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Vráblíková, Lenka. 2022. 'You keep belittling us and we are sick of it!': Four lessons learned from feminist interventions in Czech art schools. *Gender and Education*, 32(7), pp. 838-851. ISSN 0954-0253 [Article]

Persistent URL

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‘You keep belittling us and we are sick of it!’: Lessons from feminist interventions in Czech art schools

Reflecting on two feminist interventions that brought forward women’s experiences of studying in Czech art schools, the article examines the unjust hierarchies and power relations that are foundational to the Western institutions of education as well as art. It examines how Czech art schools – despite challenging some of these unjust hierarchies and power relations normalised in the wider society – nonetheless keep and fortify others, namely the binary gender divide. Following postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholars, the article then employs the analytic of postsocialism. Examining three aspects of Czech art schools - the ideological foundations, the structuring of their pedagogies and the politics of resistance - it renders visible how, in art education, the gender divide entangles with the premises of Western modernity and its hidden logic of coloniality.

Keywords: Art schools, education for women artists, the modern/colonial gender system, postsocialism, transnational feminism.

Introduction

Taking as its cue two feminist interventions that brought forward women’s experiences of studying visual arts - one from 2010 initiated by myself and another by feminist collective *Čtvrtá vlna* [*The Fourth Wave*] from 2016 - the article examines the unjust hierarchies and power relations that are foundational to the Western institutions of education as well as art. By focusing its lens on the context of postsocialist Czech Republic, it examines how art schools – despite challenging some of these unjust

hierarchies and power relations normalised in the wider society – nonetheless keep and fortify others, namely the binary gender divide. The aim of this inquiry is thus twofold. On the one hand, contributing to the feminist critique of art education (Dalton 2001; Deepwell 2010; Hopper 2015; Pusa and Haggrén 2018), I examine how the binary gender divide – which translates into two exclusively opposite notions ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and privileges the former over the latter – operates, manifests but also can be contested. On the other hand, I explore how this binary gender divide entangles with other axes of domination brought about by Western modernity and its hidden logic of coloniality, a logic that drove the European modern colonialism and has been shaping the world ever since.

In order to unpack how the binary gender divide and its correlate heteronormativity entangle with another result and a vehicle of Western modernity – racialization - I draw on the Argentinian-American philosopher María Lugones’ notion of ‘the modern/colonial gender system’ (Lugones 2007). Following from other postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholars such as Madina Tlostanova and Anikó Imre, I then employ the analytic of postsocialism in order to assist me with making this entanglement visible specifically in the context of Czech art education. The analysis focuses on three particular aspects which - according to my reading - are key to the keeping and fortifying of the modern/colonial gender system in the Czech art schools, namely their ideological foundations, the structuring of pedagogies and the politics of resistance. I conclude by providing a reading a video by feminist collective *Čtvrtá Vlna*.

The key argument presented in this article – and the contribution to transnational feminist scholarship¹ on art education – is that an examination of how the binary gender divide entangles with other premises of Western modernity in art schools in postsocialist societies² – such as the Czech Republic – teaches us important lessons

necessary for the transformative work that Afro-Caribbean writer, teacher, and activist M. Jackie Alexander calls ‘teaching for social justice’ (2006). In order to begin this endeavour, the following section recounts and critically reflect on my experience of studying visual arts in Czech art schools.

Studying visual arts in the Czech Republic: An account of one journey

I began to ask questions – which, retrospectively, I would describe as challenging the unjust hierarchies and power relations that define the current status quo - as a teenager as I tried to divert from the paths which already seemed set for me. I was pursuing answers – but mostly was coming up with more and new questions - through drawing and painting and by developing my own art practice. Since I was fifteen, I was attending additional weekend courses where I learnt the basics of the techniques and technologies in visual arts and began to familiarise myself with the codes and grammars of art’s contemporary forms and concepts. As part of this education, I was also introduced to the Western canon of art history – with the emphasis on the national (that is Czech and Czechoslovakian) art history that was eagerly presented as its legitimate but always somehow precarious part. Learning about visual arts and developing my own art practice seemed to be a place where I could develop my creative and intellectual leanings, so I decided to go to a university and study visual art education. I began an undergraduate programme in an art-teaching department in a university in Ostrava, a city across the country from our town. My future steps were not clear but perhaps I could become an art teacher in a school in my hometown or get a job in a regional gallery in a nearby city. At the same time, I was getting more and more determined that not only did I want to teach art but also become an artist myself. After several unsuccessful attempts, I was finally accepted to a fine art school, an academic field highly competitive and still considered very prestigious in the Czech Republic.

