positively and negatively, in the development of feminist art history and activism in Poland.

## KEYWORDS

State socialism. Poland. Exhibition. Women's emancipation. Women's art.

## RESUMO

Este texto discute a relação entre feminismo e o mundo da arte na Polônia socialista. Ao contrário das narrativas que giram em torno da segunda onda do feminismo desenvolvida no Ocidente, este ensaio concentra-se na importância do projeto socialista de emancipação das mulheres. Seu significado é demonstrado através do estudo de exposições exclusivamente femininas, mais precisamente de três mostras que foram organizadas nos anos em que as questões femininas eram intensamente discutidas na Polónia: *Women Fighting for Peace* (Cracow, 1952), *Women's Art Festival* (Poznań, 1980) e *Polish Women Artists* (Varsóvia, 1991). As principais questões abordadas em minha análise são quais discursos sobre mulheres e mulheres artistas influenciaram o mundo da arte em um determinado período e como eles se desenvolveram em relação

à mudança da situação política. O estudo mostra que o projeto socialista de emancipação das mulheres desempenhou papel importante, tanto positiva quanto negativamente, no desenvolvimento da história da arte feminista e do ativismo na Polônia.

#### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Estado socialista. Polônia. Exposições. Emancipação feminina. Arte de mulheres.

Linda Nochlin's article titled "Why Have There Been No Women Artists" appeared in a Polish translation only in 1999, and in a shortened version (Nochlin, 1999). It was published in a niche magazine produced by the Women's Information Centre (OŚKA), in a special issue devoted to women artists that aimed at making up for the absence of a discussion on the relationship between feminism and art (Limanowska, 1999: 2). Nochlin's essay had previously been referenced in texts included in the catalogue of the exhibition *Polish Women Artists* organised at the National Museum in Warsaw in 1991 (Morawińska, 1991: 10; Poprzęcka, 1991: 17). This show was the first historical overview of women artists active in Poland.

All this information could contribute to a story about the backwardness of Polish art history, art criticism and curatorship in comparison to the development of Western feminism. Yet, it is not my aim to present such a narration. In this text, I will instead concentrate on the inner logic of the development of relationships between the art world and feminism in Poland. Western feminist thought and practice will be present, but as one of the elements of the process. I will not deal with the circulation of Western feminist ideas in Poland<sup>1</sup>, but concentrate on tensions between the state socialist project aiming at the emancipation of women and the second-wave feminism developed in the capitalist Western world. I will analyse in what ways these tensions manifested themselves in the Polish art world.

The significance of the socialist project directed at the emancipation of women is, in my opinion, one of the missing aspects of the global history of feminist art. The latter successfully incorporates feminist voices from all over the world but seems to have problems with redefining conceptual frameworks of feminist art by consequently identifying it with the second-wave feminist objectives.

My argument will be based on an analysis of three all-women exhibitions organised between the 1950s and the 1990s in Poland. These shows, by their very nature – because of a decision to exhibit only art created by women – place the problem of women in the art world, art history and society at the very centre. They reflect contemporary discourses on women and as such provide an insight into the way ideas regarding the emancipation of women and/or feminist revolution manifested themselves in the art world. I will concentrate on three shows that from today's perspective appear to be milestones in the history of all-women exhibitions in Poland and also mark the crucial moments at which women's issues were at stake and intensively discussed in this country: *Women Fighting for Peace* (Cracow, 1952), *Women's Art Festival* (Poznań, 1980), and *Polish Women Artists* (Warsaw, 1991). By analysing them, I will reconstruct the discourses on women and women artists that influenced the art world during certain periods, paying particular attention to how they evolved in relation to the changing political situation in Poland.

## **State socialist emancipation**

### **Women Fighting for Peace, The Palace of Art, Cracow, 1952**

*Women Fighting for Peace* was an exhibition organised by the Cracow branch of the Women's League (one of the two women's organisations active in state socialist Poland, the other being the Club of Female Farmers) and the Association of Polish Artists<sup>2</sup>. It featured works by dozens female artists

from across the whole country. It was not the only show of that type then organised in Poland, but it was the most ambitious and the only one on a national scale<sup>3</sup>.

