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THE EXHIBITION *WOMEN AT THE ACADEMIES OF FINE ARTS*

Concept outline and key artistic

imperatives

The impetus behind organising the exhibition and academic conference *Women at the Academies of Fine Arts* was the centenary of the first female students' admission to the art academies in Vienna, Kraków and Prague, among other cities. The subject of women and their academic position has been a recurring research enquiry in my artistic projects. As a former art student, I observed that many of my female colleagues outnumbered male students yet most professors were men. Having worked as a freelance artist for a few years, I was appointed to the Sculpture and Intermedia Department at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk. As an academic I became interested in building connections between female art professors and exploring our professional experiences and work methodologies.

The project's direct idea stems from my artistic research into the life and work of sculptor Teresa Feodorowna Ries (1866-1956). Ries was an artist of Jewish origins who spent her youth in Moscow. In her autobiography *The Language of Stone (Die Sprache des Steines)* she reveals that she did attend the Moscow Art Academy but was later expelled for challenging a professor's authority in front of other students.¹ She probably attended the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture (MUZHYZV) which was administratively the branch of the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg.² Later, Ries moved to Vienna where she lived for over 30 years and created her most outstanding works. Regrettably, she had to abandon her 'Ary-

anized' studio in her 70s, leave all her artworks behind, and flee to Switzerland to escape Nazi persecution.

In her book Ries states that she was an exceptional student in Moscow. She most probably moved to Vienna in 1894 as evident from her registration card kept in the Vienna City and State Archives (Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv). Unfortunately, due to Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts policy, she could not enrol there. Instead, she took private sculpture lessons from one of the professors, Edmund Hellmer.³ Ten years later, Teresa F. Ries wrote a letter to the Academy's rector Clemens Holzmeister proposing herself for a professor position. Despite her recognition in the Austro-Hungarian art scene, her proposal was ignored.⁴ It wasn't until after the World War II in 1947 that the first female professor, Gelda Matejka Felden, was appointed to the Academy in Vienna.⁵

The exhibition provided an opportunity to critically interrogate the distinctions between fine arts academies established in various historical periods and geopolitical frameworks. It also raised the question of whether the contexts surrounding the formation of these academies influenced their later politics toward gender equality and fair access to professional positions. Academies in Vienna and Kraków were founded in the time of a monarchy and women could officially study at neither. The first female students entered the Kraków's Academy in 1918, which was the year when Poland reunited after 123 years of partition by the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Prussian Empires. However, the right to study and vote were not 'gifts' for women from the newly established Polish state. Rather, it resulted from the

ongoing struggle of Polish suffragists and activists of the time. One such go-ahead woman was sculptor Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska, a true forerunner of change who received the right to study at the Academy in Kraków a year earlier in 1917⁶.

Most Polish Academies of Fine Arts were established during the 1940s which marked the beginning of the communist state. At that time, they were officially known as 'State Higher Schools of Visual Arts' (PWSSP) and were only granted the 'Academy' status in the 1990s with the emergence of finance capitalism in the region. The Academy status had been previously only held by the Kraków and Warsaw schools due to their pre-war history. The initiative to create an art academy in Gdańsk was taken by artists – and both men and women played a significant role in this effort. The founders were Janusz Strzałecki, Krystyna and Juliusz Studnicki, Hanna and Jacek Żuławski, and Józefa and Marian Wnuk. They all met after the war at the Baltic coast.⁷ From the outset, female students were able to enrol to the Academy. Initially, the school was located in a historical house (Berger's Willa) in Sopot due to the heavily damaged post-war Gdańsk.

In 2019 I travelled to Vienna to do my research on Teresa Feodorowna Ries who is significant in the context of the first emancipated women bravely pursuing their careers despite the patriarchal constraints. As the 100th anniversary of the first female students' admission to the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts approached, it seemed worth reflecting on the challenges women faced in pursuing art education, particularly in the traditional relationship between master and (his) students. Interestingly, women who worked as painters and graphic artists were more accepted than those interested in sculpture. That medium was seen as a field reserved for men and women sculptors faced even more discouragement than other female artists.

The *Women at the Academies of Fine Arts* exhibition explored the idea of sculpture not only as a material intervention in space but also as 'social sculpture' – a tool for institutional change. As a faculty member of the Sculpture and Intermedia department at the Academy in Gdańsk where the exhibition took place, I am aware that such a viewpoint is subjective and selective. It is important to note that the project

was based on personal experiences and the outcome emerging from them is autonomous and individual. As such, it cannot be treated as a scholarly take on such a wide-ranging issue. Rather, the exhibition became a manifesto for more presence of women in the art academies' structures while offering a platform for exchanging ideas and identifying areas for further research and collaboration.

