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## TOUCH IS A FORM OF MEMORY. LOOKING BACK AT THE CELEBRATION OF 100 YEARS FROM THE FIRST FEMALE ABSOLVENT OF THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, PRAGUE

*Touch is a form of memory, a method of remembering and a way of bringing bodies into the present.*<sup>1</sup>

We feel the need of remembrance, when we need to connect different layers of time, because we feel that we cannot grasp the whole situation, or we suspect that some essential information is missing. The memory trace is often broken or omitted, especially when it comes to various disadvantaged and marginalised groups, such as women in art history.

*His story is his story but what about her story?*

In 1998, the Guerrilla Girls published a book called *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*.<sup>2</sup> The book is a critique of traditional art history and an unconventional survey of female artists who have worked from the time of classical Greece to the present. These women artists have traditionally been overlooked by male critics, their works attributed to their fathers, brothers, husbands, or lovers. Here, the GGs offer a more revisionist and inclusive art history where female artists are not excluded on

the basis of gender or ethnicity. Like the Guerrilla Girls, we revise history and find shards of herstory, life stories, and legacies of women artists.

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first female AVU graduate, in the fall of 2022, we have put together a cultural event with Katerina Olivova, a colleague and friend with whom I run the New Media 2 studio at the AVU in Prague, to enjoy the aforementioned jubilee and to make the legacy of the first women officially educated in Art at Prague's academy more visible. The celebrations included an exhibition called Herstory, which was located in the library of the school building, and a series of side events.

The celebrations opened with the happening *Embracing the Institution*. We invited all AVU staff and students to take part in the happening. We needed physically to realise together that the institution is our space, which we all can shape. We wanted to feel the touch of every person who is a member of AVU, whether staff, students or pedagogues.

The Art Nouveau building of the AVU was embraced by a living chain of all members of the academic community. The aim of the happening was collectively to realise and experience the fact that the academy as an institution is made

up of its membership and therefore we all have the opportunity to participate in the creation of a dynamic structure called academia. The building could not be embraced completely, but most of it was covered by the human chain.

Physical action deepens and intensifies the experience of theoretical concepts and allows them to be experienced in a new way that carries the potential to provoke change. In the case of an institution, the process of care should be bidirectional. Each and every one of us feels how we become an integral part of the care process that constitutes a living institution and participates in the transformation of its environment through the improvement of internal relationships. The happening took place on 15.11.2022

All that you touch you Change.  
All that you Change Changes you  
The only lasting truth  
is Change.  
Goddess is change <sup>3</sup>

The year 2022 brings another significant moment in the Academy's development. The election of AVU's first ever female rector, Mária Topolčanská, who took office in February 2022. We wanted to celebrate the new rector by embracing the building and supporting her feminist vision.

Hugs and touches are forms of connecting the different layers of time that we carry within us as members of the academic community. There is also a linking of history and the present, an awakening of forgotten memory and the assumption of a certain article of responsibility in these highly transformative times.

Who were the first graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts and what is the significance of their legacy for our times?

In fact, in 1922, four women graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. Each was originally from somewhere else and worked in a different medium. In 1922, Karla Bulovec, Helena Bochořáková, Charlotte Schrotter and Mary Duras graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts. The last-named, though neglected in Bohemia,

achieved worldwide recognition. The sculptures of Mary Duras are represented, among others, in the collections of the National Gallery in Prague.<sup>4</sup> However, each of the artists is a bearer of a quality artistic legacy. When we search for information about these women, we discover their interesting fates and the messages they carried through their turbulent lives.

Vjera Borozan's interpretation focused mainly on two lesser-known authors, Karla Bulovca and Helena Bochořáková. Women were allowed to study in the newly founded Czech Republic from 1918. However, when they wanted to apply for studies, a man had to transport their work to the building.

Helena Bochořáková-Dittrichová (1894-1980), although an overlooked artist in Bohemia, became the world's first recognized author of comic strips, or graphic novels.<sup>5</sup> She accompanied her graphic cycles with social themes with texts. She dealt with the themes of labour, workers, motherhood and also the theme of Indian life. She felt deeply for the workers and for the colonised. Her series entitled *Uprising* was significant. She published several books during her lifetime, including the graphic series *From My Childhood and Between Two Oceans*.