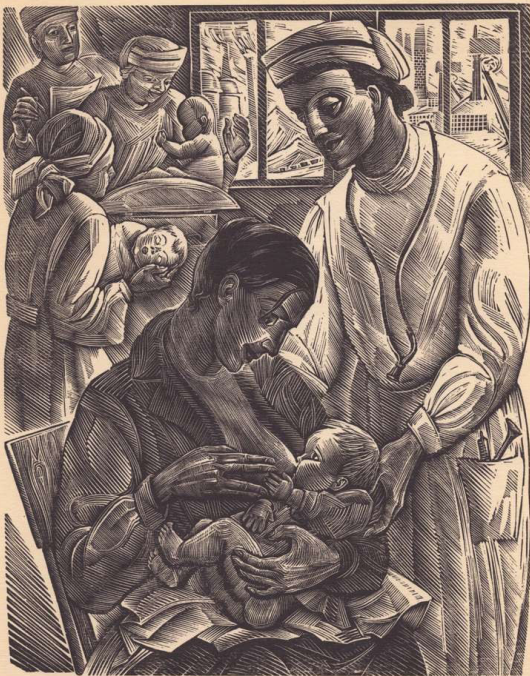


FIG. 1. Krystyna Wróblewska, *In the Factory Nurbury*, 1952, woodcut, 35,2 x 27,5 cm. Author' archive.

The exhibition reflected the project aiming at the emancipation of women implemented by the Polish government after World War II. One of the important elements of its policy was gender equality. As observed by Małgorzata Fidelis (a scholar specialising in the history of women in



state socialist Poland), the understanding of gender differences “was not a marginal element in the construction of the communist system, but rather served as the foundation of the newly established political and social order” (Fidelis, 2010: 19). Like the Soviet Union and its satellite countries constituting the Eastern bloc, Poland followed socialist ideas developed theoretically in the nineteenth-century publications and practised in the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik revolution (Stańczak-Wiślicz *et al.*, 2020). In Poland, gender equality was legally guaranteed in several official acts introduced after the war and confirmed by the Constitution Act of 1952. It was also introduced in the field of work. Women were not only allowed to work in all the domains (including those traditionally restricted to men), but were also intensively motivated to do so. They were – at least in theory – provided with the necessary training and released from household duties that were to be taken over by the government (through state kindergartens, canteens, etc.). This policy also applied to women artists who were officially encouraged to develop their artistic careers<sup>4</sup>.

The policy regarding women was modified during the communist era, but their employment was particularly intensively promoted during the so-called Stalinist period (1948–1956), when the communist ruling party aimed at fast-paced industrialisation and needed women to join the labour market. This period was also the most repressive in Polish post-war history. In the domain of culture, this repression was manifested through the introduction of the doctrine of realist socialism as a tool for reinforcing the communist ideology. This is when the *Women Fighting for Peace* exhibition was organised, which reflected the character of the period.

The majority of the artworks presented in the exhibition addressed the issue of women’s labour. There were representations of female workers and tractor drivers, as well as teachers, postwomen, draftswomen, female nurses, dentists, pharmacists, scientists (e.g. biologists or chemists), and artists (e. g. musicians, writers and painters). The works showed

anonymous women or portraits of concrete people, sometimes so-called first-rank workers, or at other times researchers or artists. Another small group consisted of portraits of female activists from various countries, like Eugenia Cotton, who was the president of the Women's International Democratic Federation, or Pak-Den-Ai, the chairperson of the Korean Democratic Women's League. The latter attests to the significance of the international dimension of socialist female activism. The exhibition offered what could be called a group portrait of contemporary women presented from the point of view of their labour and engagement in society. They were not depicted in their traditional roles of wives, mothers and household workers.

The title of the exhibition – *Women Fighting for Peace* – referred to women's engagement in creating a free, modern society. It was assumed that their commitment to peace also manifested itself, in addition to their participation in anti-war manifestations, in their involvement in (re-)building the country after the war. The curatorial text mentioned women's contribution to the realisation of the Six-Year Plan introduced in Poland in 1950 (Bologna, 1952). As noted by Luiza Kempieńska, this dimension of the show was a reflection of the policy of the Women's League, which at the First All-Polish League of Women Congress in 1951 expressed its commitment to the realisation of the government's economic plan (Kempieńska, 2017). It was also demonstrated through an initiative to organise meetings of artists and workers from various factories that aimed at bringing these two groups of working women together and diminishing class differences. Information about these meetings as well as some self-criticism concerning their results were included in the curatorial text and occupied almost half of it.