Furthermore, both the exhibition and the conference aimed to examine the impact of the increasing number of female professors and students on the very structures of the academy. This included topics like the forms of artistic expression, teaching content, and relations within the academic community. The project also encouraged participants to reflect on the history of women's presence within the academic structures. It was vital for me to consider *colleges* (universities) with an academy of fine arts status which in the European tradition emphasises their connection to the prototype of the modern academy, namely the *Academia di San Luca* established in 1635.⁸ For that reason, in this text I am taking into account a variety of academies not because they are 'better' than colleges, but because through adopting the very name 'academy' they inherit a form of prestige and tradition. As Whitney Chadwick notices commenting on German neoclassical painter Johann Zoffany's work *The Academicians of the Royal Academy* (1771-72), "artists are male and white, and art a learned discourse (...) women art objects of representation rather than producers in a history commonly traced through 'Old Masters' and 'masterpieces'".⁹

**First women students, professors
and rectors, and artistic research
in archives**

The focal point of the exhibition were artworks related to the theme of women and sculpture (including sculpture and installation). The exhibition featured several women appointed to the Intermedia and Sculpture Faculty of the Academy in Gdańsk including Ludmiła Ostrogórska. She was the first female rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Poland holding that position between 2008-16. Interestingly, it took 63

years for a woman to become a rector at this school despite it being co-founded by female artists. This highlights the patriarchal mechanisms of discrimination that have existed regardless of the origins of the individual academies. In Poland, the rector is selected through an election system by fellow professors.

The history of women's presence in academies was presented primarily through artworks and archival materials from the collection of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. The exhibition used that particular art school to foreground histories spanning over several centuries. Simone Bader's video *100 Years** (2022) featured quotes and archival photos from the Viennese Academy's archives highlighting the evolution of female position there. As it were, the Academy was supported by aristocratic female donors which links it to the phenomenon of female benefactors financing institutions otherwise inaccessible to women. That was reflected by Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One's Own* which was based on the author's own lectures to female literature students. Even in the early 20th century well-off women supported 'prestigious universities' that did not admit women.

Frau auf der Akademie* (Woman* at the Academy) (2015-18) by Marion Porten continued the history of women's struggle to study at the Academy in Vienna. In her video, the artist uses quotations from the archives focussing on discussions between the (male) professors about whether women should be allowed to study at the Academy. Despite being asked for their opinions by the Ministry of Education, subsequent committees and faculty councils rejected admitting women claiming they lacked talent and the ability to focus on creative work. Eventually, the State Office for Internal Affairs and Education ordered the Academy to allow females thus ending the professors' objections. Porten's video includes excerpts of protocols from the faculty council meetings together with images of the busts of anonymous women from the Viennese Academy's *glyptothek* (a collection of sculptures). The glyptothek is located in the basement which emphasises the work's message – video shots from there are intertwined with scenes in which we see female hands processing some kind of pulp. This may be associated with either preparing plaster for casting, or kneading dough.

Two photographs by Valerie Habsburg were presented alongside the video. One of them showed the façade of the building designed for the sculpture faculty with the inscription "The Master School for Sculptors" (*Meisterschule für Bildhauer*). The other was a photograph of the aforementioned letter sent by Teresa F. Ries to the academy's rector in 1931 (2019). Habsburg juxtaposed the two photographs to highlight the letter being sent when the building for sculptors already existed. She photographed the letter as an archival exhibit.

These two photographs were accompanied by reprints of archival photos from the private archive of Teresa Feodorowna Ries. Valerie Habsburg acquired this archive from an anonymous seller at an auction house. The photos show Ries working on the cast of a sculpture in the interiors of the Academy proving that although women were not registered as official students, they were present in the Academy. They took private lessons and provided additional income for the professors. Edmund Hellmer allowed Ries to use his studio at the school. He appreciated her talent so much that he proposed that she should make sculptures commissioned from him and then showed them under his name. However, he remained against the general admission of female students.¹⁰

De-construction, re-construction, and tools for reshaping the space

As a reference to Teresa Feodorowna Ries' story, I filmed *The March for the Witch* (2019-21) in the yard of the sculptors' building previously captured by Valerie Habsburg in her photo diptych. During a stone workshop, I made video footage of female students' hands (they made up the majority of attendees). The video shows the gestures of chiselling and grinding. Today no one is questioning women's abilities to be professional sculptors in the very institution they had no right to study at a hundred years ago. My focus on the hands of female students drew inspiration from Ries' sculpture *The Witch*. It portrays a vigorous woman preparing herself for a Witches' Sabbath. She holds cutting shears in her hand as she trims her toenails. The sculpture has been damaged

a few times and the hand holding the shears is lost. I explore the significance of this lost element in my project *Lost Element. Re-construction of the Witch* (2019-23) and the video *The March for the Witch* is a part of this project. In a metaphorical sense Ries' *Witch* represents liberated femininity but the missing tool symbolises a loss of agency. My video offers a symbolic reconstruction of this lost element embodied and multiplied in the hands of contemporary sculptors. The rhythm of the chisels is echoed in the video's soundtrack: a percussion composition by Justyna Stopnicka June relating to march as a musical genre.