Coming to the university to study art education and later joining a studio of painting in a fine art school felt incredibly exciting and liberating. It was an opportunity to explore and learn more about things I was beginning to be passionate about and an opportunity to be surrounded and supported by people who would share similar interests and thus could open new intellectual horizons for me. The possibilities felt infinite and every door seemed open for me. That was, at least, what I imagined. The reality was, as a matter of course, quite different. Very early on I became aware that the educational environment was structured by various hierarchies and power relations which were only rarely reflected or even recognized as such. Most of those in the educational institution I was part of - to my surprise and against my expectation - did not share my passion and did not challenge or even wish to challenge institutional inequalities across the axes of age, class, ability, gender and race. The lack of commitment to engage with how different people experience and inhabit this world and how they relate to each other, visual culture and art permeated every aspect of my studying. I was made acutely aware especially of the effects of the binary gender divide which privileges those considered men over those perceived as women. It struck me immediately that I had become a part of what, as I learnt later, in 1973 Adrienne Rich called the 'man-centred university' which was 'a breeding ground not of humanism, but of masculine privilege' (1995, 127).

Only a brief look around the lecture theatres and art studios confirmed that becoming an artist would not be an easy path: in the art-teaching program, although attended almost exclusively by women, most of the lecturers were men. In the fine art schools, which focused on the training of professional artists rather than art teachers, the ratio between the number of men and women students was more or less equal. The professors were, however, apart from a few exceptions, again only artists who were

men. The experiences of sexist behaviour were common in both art-teaching programmes and fine art schools. Women students were daily exposed to crude jokes, belittling, intimidation, patronising treatment, humiliation and gender-based and sexual abuse. It wasn't uncommon that teachers or administrators abused their position of power especially in relation to students' access to resources, assessment, evaluation and professional development. Furthermore, women who expressed their discontent and protested against it were perceived as 'a problem', as if 'when you expose a problem you pose a problem', as Sara Ahmed pointedly describes the situation when the instances of sexism and racism are named as such (2016, 36–38).

The critiques I voiced during my studies in Czech art schools – whether they were uttered in an art history class, in a debate in the art studio, during an informal chat in an exhibition opening or through my art practice - most commonly received such a response. Especially my MA dissertation project that I presented at the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Brno University of Technology in 2010, was seen as *a problem* and raised hostile reactions from many art schools' administrators, teachers and my peers.

Art schools and the modern/colonial gender system

By reflecting on women's experiences of studying visual arts, the project sought to unmask the institutions of art and art education as fundamentally patriarchal and tried to envision how - in such an environment - a woman can become an artist. It was a collaborative project that involved artists, theorists, activists, art teachers and art students, and was composed of debates, workshops, performances, talks and exhibitions that were spread throughout the semester so as to offer an alternative to the official curriculum. The 'alternative study programme' thus also included a discussion on how to teach women artists that feminist art historian Michala Frank Barnová and I initiated and led in Hana Babyrádová's seminar on Didactics taught to students of art-teaching

degree at the nearby Faculty of Education. Another contribution was by a painter, theorist and curator Bára Lungová who have taught English and Art Theory at the art school. For the semester during which the project took place, Bára Lungová assigned its topic as an essay question to her English language students. An artist Zdeňka Morávková, that time also a student at the art school, contributed with a painting-performance. Painting a mural on a wall at the school's corridor and talking to the curious passers-by, Zdeňka Morávková critically reflected on her experience of pregnancy while studying art, thus posing questions about how art, creativity, care and motherhood have been perceived in the art world as well as the wider society. The title of the work - 'To už tu bylo a doufám, že stále bude... [This has been here already and I hope that still will be...]' – also acknowledged and situated the artist and her art practice within the tradition of feminist art through which other women artists have been posing similar questions in their own unique ways and thus were negotiating and challenging the status quo and imagining more just alternatives.