Such a profile of the exhibition can be considered as indicating that the event was nothing more than an element of the ruling party's propagandistic activities. Women's activism in state socialist Poland, which was undertaken, for example, within the framework of the Women's

League, is often presented in this way (e.g. Stasiewicz, 2019). It is also a subject of the more general debate that concentrates on women's agency in the Eastern bloc. Some scholars representing so-called feminist revisionist scholarship claim that women's organisations active in state socialism should be perceived as agents and not as "transmission belts" of the ruling parties (e.g. Grabowska, 2018, Nowak, 2009). They realised their policies in cooperation (which was usually difficult) with the governments. Others, more sceptical of the revisionist perspective, respond with the argument that to a great extent, the ruling party decided what the possibilities of women's agency were, as well as who could perform socialist activism, when and how. One of them, Nanette Funk, argues that women's agency in state socialism was reactive, as it only responded to governments' policies. She underlines that "promoting women's employment, if done only because of Party directives, makes one an instrument, not an agent or feminist" (Funk, 2014: 349).

The *Women Fighting for Peace* show is a perplexing and inconvenient element of the history of feminism in the art world in Poland after World War II. From one point of view, it presented a vision of emancipated women, fulfilling themselves not in traditional social roles, but in various professions. It supported women artists by focusing on their vision of women's labour, but it also promoted the inter-class and global solidarity of women. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine the autonomous activities of women gathered either in the Women's League or in the Association of Polish Artists in the Stalinist period. Even if in many aspects they shared similar views on the role of women in a society with a totalitarian government, they were in no way equal partners in fulfilling this policy.

It is usually very difficult to say, because of the scarcity of archival materials, whether any initiative was undertaken "only because of Party directives", and this is also the case for the *Women Fighting for Peace* show. The curatorial text was signed by Carlotta Bologna, an Italian who came



to Poland as a child with her mother, a musician hired by the Warsaw Philharmonic. After World War II she was active in the Association of Polish Artists, serving as a secretary of the Cracow branch and then as the head of its painting section. In reviews of the show, she is mentioned not only as the exhibition's organiser but also as its initiator (K. W., 1952). In her memoirs, written in her nineties, she did not mention her activities in the association, yet we can find a fragment which seems to resonate with the exhibition's theme (Bologna, 2006: 40). Bologna started her career as an actress, but when she achieved her first success, her husband, a director, used his influence to put an end to it. She wrote with bitterness that in a theatre she could only sit in the first row, representing her husband. She developed an alternative career in painting where her husband could not intervene. This history of the main exhibition organiser is important as it demonstrates the personal motivations behind the show and the significance it could have for particular women. The official message stressed the importance of women's labour for the country, but the majority of the pieces presented portraits of individual women and conveyed histories of individual realisation in work. Yet, the subject was presented affirmatively, following the party's policy that left no space for critical reflection.

When the Stalinist period ended, all-women exhibitions almost disappeared (a few of them were organised on specific occasions) and no other show devoted to women's labour was organised by women<sup>5</sup>. The Stalinist period influenced in a significant manner the way women's activity in art developed. It left female artists reluctant to engage in women's politics as it was perceived as associated with the totalitarian government's policy. In the following decades of state socialist Poland, government control was much looser, yet the party still organised some propagandist activities around women (e.g. official celebrations of Women's Day, Jarska, 2010) and the majority of artists did not want to be part of that.

## Second-wave feminism in state socialist Poland

### Women's Art festival, ON Gallery, Poznań, 1980

The *Women's Art* festival represented a new kind of all-women exhibition that appeared in Poland in the second half of the 1970s. In contrast to the previous one, such shows were not related to the party policy regarding women or the socialist idea of their emancipation.

The festival was organised by two Poznań-based artists, Izabella Gustowska and Krystyna Piotrowska, at the ON gallery that they ran at that time<sup>6</sup>. It was their second exhibition of this type. The previous one, organised two years earlier, was entitled *Three Women* and featured works by both of them and their university friend, Anna Bednarczuk. In arranging the second show, they decided to go beyond their local environment and invited several artists who were active in other Polish cities: apart from the organisers, Natalia LL, Anna Kutera, Ewa Partum, Maria Pinińska-Bereś and Teresa Tyszkiewicz presented their works. They were members of neo-avant-garde circles in which they functioned surrounded by their male colleagues<sup>7</sup>.