Bochořáková-Dittrichová's larger body of work references starker topics, from oppression to capitalism. "Her subsequent work further expanded [graphic novels'] scope, focusing on history, religion, and impressions of other cultures," Rebecca Gross writes. "As a result, Bochořáková-Dittrichová quietly strengthened the case for topics such as domestic life to be seen as legitimate art subjects rather than as easily dismissed female fodder." (Gross Rebecca, "Bringing artist to light," NEA Arts blog. Accessed April 1, 2023, link not accessible anymore)

"It's great that there's proof that there were women who were working in this very early art form. I'm hoping people will recognise her place, and the place of women at the beginning of things." said Heather Slania, the director of NMWA's library and research center about Helena Bochořáková's works. (see Katherine Brooks, "Meet The World's First Woman Graphic Novelist, Helena Bochořáková-Dittrichová," accessed December 21, 2023,

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/26/helena-bochoakova-dittrichova\\_n\\_5354241.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/26/helena-bochoakova-dittrichova_n_5354241.html)

Karla Bulovec-Mrak's (1895-1957) work was marked by a lack of funding and therefore materials. She created her sculptures in clay, which disintegrates over time. After her studies, Karla Bulovec returned to her native Ljubljana, Slovenia. She married the first declared gay man, Ivan Mrak. She was therefore a pioneer on the issue of open marital relationships and LGBT+ identities. She was fascinated by indigenous cultures. The only surviving realisation is the Yakumtek Indian statue. It was part of a dreamed-about project for a Pantheon of Indians that was never realised. We only know of the project from drawing studies.<sup>6</sup>

The lecture about the first graduates of the Prague Academy was given by Vjera Borozan. Vjera was the director of the Artyčok project and the director of the National Museum in Montenegro, and currently lives in Prague and teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts.

This was followed by a lecture on Teresa Feodorowna Ries (1866-1956), an unofficial student of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. The lecture was given by the Polish theoretician, curator and artist Anka Lesniak from the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk. Lesniak is one of the authors of the exhibition *Un Paradiso Amaro / Bitter Paradise* and a member of the TFR Archive.<sup>7</sup> The exhibition was held in 2021, the centenary of the official admission of the first women artists to the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. This exhibition, and the subsequent exhibition *The Lost Element/Reconstruction of the Witch* in the VBKOE (2022), were dedicated to the enigmatic work *Die Hexe* (The Witch, 1895) by the sculptor Teresa Feodorowna Ries, who, although she could not officially study at the Academy, paved the way for future generations of women art students with her enthusiasm.<sup>8</sup>

The figure of *Hexe*, the witch, is a kind of feminist image of a woman who defied patriarchy and lived her authentic life in spite of the status quo. In this sense, every woman artist is a witch. As Kristen J. Solle writes in her book *Witches, Sluts, Feminists*: "a witch is the opposite of a victim."<sup>9</sup>

We saw the exhibition at the Vienna Academy with the New Media 2 studio. The enigmatic sculpture of the witch completely captivated us as well as her contemporary artistic interpretations. Like the works of the first graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts, *Hexe* by Teresa Feodorowna Ries was closely linked to the artist's life and experienced its own troubled destiny. Such a curatorial approach became an inspiration for us of how to grasp the past and connect it with the present through the frame of contemporary art.

The presentations and the debate ended with the performance *Angel of Assassination* by Saydie Vell & Yazz. Dancing with burning fans and wax lovingly poured over each other's bodies, they made a conscious integration of the submissive and dominant components of the soul. BDSM culture can be understood as the objectification of power games, which, when they are conscious and consensual, help transform power games and other usually toxic behaviors into a form of dance. Presentations, debate and performance happened as a part of celebrations which we called Wisdom Day on 22.11.2022.

The main element of the celebration was the exhibition *Herstory*, set in the specific atmosphere of the AVU library. The library of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague is one of the oldest Czech libraries in the field of art history. Its origins date back to the founding of the Academy in 1799. The author of the original unique interior of the library from the early twentieth century is the famous Czech architect Jan Kotěra. The library is housed in the main building of the Academy, which was built in the Art Nouveau style, sometimes called Art Nouveau Baroque. The main building was designed by architect Václav Roštlapil. The project dates from 1897 to 1903.<sup>10</sup>

The exhibition was opened on 15.11. 2022 by the performances *Herstorie* by Kateřina Olivová and *All the female Graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts* by me (Darina Alster).