Of course, my collaborators and I were not the first ones to pursue these questions. That there is something particular about creative arts – such as music, literature, performance or visual arts - to education and therefore institutions such art schools might occupy a privileged position from which to critically examine and contest the unjust hierarchies and power relations has been argued by many scholars (see Spivak, 2005, Pollock, 1996, Ville and Foster, 1999). A US scholar Peggy Kamuf makes a similar point in relation to literature and the teaching of literature. Kamuf argues that teaching of literature has a particular relationship to the university because the question that literature poses to the university - 'what do we teach as literature?' – interrogates 'the definition of what is and what is not to be comprehended within that institution's determination of itself' and thus touches 'upon some essential foundation

of the university institution' (1997, 3). As Kamuf elaborates, because of this peculiar character, literature and its teaching(s) are, on the one hand, experienced as threatening to the identity of educational institutions, yet, on the other hand, it represents a chance of the university's transformation. Representing 'an open set, and, thereby, the opening beyond itself, beyond the self', the teaching of literature makes the university 'open to the transformations of a future' (1997, 3-4).

As I see it, this interpretation can also apply to visual arts education. One of the ways in which the transformative potential manifested itself in the institutions where I studied was their relentless refusal to conform to the university and its orthodoxies. Art schools did not follow university doctrines. There was no systemic induction and pedagogical encounters did not follow conventions characteristic of the academic environment. The departments did not have fixed guidance for assessing students' work, clearly defined programs of study, or criteria for students' admission to study programs. My first impression of the overall mood in the schools would suggest that it was both very relaxed and even had a radical feeling to it. For instance, the encounters with teachers did not follow formal protocols of polite address (similarly to German, Russian or French, Czech language uses the T-V distinction to mark politeness, social distance and seniority). Nor was it uncommon that consultations, tutorials, seminars, or even exams took place in informal settings such as in pubs or bars. The art departments' non-conformist approach also impacted the accessibility of this education. It opened the university to students who would otherwise struggle to gain a university degree. Czech art schools provided access to education for people who, owing to various reasons 'did not fit', and would otherwise have no chance of being accepted to any other university program. Art schools thus did - in many respects - feel like an 'open set, as an opening beyond itself and the self' which was remaking the space of education and art beyond

pre-given boundaries as Kamuf describes it. Practices and ideas could be developed which were impossible to pursue in any other department of higher education across the country. This was not only in art practice, but also regarding all methods and objects of teaching, and 'institutionality' across the curriculum. They were places which in many ways acted as a counter-force against the university establishment, as a maverick which resisted orthodoxies, normativity, disciplining, as a free creative place where 'civil disobedience' or 'dissidence', creative and critical practice, could develop. It was a gap, an exception from the (educational) system, a deviation from the norm, which resisted being 'quantified' by university measures and which provided room for experimentation in art as well as life.

However, my experience of being an art student distorted the optimism of this picture. Although providing space for experimentation in art and life, and although posing questions that did 'touch upon some essential foundation of the university institution' in significant ways as described by Kamuf, the discourses and practices I witnessed during my studies in art schools left certain questions untouched and thus kept some parts of its foundations firmly in place. There were other 'foundational elements' which – despite their ubiquitous presence – were made invisible. Although art departments did question the possible limits of the university and the society in general through its experimental and non-conformist approach, this questioning seemed to harden other limits which the institution failed even to recognize as such - one of them being the binary gender divide. To be clear, the art departments where I studied were not in accord with the ways in which gender binaries manifested themselves in the Czech mainstream culture and society of that time. It did not correlate with the gender roles and (hetero)normativity characterised by the majority of the society. Art students and art teachers were transgressing limits not only artistically but also in terms of

traditional distribution of gender roles and sexuality. However, despite the exceptional gender-fluidity and the loosening of sexual norms – or, perhaps, because of it - sexism against women flourished extremely well in art schools. For women students, and particularly for those, myself included, who pointed at this ‘hidden foundational element’ of the seemingly otherwise non-conformist and transgressive art departments, art schools felt like a dead end and not an ‘openness towards transformation of a future’.