The *Women's Art* festival can be perceived as the culmination of feminist initiatives that started taking place in Poland in the second half of the 1970s. These formed a new phenomenon characterised by direct reference to the development of second-wave feminism in Western Europe and the US. Studies of all-women art initiatives in Europe in the 1970s demonstrated that the proclamation of the International Women's Year in 1975 by the United Nations played an important role in their development (Jakubowska; Deepwell, 2018). The governments of many countries responded to this proclamation with programmes including all-women exhibitions. These often provoked protests from some women artists, who were unsatisfied with the lack of criticism in the exhibitions and created feminist responses. In Poland, a similar official programme was also arranged and included,

among others, an exhibition called *The Works of Contemporary Female Artists* that took place at the National Museum in Poznań and featured works from its collection. A brochure contained the words of Prime Minister Piotr Jaroszewicz who emphasised that “The contribution of Polish women to our cultural development is immense”. This exhibition, contrary to the one discussed above, did not emphasise women’s labour, but instead presented many women in traditional roles, and as such carried no emancipatory message. The show went almost unnoticed, especially in the art world, and did not cause any direct reaction on the side of women artists. Yet, the second-wave feminist impulse that spread over Europe soon became visible in Poland as well. It manifested itself in several initiatives organised by various artists, such as a presentation of artworks by VALIE EXPORT and Natalia LL in Lublin, in 1977, under the title *Feminism and Art*<sup>8</sup>; one by Anna Kutera titled *Is a Word “Woman” a Noun or an Adjective?*, prepared for the Conference of Contextual Art held in Kazimierz nad Wisłą that same year; an exhibition named *Women’s Art* coordinated by Natalia LL in Wrocław in 1978 featuring Carolee Schneemann, Suzy Lake and Noemi Maidan; and Ewa Partum’s poster action and performance *Change – My Problem is a Problem of a Woman* in 1979 in Łódź, during which she read her feminist manifesto.

As noted above, the *Women’s Art* festival can be considered the culmination of these events. It gathered women artists involved in them as well as others who also manifested interest in feminist issues. It is important to underline that some of them developed their feminist artistic activity earlier, yet individually, and without reference to feminist ideas that have developed outside Poland. In particular, artworks by Maria Pinińska-Bereś and Natalia LL made at the turn of the 1970s critically responded to the current situation of women<sup>9</sup>. During the festival, Pinińska-Bereś was honoured with the provision of additional space for her artworks, as the pioneer of this kind of art [Fig.2].



FIG. 2. *Women's Art Festival*, works by Krystyna Piotrowska and Maria Pinińska-Bereś, ON Gallery, 1980. Courtesy Izabella Gustowska.

The subjects and forms of the artworks shown at the festival did not differ from those presented at feminist shows in other countries at that time (Tatar, 2014). For example, Izabella Gustowska showed the film *Relative Features of Similarity* which, by depicting female twins, analysed the problem of dis/similarities between women; Anna Kutera presented a photo series named *Hairstyles*, with the slogan: “I decide on my hairstyle, not the dictators of fashion magazines”; and Ewa Partum made the performance titled *Women, the Marriage is Against You* [Fig.3], in which she appeared dressed in a bridal dress that she finally cut into pieces, manifesting her rejection of the traditional female role and expectations towards women.

Maria Pinińska-Bereś performed a piece called *Laundry*, during which she washed (using old-fashioned equipment) and hung up several pieces of clothing. The letters on the clothes formed the word “feminism”. The reception of this performance is interesting for my argument here, as for many years all critics concentrated on the artist’s attitude to feminism understood as a Western concept, completely ignoring an issue regarding home labour that was evidently also present. In her description of the piece, the artist stated that she utilised the same washing tool that she used when her daughter was born (Pinińska-Bereś, 2017: 92). In another statement, she claimed that the first three years after giving birth to her daughter were lost for her art (Pinińska-Bereś, 1999: 113). One of the possible explanations for ignoring this aspect of her performance could be that labour was specifically considered the subject of the official discourse on women, from which avant-garde artists and critics distanced themselves.



FIG. 3. Ewa Partum, *Women, Marriage is Against You*, performance, Women’s Art Festival, ON Gallery, 1980.

Courtesy Izabella Gustowska.