Another context for *The March for the Witch* was a large-size photograph by Agnieszka Babińska depicting a destroyed monument to a man. His head was chopped off and the whole statute removed from its plinth. The picture was taken in Ukraine in 2018. The artist poses the question "Is that Lenin?" in the work's title. It is likely that the monument was one of many dedicated to Lenin across the former Soviet Union. While some of these statutes remain standing, others were removed often with passion and anger as shown in the photograph. In a broader sense, the damaged figure represents the imperial politics of the Russian Empire which have persisted over centuries and continue to this day (it should be mentioned that our exhibition coincided with the Russian aggression on Ukraine in February 2022). Babińska's photograph also raises questions about the visual language of propaganda and how it shapes public spaces through its proliferation. Sculpture memorials play a significant role in appropriating public space with tangible symbols of the regime. As such, the art education system must be compatible with the state ideology to produce artists who can meet its expectations.

Among the works described above was also *House-Shelter* (2020-21), an installation by Sylwia Jakubowska-Szycik, currently the vice-rector of the Academy in Gdańsk. It featured models of wooden houses of varying sizes connected by corridors. For the exhibition, the artist left some parts of the installation unassembled. As a result, it was unclear whether the work was still under construction or had in fact been damaged.

The ambiguity of tools such as chisels and

hammers that can either manufacture or destroy something was reflected in *Persuasion* (2019) by Adrianna Majdzińska. An accumulation of knives was juxtaposed with moulds of soil. The knives were collected from the artist's friends or bought at a flea market and given a new meaning as ready-mades. Their contradictory physical properties such as the hardness of steel and sharpness of blades as opposed to the softness of organic soil could be read as a comment on the Anthropocene era where what is natural, undefined and formless must be shaped, disciplined, and controlled. Another interesting aspect of that work is that while knives are typically utilised in the kitchen (often associated with house chores assigned to women), they are also used in sculpting in clay.

Aurelia Mandziuk's *The Hare. Re-enactment* (2011/12) sheds light on the challenges faced by women artists in making a living from their art. The work is based on the story of Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951), a Polish female sculptor of German-Russian origins who belongs to the history of avant-garde art.¹¹ Kobro was married to Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952), a prominent painter and art theoretician. Their artistic relationship, productive and flourishing in the beginning, soon became rife with conflict and violence on Strzemiński's part, leading to their separation. Although Kobro's contributions to avant-garde art are equally significant as those of her husband's, she was never appointed to the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź which Strzemiński co-founded. Despite authoring outstanding and pioneering sculptures (spatial compositions) and theoretical texts, Kobro was forced to sew fabric toys for children to make ends meet.¹²

One of the toys she made for her daughter Nika was a hare which directly inspired Mandziuk's work. She is a graduate of the Textile Faculty of the Academy in Łódź and is currently serving as the dean of the Design Faculty at the Art Academy in Szczecin. Her works sit in the intersection of art and design. She focuses on an aspect that is not usually considered worth dealing with in Katarzyna Kobro's practice. While some of Kobro's works were damaged or lost and later reconstructed, the hare toy given to Nika has been preserved by Monika Krygier, a daughter of Kobro and Strzemiński's friend. As the hare had lost its legs over time, Mandziuk decided to reconstruct

the toy in its original shape using methods usually applied in art conservation. That way, Mandziuk shifts perspective and challenges patriarchal clichés in narratives on Kobra by inserting a simple child toy into the discourse.

Institutional critic. Re-forming the Academy

A few years after graduating from the Academy in Łódź, I created a project *Registered* (2011), which included an animation *Academies 2011* that displayed the gender statistics of students and professors in Polish art academies. I collated information from seven art academies' websites and interviewed several professors. The results of this para-sociological research surprised me; all art academies had a majority of female students ranging from 70% to 80%, while around 70% of art professors were men. The differences were slight as the number of female professors never exceeded 35% at any of the academies. These facts were based on hard data. However, many other indirect ways of discrimination were not obvious, and the mechanisms to prevent them were either non-existent or ineffective. These statistics were confirmed a few years later in a report on the study of the presence of women at higher art schools in Poland published by the Katarzyna Kozyra Foundation.¹³

This issue is raised in *Base of Academic Woman's Brain* (2022), a drawing by Julia Kul. It depicts the human brain that looks as if it's taken from a medical textbook. As we read, the drawing was prepared by AKIN_Autoethnographic Kul Institute of Neuroscience (a fictional scientific body invented by the artist). Kul illustrates and describes over 20 different areas of "an academic woman's brain," each responsible for various functions such as "selective attention (ignoring the way other people ignore you)," "normalising men's language (in case of linguistic exclusion)," "primal instinct to devalue one's own qualification," "fight, flight, freeze or act-like-a-man."