As famously argued by Jo Freeman (1972), spaces and initiatives which are in discord with and seek to challenge the status quo not only artistically but also politically and institutionally may in fact reproduce and harden that which they sought to oppose. Echoing Freeman’s argument, women who studied or taught in art schools such as Lisa Tickner (2008), Coco Fusco (2017), Griselda Pollock (1996), Judy Chicago (2006) or Zuzana Štefková (2016) point out that the absence of clearly defined and formalised pedagogic procedures and teachers’ and students’ responsibilities do not square up unjust hierarchies and power relations. Rather, it covers them and thus makes them even more difficult to critique. After all, as Kamuf also points out, art and art education are not characterized only by their ‘openness’ or ‘transgressiveness’, but they are still institutions founded in a particular cultural and historical context and thus are also ‘the instituted name of a set of traditions, practices, conventions, and evaluations’ (1997, 5).

Following from the above discussion, I argue that what makes art schools a specific site for feminist interventions is the ways in which this tension – between the transformative potential embodied in art schools, what Kamuf calls ‘openness towards transformation of a future’ on the one hand, and the traditions, practices, conventions and evaluations that define these institutions on the other – play out in relation to the modern/colonial gender system. Put differently, the intricate and paradoxical ways in which the modern/colonial gender system operates in art schools makes its

manifestations extremely pronounced but difficult to clearly point out and thus also to contest. Yet, simultaneously, because of the transformative potential embedded in the critical and creative aspects of the artistic and educational practice, art schools represent a particularly advantageous site for the transformative work necessary for the building of a different world beyond the current modern/colonial gender system. The analysis presented below examines how these intertwined complexities and paradoxes play themselves out in art schools in postsocialist Czech society.

Postsocialist frictions: Art schools ‘in between’

Most famously articulated and promoted by Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History* (1992), the term ‘postsocialism’ has been used to describe the seemingly all-encompassing victory of global capitalism and Western liberal democracy after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In this paradigm, postsocialism is understood as ‘an abrupt historical rupture with discredited socialist modernity’ (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2019, 83). Rather than designating a geographical location, the term thus indexes temporality, namely the surpassed past. In effect, this paradigm renders irrelevant the lives and experiences of those inhabiting countries of the previous ‘Eastern bloc’, the Central and Eastern Europe and East and Southeast Asia. In same vein, postsocialist histories and experiences are regarded as not having anything to offer in terms of political tools and analytical frameworks that could assist in effective interventions in the unjust hierarchies and power relations of the present world (Atanasoski and Vora 2018).

Countering this dominant narrative, postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholars argue that postsocialism represents a particularly advantageous vantage point from which to interrogate the current global hierarchies and power relations. This is because postsocialism - in result of its particular geo-political and cultural genealogy

and its specific relationship to temporality - occupies a highly intricate position.

According to Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora, postsocialism 'resists revolutionary teleology of what was before' and thus marks 'queer temporality' that 'creates space to work through ongoing legacies of socialism in the present' (2018, 141–42). In Madina Tlostanova's theorisation, postsocialism is a 'bordering' or 'in-between' space that disturbs 'the dichotomous scheme of the West/vs. the East or rather the North/vs the South' because those who inhabit it 'cannot fully occupy either of the familiar binary positions of the colonizer/the colonized, the world proletariat/capital' (2014, 158).

This 'in-between' position is defined by what Tlostanova calls a 'contradictory drive'. On the one hand, it is characterised by an over-identification with what is envisioned as 'Western' in opposition to what is 'Eastern'. A desire to become 'identical with Europe, to become the same' can be discerned from phrases such as 'catching-up', 'return to Europe', 'transition' or 'transformation' that have proliferated much of the political and public discourses in postsocialist countries (Tlostanova 2014, 164–65). In Central and Eastern Europe, this desire is further reinforced by there being no major ontologized racial, religious or civilizational difference from the 'core Europeans'. Such desire however cannot ever be entirely fulfilled. Although those occupying the in-between spaces of postsocialism are perceived as 'similar to the West' they are still considered as 'not similar enough' (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2016, 216). The 'new Europeans' – as people from postsocialist countries are sometimes called – are therefore being rejected by the 'core Europeans' and declined legitimate belonging in this at once material and fantasized entity called 'Europe'. On the other hand, the postsocialist in-between position is thus also characterised by animosity that although is a consequence of experiencing rejection by 'Europe' is only rarely directed against what is seen as embodying its *raison d'être*. Instead, it is

misplaced to target people, cultures, politics and epistemologies that seem to represent Europe's 'others', whether they are located in the 'East', 'West', or, indeed, anywhere in the world. This implies that also the object of the 'postsocialist desire' - 'Europe' - is not perceived as unambiguous whole but splits into two opposing entities – a good and authentic one, and a bad, false one, allowing to selectively pick and choose from political, intellectual and aesthetic traditions associated with it (see Imre, 2012).