All women artists who participated in the festival belonged to the neo-avant-garde artistic milieu. The majority of its members, even if they had left-wing political views, were critical of the (post-)totalitarian government and situated themselves in the political opposition<sup>10</sup>. In Poland, they could develop their artistic activities under the condition that they did not critically address the party and its politics<sup>11</sup>. Neither the organisers of the festival nor the participants had connections with the Women's League, which they perceived as a governmental institution. They did not want to enter into a dialogue with the governmental politics towards women and – consequently – also with socialist ideas regarding the emancipation of women (there was no space in Poland where one could sympathise with them remaining independent of the party). There was also a different reason for their distancing from the Women's League and its activism. During this period, one could observe a growing discrepancy of interests between women and the women's organisation. As Piotr Perkowski observed, there was a “tension between unofficial processes and the principled nature of women's organization” (Perkowski, 2020: 70). He pointed to the league's silence on social and moral revolution, or even its condemnation of them, as the source of this tension. I would add that it manifested itself, for example, in the ignorance of the organisation towards the growth of consumerism and its consequences for women. While many women artists addressed the problem of the increased number of eroticised images of naked women in popular culture, offering criticism or alternatives to them<sup>12</sup>, the women's magazines published by the Women's League presented such images and not artworks by women artists (alternative magazines could not appear because of censorship and the rationing of paper)<sup>13</sup>.

The experience of functioning in a post-totalitarian state, rather than in a democratic one, left strong marks on the way the Polish feminist artists acted. One of the most significant features of this milieu was that the artists remained separate and did not form any collective. Gustowska and Piotrowska invited various artists who dealt with similar issues for

the festival, creating an opportunity for dialogue and future cooperation, but this did not occur, either during the meeting or after it. Individualism turned out to be stronger, which made the meeting a one-off event. The most probable explanation for this is a reluctance towards the idea of being organised in a group, which was associated with the way the party envisioned women's actions, such as through the mass organisation of the Women's League, which officially celebrated International Women's Days, and the participation of groups of women in the First of May parades. The political conditions in which these artists functioned also influenced their attitude towards activism – besides legal restrictions that made public protests impossible, there was also an unwillingness to directly connect art with politics, which was a legacy of the doctrine of socialist realism.

## **Feminism and the democratic transition**

### **Polish Women Artists, National Museum, Warsaw, 1991**

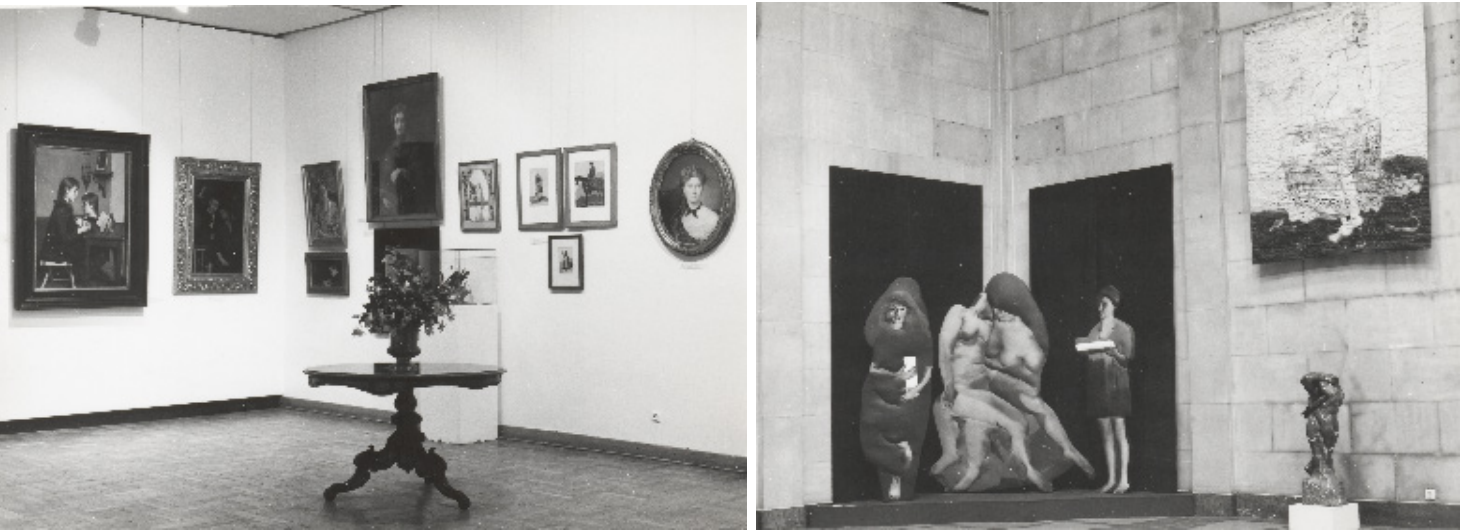
*Polish Women Artists*, the show that I mentioned at the beginning of this text, was the first comprehensive historical overview of art created by Polish women artists [Fig.4]. It featured works by more than 200 artists, from those born in the eighteenth century to contemporary ones. The show was organised at the National Museum in Warsaw by Agnieszka Morawińska, who at that time worked in the institution [Figs.5-6].