In *Praise of Precariat* (2022) Ania Włodarska [a.w.] touched upon the question of precarity glaringly prevalent in the so-called culture industries. Like other schools of higher education, the Academies of Fine

Arts benefit from the precarious work of their academic teachers who are employed on mandate contracts, meaning the institutions cover only for teaching hours. Such a tutor is not paid during holidays and doesn't have the right to any other social benefits. However, working at art schools is not limited to teaching hours – for instance, the tutors are obliged to prepare graduate exhibitions and half-year term reviews with students. Włodarska listed a vast number of projects and teaching hours which she realised on mandate contracts between 2015–22. She showed such projects in a golden frame echoing the way prisoners count their time through crossed-out lines arranged in groups, thus capturing the remaining days in confinement.

Escape from the Oz (2020/22) presented in the exhibition as an object and photographic documentation refers to an installation of the same title carried out on the façade of the University of Arts in Poznań by Anna Tyczyńska. The artist lowered a rope from the window as if she wanted to leave the institution building. However, the rope was not affixed which thwarted the desired evacuation. This site-specific installation may be understood as a reference to the mechanisms of oppression in state institutions such as fine arts academies. They are often grounded in the passion and commitment of numerous employees who devote their energy to students in the teaching process and implement projects and organisational work to ensure the smooth running of such institutions. However, after some time this leads to a burn-out, routine, and conflicts that may last for years and which affect the overall atmosphere in the institution.

Janina Rudnicka, a professor of drawing at the Faculty of Sculpture and Intermedia of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, created an animation entitled *My Name WAS no 1* (2018). It features the artist's name written in a hand-drawn style using a simple brush from a graphic design software. The name is scribbled repeatedly resulting it being obscured by the lines. This artistic gesture recalls the issue of women's systemic underappreciation in academic structures and their tendency to self-sabotage. Women often feel responsible for the institution's well-being and as a result take on many responsibilities which leaves little time for their creative endeavours.

Janina Rudnicka and Ludmiła Ostrogórska prepared the first ever publication on the Sculpture Faculty of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk in 2003. It presented the history of the faculty and the people associated with it since its establishment just after World War II.¹⁴ Notably, it was the female faculty members who took the initiative to preserve such knowledge of the faculty's origins for future generations. Ostrogórska's work *Atropos Scrolls* (2022) has a special meaning in this context. A spindle-shaped object showcases scraps placed behind a glass surface, much like fragments of memories. Rudnicka was once an assistant professor in the Drawing studio led by Ostrogórska. They were not only colleagues but also became friends. Rudnicka remembers that in 1999 Ostrogórska broke barriers by becoming the first female dean in the history of Polish art academies. This achievement surprised the academic community as sculpture faculties were traditionally considered particularly masculinised. A decade later, Ludmiła Ostrogórska became the first female rector.¹⁵

Language as a Manifesto of Presence

Feminist artist and sculpture professor Iwona Demko has thoroughly investigated the role of women in the Academy of Fine Art in Kraków both in the past and present. The Academy was established in 1818 and recently celebrated its bicentenary. Coincidentally, 2018 also marked the 100th anniversary of the admission of its first female students. Despite the significance of this event, it was not included (even mentioned) in the planned celebrations. Consequently, Iwona Demko organised the Women's Year at the Academy in Kraków which included lectures, panel discussions, film screenings, exhibitions, publications, and interventions in the school's space throughout 2018. Copies of antique statues, predominantly male, were adorned with pink sashes inscribed with "200 years of Academy and 100 years of Women's Academy."¹⁶ Demko also created a series of counterfactual photomontages *Real Impossibility* (2018) which imagined what it would have been like if women artists who were historically not allowed to study and teach, had instead been the professors and rectors.

These photomontages were based on photographs from the National Digital Archive and aimed to challenge the male-dominated history of the Academy.¹⁷

Demko also presented her series *Feminatives* (2021) at the *Women at the Academies of Fine Arts* exhibition. Feminatives are the distinctively feminine forms of nouns derived from grammatically masculine forms, particularly those referring to humans.¹⁸ In English, nouns are generally not marked for gender and there are relatively few feminatives such as waitress or actress. However, in Polish all nouns are marked for their grammatical gender which can be male, female, or neutral. Using feminatives for occupations such as nurses, cleaners, and schoolteachers is popular, but such a linguistic logic is rarely applied to higher education institutions or the realm of politics. There, male forms dominate even when a professor or a prime minister is a woman. This shows the lack of consistency in applying feminatives that is conditioned by patriarchal gender roles. Strangely, the use of feminatives in more 'prestigious' professions such as medical doctors, lawyers or academic teachers has been rejected by many women as they feel that the feminine version of their professions somehow diminishes their status. However, the younger generation of female academics calls for introducing feminatives into everyday use and official documents.

In her series Demko presents exclusively female-gendered names for all academic positions, from a student to a professor through to a rector. The artist challenges gender stereotypes related to women's clothing and the appropriate 'dress code' for sculptors. As a woman, Demko enjoys putting on pink clothes, short skirts and high heels which she also wears at the Academy where she has been appointed to the Sculpture Faculty despite many of her colleagues believing that her very appearance undermines the quality of her work. Once she has realised it, she decided to keep her unique style as a feminist statement and subversive gesture against the adopted habits. She presented her outfit on a mannequin as part of the *Feminatives* series.