The performance *Herstorie*: Kača Olivová was lying naked on a pile of feminist books. Her beautiful body was looking very monumental in the darkness of the Art Nouveau library. Kateřina

pulled out various selected books from underneath her and read random passages from her favourite feminist authors. Some of these books were later quoted by Anka Lesniak in her presentation, for example *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture*.<sup>11</sup>

Outside the library, in the corridor directly adjacent to the study department, I was standing on a ladder in a tight red velvet evening dress. On a large sheet of paper about 3 by 10 meters long, I wrote the years from 1922 to 2022. Under each year I wrote the names of the female graduates of the study. Some years were more prolific for female graduates, at other times one or two names appear, and in some years women did not graduate. In the post-war period there is a great rush of names of women graduates. The writing process exceeded the building's working hours, so I was later assisted by the students of the New Media 2 studio in the following weeks.

In this way, we both (Darina and Kateřina) remind us that they are continuing in the roots of our foremothers, women feminists, artists, witches, thinkers and pioneers. Women who have found the courage and self-respect to challenge the unequal social norms set in our Euro-American world by predominantly white cisheteronormative men. These courageous women had the imagination to realise that the norm can be transformed and often contributed to the equality of their followers. These courageous women had troubled lives and were often subjected to hatred and rejection by mainstream society. Like them, it gives us the strength and hope to see the world in the larger scale of herstory and in the broader context of world development for all social classes. Similarly, their legacy gives us the power to actively participate in the transformation of the institution in which we work and to imagine and shape a mutually caring society through our own creation and legacy.

With the aforementioned *Herstory* exhibition, we aimed to present the life and work of four artists - the first female graduates of the Academy of Fine Arts through to the artistic interpretation of the students of the Academy of Fine Arts. For the occasion, we organised a site-specific. We are

fascinated by the quiet and peaceful space of the library, where history and shared knowledge breathe. We worked freely with the legacy of the artists mentioned above, letting it inspire us... The exhibitors were selected on the basis of an open call. The selection criteria for us were the relevance and extension of the subject matter for today's current turbulent times, and also the feminist theme of the position of women in the art world.

Both Kass Vladyka and Karol Filo thematised the relationship with women from their own lineage. Kass's *Golden Girls* is a video of a drag party he threw in his drag form Beatrice to please and share wisdom and humor with his mother and grandmother. In his audiotapes, Karol dialogues about life with his mother, sister, grandmother and great-grandmother.

Hana Chmelíková and the collective created guides for seven exercises in appropriateness. The exercises were designed for mothers who always and everywhere feel out of place. They placed the *Exercise Book* object on a library table, and later it became part of the library's archives.

The diary, which Marie-Luise Pulkrábková used to make the lives of four women artists visible through fictional diary entries, became a bridge to the personal confessions of the academy's contemporary student body and to the revelation of several examples of the pedagogical transgressions of power.

Natalia Różycka's video *A tak Cię zawołałam* (And that's how I called you) captured a fragment of the old Polish series about Janosik, where Janosik, as a symbol of masculinity, seduces his love Maryna through a red carpet rolled out in a meadow. Różycka borrowed this moment for her own erotic play between two girls, contextualizing the fragment as queer and thus appropriating it into the present.

Michaela Prablesková together with Natalia Różycka created a *Celebratory cake*, which was a tribute to the four first graduates and at the same time a certain commentary on the position of women in today's art world and a wish for a better future not only for women.

Sonya The Moon painted on a large strip of plastic a certain allegory of the motivation to

create, Daemon, which drives people on despite all the difficulties of life inspiring them to make art.

Dominik Málek exhibited a painting called *Warmth of Home*, which speaks of gay desire, partnership and the need for a safe space in a non-normative relationship.

Marina Drozd Smutná exhibited a painting painted on a tea towel titled *Kitchen Towel*, the painting themed the invisible feminine care that surrounds our lives and keeps society running.

Nik Timkova exhibited a textile object giga glow for cleaning made of thermal fabric. The object is called *Existential Housekeeping*.