In contrast to the previously discussed exhibitions, this one was prepared by an art historian and presented an art historical perspective. This perspective had been almost absent in Poland in previous discussions on women artists from an emancipatory/feminist perspective. While emancipatory/feminist research developed in other academic domains, this was not the case in the field of studies on culture, including art history, which turned out to be a reserve of patriarchal assumptions. The all-women exhibitions, such as those discussed above as well as others, were almost

all prepared by female artists and represented current artistic production. The only art historical publication known to me that was devoted solely to women artists was the book *Polish Women Painters* written by Alicja Okońska and published in 1976<sup>14</sup>. In this rather popular work, the author aimed at examining the various attitudes of women artists related to “the reconciliation of artistic activity with every woman’s need for love, the desire to start a family” (Okońska, 1976: 8). Her story bears no traces of the emancipatory discourse and as such demonstrates that it did not dominate the discourse on women in state socialist Poland. A different attitude toward women artists was presented in an essay entitled “Neofeminism in Art”, written by philosopher Stefan Morawski and published in the journal *Sztuka* [Art] (Morawski, 1977). This lengthy article was based on the catalogue of *Kunstlerinnen International 1877–1977*, as the author himself admitted. Although he concentrated on contemporary art, some attention was also given to the feminist task of restoring female artists that were active in the past to the art historical narration. The text did not resonate in the art historical and museum circles.



FIG. 4. *Polish Women Artists*, National Museum, Warsaw, 1991, the exhibition catalogue cover. Author's archive.



FIGS. 5-6. *Polish Women Artists*, National Museum, Warsaw, 1991, view of the exhibition.  
The National Museum in Warsaw Archive.

The feminist art historical perspective manifested itself only at the beginning of the 1990s and immediately in this ambitious project the *Polish Women Artists*. Agnieszka Morawińska, the exhibition's curator, who had worked for the museum since 1976, had an established position. She also had many international contacts thanks to her research stays abroad and the several exhibitions of Polish art she had organised outside the country. This allowed her to incorporate her personal interests in women's art, which flourished during her stays in the US in the 1980s, into this ambitious research and exhibition project. She did not organise it in a friendly and fostering environment. The catalogue of the American version of the show<sup>15</sup> opened with a short text written by Danuta Wałęsa, the wife of Lech Wałęsa, the hero of the political opposition in Poland, and afterwards president (Wałęsa, 1991: 8). She stressed that the exhibition demonstrated the significant participation of women in Polish culture and that they did not remain in the shadow of a man. This could be considered to attest to the significance of women in the political and social transformation that was

taking place in Poland. Yet, the opposite was true. Morawińska remembers that she met with a lack of understanding and support for her project, both in the museum and, for example, in the ministry of culture (Janiszewski, 2010).

As many scholars have demonstrated, the democratic transformation was unfavourable for women throughout the whole region (Fuszara, 2000, Watson, 1997). It involved the restoration of traditional gender roles, which was perceived as an antidote to the socialist past. In Poland, it was strongly related to the significant position of the Catholic church. The detriment of the position of women in this country can be demonstrated by the restriction of the anti-abortion law that took place soon after the collapse of the communist regime<sup>16</sup>. The fight for the preservation of the law that existed in state socialist Poland mobilised feminist circles, but it did not find its manifestation in the art world. It was a Polish version of Barbara Kruger's poster "Your Body in a Battleground" that became the main visual symbol of a pro-choice campaign at the beginning of the 1990s in Poland.