Anna Królikiewicz from the Painting Faculty of the Academy in Gdańsk works with senses other than sight. In her art book *Interlanguage* (2019) included in the exhibition one can see images of her

works based on taste and carnal sensuality.¹⁹ Królikiewicz breaks the hegemony of sight and hearing considered for centuries to be the senses superior to smell, taste and touch defined as more corporeal and thus assigned to the sphere of femininity and matter.²⁰ Music and visual arts were created to please the superior senses and the sphere of spirituality.

Women's transgenerational legacy and collaboration. Projects with students

In her newly commissioned work Magdalena Grzybowska created a minimalist composition *The Unbearable Lightness of Paper. Submission* (2022) using blocks of white paper for notes that pay homage to her female master, Alfreda Poznańska (1939-2001). Poznańska was Grzybowska's professor at the Academy in Wrocław renowned for representing the impermanence of things through durable materials such as paper sculpted in marble. Grzybowska and her students continue this tradition of combining permanent and ephemeral elements in their intermedia and post-conceptual artworks.

Love Stories-Radio Pogoda (2021) by Izabella Gustowska and her students (Martyna Miller, Maja Okamgnienie, Joanna Pietrowicz, Maria Subczyńska, Katarzyna Wojtczak, Weronika Wronecka) is another example worth mentioning here. The film comprises seven distinct stories that showcase diverse artistic sensibilities but together form a coherent whole. The work blends documentary footage and personal memories with surreal and dreamy elements and humour.

Izabella Gustowska is an important figure in the history of women's activities at art academies in Poland. She is a distinguished intermedia artist who often explores feminist themes in her practice. Her work focuses mainly on video and installation art, and she has been teaching at the University of Arts in Poznań (earlier Academy of Fine Arts) for more than four decades. Gustowska is one of few women in the history of Polish art academies who has had the chance to run an accredited studio practice programme. She is also a passionate activist for the

promotion of women's art. Between 1979 and 1994 she ran the ON gallery at the Academy in Poznań presenting the most interesting art tendencies of the time. Gustowska co-curated the gallery with Krystyna Piotrowska who emigrated from Poland in the early 1980s. Together, they organised an exhibition *Women's Art* in 1980 which showed the most significant Polish artists of that time shedding light on femininity and women's position in the society.²¹

When watching *Love Stories* we recognise Gustowska's influence on her students in their awareness of the medium of video, their ability to work with the language of moving image, the aesthetic sensitivity, and the construction of non-obvious visual narratives. As a professor, Gustowska avoided the formatting of her students to her visual language which has been a frequent problem at art academies (though fortunately this seems to be changing lately).

When discussing female professors associated with the University of Arts in Poznań it is important to mention Magdalena Abakanowicz, a significant figure in the institution's history. A world-renowned sculptor, Abakanowicz taught from 1965 to 1992 and she led the Tapestry Studio.²² According to Krystyna Piotrowska, one of her students, Abakanowicz encouraged them to think beyond the boundaries of artistic disciplines. Through the tasks she assigned to her students Abakanowicz proved that textiles could be transformed into sculptural forms, installations, or performances.²³

Sowing (2021), a performative project in the exhibition initiated by a younger generation academic Martyna Jastrzębska also belonged to the series of initiatives involving students. It was done in collaboration with the NOMUS Museum of Contemporary Art in Gdańsk. The students collected different plant seeds and spread them onto a hemp fabric (jute). The crucial element of their public space action was a walk from the Sculpture and Intermedia Faculty's building of the Academy to the NOMUS Museum. The texture of the jute allowed some seeds to fall down on the way. This action reflects the mechanisms of the education and the art world systems. Are they compatible? Do graduates have an open access to exhibiting in museums? Isn't an artistic career understood in terms of 'an artistic success' defined by the market? Who will survive

and achieve such success? How many seeds will fall somewhere onto the unknown ground, and what new may emerge from the pre-defined structures of the art world? The piece of fabric with seeds that hadn't fallen out on the way to the Museum was buried in front of its building. Perhaps one day they will sprout there.

Artist Agata Zbylut leads the Studio of Photography and Post-Artistic Activities at the Art Academy in Szczecin. As part of the exhibition, she presented a documentation of a project she made with her female graduates. *The Queen of Bees* was presented at Kronika Gallery in Bytom in 2019. In a rather perverse way, the idea of that exhibition referred to the model of showcasing the master and their students. However, Zbylut didn't show 'the best of young artists from her studio but instead focused on the difficulties they faced after the graduation. Some works also revealed direct and indirect gender discrimination in the labour market. A few of the graduates gave up their practices while others experienced some artistic success living out of a suitcase and leading the lives of freelance artists without steady income and health insurance.