Lenka Štěpánková thematised the low visibility of recent art college graduates with her painting *Hostess Inga*, a portrait of a recent UMPRUM (Academy of Arts, Design and Architecture in Prague) graduate.

Zlata Ziborová placed a series of ceramic breasts directly between books to emphasise the interrelationships between different kinds of bodies and the physicality of each and every one of us.

Together with Kateřina Olivová we exhibited a photograph we made together with Anna Daučíková in 2019 in the space of the library. The photographic work was a means to pass on the imaginary scepter of the function of the head of the studio in an artistic form, and also to divide the monolith of authority power from one personality into two. The joint leadership of the studio, which took 2 years to establish officially, opened the way for leading collectives, frontal distribution of power, art making as a collective phenomenon and the non-hierarchical idea of the studio as a living organism or feminist art laboratory.

The celebrations ended on 29 November 2022, the Day of Joy, with a joint performance by me (Darina Alster) and Kateřina Olivová named *Art Cleaning ladies*. Cleaning ladies have played a specific role in conceptual art. From time to time, they clean up a work of art thinking that it is a mess, thus indelibly inscribing themselves and the work in history. The two pedagogues walked naked through the lower part of the building and swept the thresholds of all the official areas of the building, including the rector's office, the studies

and economics department, the questor's office and several sculpture studios. The two naked female teachers were covered in mirrors like two disco balls, Darina's body was painted dark blue like the body of the goddess Nuit. Both artists thus simultaneously evoked the mythical allegories of Day and Night. Everything happened in total darkness, the scene was illuminated only by one travelling disco light, which changed colours to the rhythm of Sonya The Moon's live music set.

The situation was thus reminiscent of a magical cleansing ritual, with mirrors reflecting tiny lights across the audience to remind us of the fragile places in each and every one of our souls. Awareness of these fragile places should not be an excuse to hurt each other, to entrench ourselves in collective trauma, but rather a moment of healing, knowing that our life stories and pains are symptoms of a society's crumbling trauma,<sup>12</sup> and that these wounds and the whole society can be healed and transformed through mutual respect and compassion. Imagining a new world through rethinking and reevaluating the attitudes of the past through living contemporary art.

Through the celebration, we wanted to encourage a more inclusive treatment of historical facts, to make the legacy of specific alumnae more vivid for our times, and to encourage an overall reflection on the position of women artists in the art world.

*All power to healing and imagination!*

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Quotation from my unpublished dissertation about Liquid identity at the edge of civilisation.
- <sup>2</sup> Guerrilla Girls, *Beside companion to the history of western art* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).
- <sup>3</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> A monography of Mary Duras's work was published under the title *Mary Duras* in 2014. Annotation here: Ivo Habán, *Mary Duras* (Prague: Arbor Vitae, 2014).
- <sup>5</sup> Katherine Brooks, *Meet The World's First Woman Graphic Novelist*, accessed March 21, 2023, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/helena-bochoakova-dittrichova\\_n\\_5354241](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/helena-bochoakova-dittrichova_n_5354241).
- <sup>6</sup> Lev Menaše, Nina Pirnat Spahić (ur.), Reno Svan, Taras Kermauner, Jedert Vodopivec, *Karla Bulovec 1895–1957* (Ljubljana: Cankarjev dom, 2003).
- <sup>7</sup> *Un Paradiso Amaro / Bitter Paradise*, Exhibit Studio, Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, 9.10 - 16.11.2021, curator: Valerie Habsburg.
- <sup>8</sup> *Lost Element. Re-construction of the Witch*, VBKOE, Vienna, 14.01-13.02.2022, curator: Anka Lesniak.
- <sup>9</sup> Kristen J.Solle, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists* (New York: ThreeL Media, 2017).
- <sup>10</sup> Anna Hrabáková, Zuzana Křišková, Pavlína Morganová, Dagmar Svatošová, *220 míst AVU* (Praha: Akademie výtvarných umění v Praze, 2019).
- <sup>11</sup> Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 2017).
- <sup>12</sup> Therapist Resmaa Menakem talks about the society of trauma in the book „My Grandmother's Hands“. Specifically quoting : "Trauma in humans, decontextualized over time, looks like culture." Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's hands* (New York: Central Recovery Press, 2017).

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