The idea of conducting extensive research on women artists and presenting its results in the form of an exhibition in the National Museum was in opposition to the dominant opinion and received a lot of criticism. Yet, the show paradoxically also seemed to reflect those major trends in some respects, as if the potentially more radical feminist character of the project had to be tempered<sup>17</sup>.

The curatorial text, as well as an essay by Maria Poprzęcka (the director of the Institute of Art History at the Warsaw University at that time), both included numerous references to feminist art history as it had developed in the Western, essentially English-speaking countries. It was said directly that the exhibition had similar ambitions to the one prepared by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin in 1976 in Los Angeles – *Women Artists: 1550–1950* – to restore forgotten female artists in art historical narratives, through extensive research, and to initiate further studies on them (Morawińska, 1991: 9). The exhibition distanced itself from feminism in the sense that it



demonstrated hardly any interest in the feminist content of the artworks exhibited. When reading short texts on the artists included in the catalogue, one could gain the impression that there were hardly any feminist artists active at that time in Poland. There were also two very specific tricks used to soothe any potentially provocative character of the show. The first was the cover of the catalogue. It featured a graphic work by a male artist – Józef Jurczyszyn – depicting a bunch of paintbrushes inserted into a high heel decorated with a flower. This trivialised the subject of the exhibition and turned it into a “nice” show of women artists. The second was the way the artworks were exhibited. In some rooms, they were accompanied by bunches of flowers. While this could be considered a reference to the old exhibition techniques that recreated a domestic environment, in this particular context it had a very negative effect of putting down any critical character of women’s art. As one of the reviewers observed, the arrangement of the museum rooms “turned them into salons and boudoirs, with all the attributes of the bourgeoisie, from the constraints of which most female artists of the time had to liberate themselves” (Grygiel, 1992: 39)<sup>18</sup>.

The exhibition was also indebted to its times in a different way. In the domain of feminism, this period was characterised by an orientation towards Western theories and practices, accompanied by a distancing from or even resentment towards socialist ideas and practices, which were associated with the communist totalitarian regime (Grabowska, 2012). If it looked for any local predecessors, it was in the pre-World War II period. Similarly, to feminist and women’s organisations active at that time, the exhibition’s organisers disregarded the recent socialist past. For example, the list of all-women exhibitions that was published in the catalogue included only pre-World War II shows and information that “the tradition of organising collective feminist exhibitions did not survive in post-war Poland” (Morawińska, 1991b: 375). As the reader of this text is already aware, this does not match up with the facts. Another manifestation of the reluctance was the fact that the catalogue did not contain examples of

socialist realism, or realism engaged in the creation of socialist society. The subject of labour was almost entirely absent from *Polish Women Artists*. If it appeared it was in self-portraits or portraits of female artists or in artworks from the pre-war period, as in the studies of peasant women by Maria Klass-Kazanowska (1895). Some artists, like Helena Krajewska, who played a crucial role in the art world in state socialist Poland, were not included. If any of the artists who participated in the 1952 exhibition were present, they exhibited completely different works bearing no relationship to the socialist reality. For example, Janina Kraupe (1921-2016) showed a portrait of Rosa Luxemburg at the 1952 exhibition [Fig.2], and in the 1991 show was represented by works manifesting her interest in occultism and Eastern philosophies. All these aspects of the exhibition were rather minor in the context of its main objectives and its momentum, yet they are significant if we think about the show as testifying to the specificities of the period it was conceived in, which was a time of transformation.



FIG. 7. Janina Kraupe, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 1951, oil painting, 71x52,5 cm, Zamoyski Family Museum, Kozłówka, Poland. Author's archive.

## Conclusion

The three exhibitions discussed in this text mark three important moments in the history of feminist art (history) in state socialist Poland. The first one – organised in the middle of the Stalinist period, in which the socialist idea of emancipation of women was announced and realised most visibly – offered support for women artists, as for other women developing their professional careers. It was an exhibition involved in the contemporary gender politics but marked by the propagandist expectations of the party. From today's perspective, it is clearly visible that it influenced the further activities of women artists in state socialist Poland who become reluctant to merge art with politics. We can observe this at the second exhibition arranged at the end of the long 1970s, when ideas most similar to the second-wave feminist ones developed intensively in Poland and also manifested themselves in the art world. These feminist ideas were present in the art created by many women at that time, but the experience of the art and women's activism being harnessed to politics of the (post-)totalitarian state prevented the development of feminist activism and group activities. The third exhibition – assembled at the beginning of the 1990s, during the period of the transition to democracy – demonstrated an even stronger rejection of the socialist past. In comparison to the two previous exhibitions, this one was much less critical as far as the position of women was concerned, the result of a specific understanding of returning to “normal” after state socialism, which included attempts at restoration of traditional gender relations and the position of women.