Zbylut and her students questioned the traditional master-student hierarchy in their work. Through a collaborative model of *The Queen of Bees*, the vertical structure inherent in institutional education was softened by students being genuine partners and co-creators of the work, and by the professor supporting them in finding their path rather than simply instructing them to do so. This opens up the possibility for collaborative projects where students and professors are equal co-participants. The only question that arises is how the increasing number of women in academic positions can in fact influence the methods of artistic education.

In her cartoon animation *The Exam Session* (2019) Joanna Bajus portrayed her professor Anna Tyczyńska with tenderness and wit, focusing on the latter's appearance, characteristic gestures and 'aura'. Tyczyńska runs the 2nd Interdisciplinary Drawing Studio at the University of Arts in Poznań and showed *Primal Scream* (2015) which documents a student workshop inspired by the therapeutic method invented by American psychotherapist Arthur Janov. Letting out a scream was a difficult task in a world in which we are conditioned to suppress our expression. Each

student screamed one after another and their efforts were recorded as a collective video performance.

Private is Political.

Gestures and symbols

Scream was also heard in Dominika Kowynia's painting *The Furious Girl* (2017) (depicting a yelling girl). Kowynia is a painter who teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice. An otherwise empty red wall on which the painting was hung enhanced its expression. The work refers to an event from the artist's childhood when her mother bought her an ornate dress (almost like a wedding dress) for her First Communion ceremony which little Dominika did not care about. However, upon noticing that she stood out from the other girls and commented on it with satisfaction, she was scolded by her mother. Through her work the artist highlights the contradictory expectations that girls face when growing up which demand perfection in many areas while also requiring false modesty. Girls are taught to compete while being expected to deny it.

Eliza Proszczuk from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw explores the notion of female solidarity. Her textile *Sisterhood* (2020) features graphic symbols and pictograms of a woman. They resemble the Palaeolithic 'Venus' figurines or extraterrestrial beings, expressing a sense of power and joy and recalling Niki Saint-Phalle's works. Proszczuk is also the author of *Traces of Sisterhood*, a project that took place at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw two months after the exhibition's opening. It brought together women from various fields for discussions, presentations, and workshops, ultimately resulting in a publication.²⁴ It is worth noting that Proszczuk also ran a series of workshops with female prisoners where they created outfits that served as a temporary alternative to their prison uniform. During these workshops, the artist recorded conversations with the imprisoned women.

Jolanta Rudzka-Habisiak, the second woman to serve as rector (2012-20) in the history of Polish Academies of Fine Arts is an artist working mainly in textile. She is affiliated with the Textile Institute of the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź (previously, the Faculty of Textiles and Clothing). Interestingly, this

faculty had the highest proportion of female tutors among all departments in the academy with 50% of its lecturers being women. However, this exception only confirms the age-old rule that women in the academies were mainly accepted in fields that were culturally assigned to them. Rudzka-Habisiak presented a large-format object titled *Moon Lake* (2018) in the exhibition. The starting point were the shapes based on letters from the alphabet designed by Władysław Strzemiński. This way Rudzka-Habisiak refers to the work of the founder and patron of the Academy where she studied and currently works. In my view, she effectively hacks the master's work by spontaneously and intuitively arranging the shapes of the Latin alphabet letters he designed into a circular structure covered with gold paper. The work is a pleasure to look at, cozy and tactile, far from the disciplined visual compositions of Strzemiński who created the ideological foundations of the Academy in Łódź.

Rudzka-Habisiak also showed a series of small paintings in which she depicted ideograms from the everyday life and the *iconosphere* (a term introduced by Mieczysław Porębski to designate the universe of images of all kinds surrounding human) of the so-called feminine—lip prints, lipsticks, and clothing accessories. After a closer look, we see a lightning bolt among these pictures – a powerful emblem of women's fight against a legislative proposal for a total ban on abortion in Poland – or an umbrella, both an everyday object and a symbol in the Black Protests against restraining women's right to self-determination.

Care and Protest

Magdalena Wawrzyniak's graduation artwork *Design of a Conceptual Melee Weapon in the Context of the Contemporary Social Resistance Movement* carried out at the Faculty of Design of the Academy of Art in Szczecin similarly explores public dissent. This performative critical-design object can function as a simple stool. Yet after disassembling its components it turns out to be a piece of armour, a shield and a police baton. The form of the stool, the most basic home equipment, can be

used during protests. This works as a metaphor for society which, however it appears to be passive and subjugated to power, does have the necessary tools for resistance and change which it unmistakably becomes aware of when human rights have been violated and the social contract has been broken.