The time-based framework of this text was intentionally derived from common chronological delimitations of histories of art and feminism. I intended to offer a narrative that was not conceptualised according to US feminist art history, even to such crucial elements as the publication of Nochlin's essay in 1971. Thus, it is grounded in the political history of Poland with which gender relations are directly intertwined and focused on events

that are crucial from a local perspective. Such a procedure was designed to encourage others to think differently about relationships between feminism and the art world, in the sense of not seeing them as limited to the second-wave feminism, but instead taking into consideration the significance of the socialist project of emancipation of women. This included its positive and negative influences on the development of feminist art, art history and art activism.

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## Notes

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- 1 I devoted a different text to this subject, see: Jakubowska (2018).
- 2 The activity of social and professional organisations was strictly regulated by the state in state socialist Poland. After World War II it unified several organisations into one that was centrally organised with regional branches.
- 3 Other exhibitions were organised at that time by both organisations in Cracow, as well as in Poznań or Wrocław, but they had a local character.
- 4 Yet, as in other areas (e.g. in industry), women active in the art world often encountered resistance from the conservative milieu that fostered traditional gender roles. One specific formal handicap also existed in the case of women artists – the services provided by the government, such as child care, were offered to women who were employed and were thus not available to those who worked as freelancers.
- 5 On the history of all-women exhibitions in Poland, see [www.wystawy kobiet.amu.edu.pl](http://www.wystawy kobiet.amu.edu.pl).
- 6 The ON gallery belonged to a specific type of art space that functioned in state socialist Poland: galleries associated with the Socialist Association of Polish Students that were official venues, but experienced relatively more freedom, especially in the 1970s, which was the decade of political liberalisation.
- 7 Biographical notes describing these artists can be found at <https://culture.pl/en>.
- 8 Natalia LL then delivered a text, *Feminist Tendencies in Art*, in which she talked about foreign feminist artists and the exhibitions they organised.
- 9 They both responded in their works to the increased presence of the eroticised images of women that appeared at that time in Polish popular culture together with the development of consumerism (in its socialist version).
- 10 With some exceptions, e.g. KwieKulik (Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek), who at the beginning of their career aimed at reforming the system, not opposing it.
- 11 Piotr Piotrowski claimed that in Poland in this period “here was no alternative art scene and no ethos of the (politically) independent artist who engaged in a systematic and uncompromising critique of the regime”. He added that what he called pseudo-avant-garde art “was very comfortable for the regime pursuing the strategy of pseudo-liberalization” (Piotrowski, 2009: 291).
- 12 See e.g. Dobrowolska (2021: 135–45, chapter entitled “Feminist Critique and Sexual Modernity”).
- 13 For example in *Zwierciadło*, a magazine for women published by the Women’s League, in 1975 female nudes, no different than those presented as erotic images, appeared at least twice next to texts on taking care of oneself (16/1975: 20) and the difficulties of being a model (28/1975).
- 14 In 1951 a book titled *Stanisław August’s Female Painters* appeared, but it was published posthumously by the wife of the author, Zygmunt Batowski, who was murdered in 1944.
- 15 The National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. showed a reduced version of it under the title *Voices of Freedom. Polish Women Artists and the Avant-Garde* in 1991.
- 16 The new law was announced in 1989 and finally introduced in 1993.
- 17 A similar attitude – the presentation of female artists with no reference to feminist politics – could be observed at other all-women shows that were organised during this decade in Poland? (Kowalczyk, 2016).
- 18 The exhibition curator told me that the flowers were not planned (the bunches that were offered

during the vernissage were used) and remained only for a short period of time (recorded conversation, 13 July 2022). Nevertheless, as the citation demonstrates, the viewers considered the flowers to be part of the show design and they are visible on the documentation stored in the National Museum in Warsaw.

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