Marina Gržinić is an artist and philosopher who runs the Studio of Post-conceptual Art Practices at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, an essential part of their socially engaged projects. In the exhibition, she presented *Seizure – Rewriting Counter Histories* (2015), a video film made in collaboration with Aina Šmid. It shows four strong female characters (Adela Jušić, Anja Salomonowitz, Heiny Srour and Nevline Nnaji) working in the field of film and video who take the risk of revealing social mechanisms and power relations. The piece is a hybrid that breaks the conventions of traditional documentary filmmaking. It combines video documentation and interviews to create a visual essay that serves as a rebellious manifesto that challenges the conventions of the genre. The question the artists pose is whether it is possible to subvert, contest, destabilise and rethink some old and new relations in film and political activism.²⁵

Artist Bogna Burska is a careful observer of social mechanisms which she explores through performative works situated between video and theatre.²⁶ She runs classes on sensual perception at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, where students create works based on senses other than sight and deal with the issues of disability. In the exhibition, Burska presented her video *I didn't tell anyone anything* (2017/19) based on the story told by Maciej Chodziński, her PhD student and graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk. During his studies, Chodziński was a member of the artistic group Krecha (2006-09) which published an art zine criticising the art world and mass media calling it “media terrorism”. When releasing the zine's topical issue on media terrorism, the artists enclosed an envelope which had the seal of the Krecha group and the inscription “anthrax” on it (a dangerous disease caused by the bacteria *Bacillus anthracis*) and mailed numerous copies of the publication to the cultural institutions in Gdańsk.

Even though the group was well known for its provocative actions in the city's artistic community and the probability that the envelope contained the anthrax bacteria was zero, one of the institutions' directors called the police. Chodziński was taken out of his house in handcuffs and the investigation into the case lasted over a year.

Cuban artist Vivian Crespo Zurita presented her video *The Power of Ancestors* (2019), an excerpt from group performance *Willkommen auf dem Bababara* initiated by Mariama Diallo in 2019 in front of *Africa*, a large-format painting by Maître Leherb (Helmut Leherb) itself deriving from a series of several metre-long faiences (fine tin-glazed pottery) depicting six continents (1980-1992). These large pieces of faience were laid on the Vienna University of Economics and Business walls, the space also used by the Academy in Vienna during a renovation works of its main building. Considering discourses such as post-colonialism and feminism, *Africa* clearly is part of colonial and racist thinking.²⁷ Crespo Zurita's performance explores patriarchy, migration and indigenous ancestry. The artist emphasises the bond she feels with the sea through her singing. Her performance resembles a ritual with the artist as a shaman who evokes her black ancestors brought to Cuba by the sea. Her country of origin and Europe are also divided by an ocean. Crespo Zurita is critical of the European policy against migrants. As she writes in the commentary on her performance, "I carry the sea and the power of my ancestors within me. I use this power to fight racism, fascism, and patriarchy".

Final remarks

The myriad of the threads and artistic responses that the exhibition presented are worth further exploration in future projects. Naturally, women in art academies are not just tutors and students. As highlighted in the book *Remembering Academy* edited by Iwona Demko included in the show, there are indeed female employees in administration, cleaning, and security doing work that is often invisible or underestimated.²⁸ The problem of women in fine arts academies is part of a broader equality discourse related to racial, ethnic or gender identity, and disability. These issues resonate

differently depending on the degree of national and ethnic diversity of the academic community. Polish academies still function in a more homogeneous society than for example the Academy in Vienna. Procedures and communication methods intended to counteract discrimination are still being implemented in Poland.

Certainly, in recent years there has been a greater political, feminist and ecological awareness among students of the Polish academies. Queer and non-binary people are more and more visible, and their creative practices make us acutely aware of the oppressiveness of binary divisions and gender roles to which we are all formatted as a society. Using a sculptural metaphor, it was the women's very entry into the fossilised structure of the academy that constituted the first chip-away breaking down of the monolithic block of exclusion. Women's intellectual, creative and physical presence within the male-dominated structures has helped create a far more inclusive space for diverse attitudes and artistic forms of expression ever since. It has in the process also transformed the definition – and the meaning – of artist.

Notes

- ¹ Julie M. Johnson, *The Memory Factory: The Forgotten Women Artist in Vienna 1900* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2012), 205.
- ² Andrey Shabanov, *Art and Commerce in Late Imperial Russia* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 39-40.
- ³ "100 years of Admitting Women to Study at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna," <https://www.akbild.ac.at/en/news/2021/100-years-of-admitting-women-to-study-at-the-academy-of-fine-arts-vienna-> (10.10.2023)
- ⁴ Valerie Habsburg, "Teresa Feodorowna Ries and her Private Archive," *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* no. 21 (2019): 134.
- ⁵ Ulrike Hirhager, "Gerda Matejka-Felden: Umstritten progressive," Biografieblog, *Der Standard*, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000136742429/gerda-matejka-felden-umstritten-progressiv> (01.10.2023)
- ⁶ Iwona Demko, *Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska – pierwsza studentka na krakowskiej Akademii Sztuk Pięknych* [Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska – the First Female Student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków], *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* 2018, no. 19, 27-32.
- ⁷ Roman Nieczyporowski, *Szkoła z Widokiem na Morze. U źródeł Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Gdańsku* [A School with a View of the Sea. The Genesis of the Fine Arts Academy in Gdańsk], *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* 2021, no. 19, 5-19.
- ⁸ Academy of Art, *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/art/academy-of-art> (19.10.2023)
- ⁹ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 8.
- ¹⁰ Valerie Habsburg, Jakob Krameritsch, Anka Leśniak, "The Professor's Council voted against the admission of female students," *Spezialschule*, (Vienna: Schebebrügge.Editor 2019), 115.
- ¹¹ Janina Ładnowska, "Katarzyna Kobro: A Sculptor of Space," *Artibus et Historiae* 22(43) (2001), 161-185, doi:10.2307/1483659
- ¹² Phillip Barcio, "Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński – Stars of the Polish Avant-garde," IDEELART, <https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/katarzyna-kobro-wladyslaw-strzeminski> (10.11.2023)
- ¹³ *Marne szanse na awanse. Raport z badania obecności kobiet na uczelniach artystycznych w Polsce* [Little Chance to Advance? An Inquiry into the Presence of Women at Art Academies in Poland] (Warsaw: Katarzyna Kozyra Foundation 2016), 5. <https://www.nck.pl/upload/attachments/317998/Marne%20szanse%20na%20awanse%20RAPORT.pdf> (18.10.2023)
- ¹⁴ *Wydział Rzeźby Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Gdańsku* [Sculpture Department of the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, ed. Ludmiła Ostrogórska, Janina Rudnicka (Gdańsk: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Gdańsku, 2002-2003). <https://www.zbrojowniasztuki.pl/pliki/aae680536a21b07814713683c097c274/wydzial-rzezby-akademii-sztuk-pieknych-w-gdansku.pdf> (10.10.2023)
- ¹⁵ Janina Rudnicka, "When do we meet...?", *Ludmiła Ostrogórska, Przemiany* [Transformations], ed. Ludmiła Ostrogórska (Gdańsk: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Gdańsku, 2020), 104.
- ¹⁶ Iwona Demko, „Jak to się stało, że się udało?” *Rok kobiet w ASP* [Year of Women from the AFA. The Centenary of women's presence at the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts, ed. Iwona Demko, Agnieszka Marecka (Kraków: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie, 2021, 13-23.
- ¹⁷ "Iwona Demko," *Secondary Archive*, <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/iwona-demko/> (11.10.2022)
- ¹⁸ Jadwiga Linde-Usiekiewicz, "The Case for Feminatives in Polish," *The Magazine of PAS* 4/76/2022, 82, https://journals.pan.pl/Content/126352/PDF/82-82_Linde_Usiekiewicz_ang.pdf (12.10.2022)
- ¹⁹ Anna Królikiewicz, „Interlanguage,” *Międzyjęzyk* [Intrlanguage], ed. Jacek Foromański (Gdańsk: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Gdańsku 2019), 71-110. <https://www.zbrojowniasztuki.pl/pliki/e72645c98eeb20082be438590a1736a5/anna-krolikiewicz-miedzyjezyk.pdf> (13.10.2023).
- ²⁰ Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Taste and Other Senses: Reconsidering the Foundations of Aesthetics," *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, No. 54 (2017), 20–34, 20.
- ²¹ Agata Jakubowska, "Meetings: Exhibitions of Women's Art Curated by Izabella Gustowska," *Ikonotheka* 26/2016, 291-311.
- ²² Marta Smolińska, "Abakanowicz in Poznań: an enduring presence," *Poznan.pl*, <https://www.poznan.pl/mim/wortals/en/en/news,9560/abakanowicz-in-poznan-an-enduring-presence,170114.html> (14.10.2023)
- ²³ Anka Leśniak, *Fading Traces. Polish Women Artists in Art of Seventies*, video-installation based on conversations with artists, 2010.
- ²⁴ *Traces of Sisterhood*, ed. Eliza Proszczuk, Ewa Chomicka (Warsaw: Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, 2022) <https://tractsnetwork.online/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/TRACES-OF-SISTERHOOD.pdf> (16.10.2023)
- ²⁵ "Seizure – Rewriting Counter Histories (2015)," Grzinić-Smid.si, <http://grzinić-smid.si/?p=1303> (17.10.2023)
- ²⁶ "Bogna Burska," *Culture.pl*, <https://culture.pl/en/artist/bogna-burska> (16.10.2022)
- ²⁷ "Kulturen-Clash: Das „nackte“ Afrika an der alten WU," *Die Presse*, <https://www.diepresse.com/5359064/kulturen-clash-das-nackte-afrika-an-der-alten-wu> (17.10.2022),
- ²⁸ *Wspominając Akademię. Wysłuchane, zapisane, okazane. Kobiety* [Remembering the academy. Heard, written down, presented. Women] Vol. 12., ed. Jacek Dembosz, Iwona Demko (Kraków: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie, 2021).

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