According to Tlostanova's reading that draws from decolonial theory, the contradictory drive that is behind the love-hate relationship to oneself and others that defines the postsocialist experience is an indicator of 'an unconscious secondary Eurocentrism' that is 'an integral part of Western modernity with its hidden logic of coloniality', manifesting itself through secondary-mimicking, self-negation and victimhood claiming (2014, 165). Some features that characterise this experience are specific to postsocialism, such as the 'almost emotional rejection of everything socialist and a fascination with Western knowledge' (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak 2019, 83). Other features and strategies are shared with groups from other 'bordering spaces' that also have had claimed their belonging in Western modernity and had not been coded as racially, religiously or civilizationally absolutely different from 'core Europeans', namely the identification with whiteness and nationalism (Ignatiev, 1995; Morrison, 1992). Anikó Imre (2012, 82) argues that 'East European nations' unspoken insistence on their whiteness is one of the most effective and least recognised means of asserting their Europeanness'. Simultaneously, it closes any possibility to critically examine racialisation and racism, failing 'to account for the ways in which Eastern Europe is a site that has been racialized in multiple imperial histories that are overlapping' (Pagulich and Shchurko 2019). Furthermore, by insisting on absolute 'colour line' between white and non-white, the unquestioned identification with

whiteness prompts the contradictory drive of secondary Eurocentrism identified by Tlostanova. It reinforces series of hierarchical binary divisions such as truth/lie, human/inhuman, progressive/backwards, West/East, North/South that postsocialism at once disrupts, transforms but also re-solidifies. Mobilised by nationalist discourses that have re-emerged especially after the end of socialism, it thus allows to – for instance - welcome ‘Christian values’ or liberal capitalist democracy as truly European, whilst deem as foreign and harmful ‘Western’ imports phenomena such as globalisation, consumerism or multiculturalism (Imre 2012, 82).

The dynamics identified and analysed by postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholars in postsocialist societies also play themselves out in Czech art schools. Employing the analytic of postsocialism, the following sections examine three aspects of Czech art school - their ideological foundations, the structuring of their pedagogies and the politics of resistance - in order to show how the contradictory drive that, as Tlostanova argues, defines postsocialist experience, manifests in the realm of art and art education.

Ideological foundations: The artist tout court

As feminist scholars researching art and art education pointed out (Battersby 1990; Dalton 2001; Pollock 1996; Štefková 2016), although current Western art education proceeds in accordance with ‘post-’ or even ‘anti-’ modernism, and thus questions some of the fundamental aspects of masculinist, colonial and bourgeois concepts of art and artist, it is still dominated by this particular paradigm. As Griselda Pollock defines it in a text that critically examines British art education first published in 1985, the modernist paradigm ‘celebrate[s] individualism by means of the idea of the self-motivating and self-creating artist who makes things which embody that peculiarly heightened and highly valued subjectivity’ and ‘whose works express both a personal

sensibility and a universal condition'. This creative and independent individuality, furthermore, is not 'gender neutral' but the modernist paradigm 'celebrate(s) the great and creative as an exclusively masculine attribute. Man is an artist tout court' (1996, 131).

The analytic of postsocialism allows to analyse the ideologies that have been foundational to the contemporary Czech art and art schools not only as corresponding to those identified by Pollock in the 1980s Great Britain (and thus fortifying the idea of Eastern European countries 'catching up' with the 'West') but as further complicating them and by doing so, enabling to examine their current manifestations. More specifically, I argue that in the postsocialist context, certain aspects of the modernist paradigm of art and artist further amplify and twist in order to accommodate the contradictory 'bordering' position of the secondary Eurocentrism.

For instance, the definition of the artist as an independent, individual radical force correlates well with the values characteristic of the political and intellectual climate that has dominated Eastern Europe since the end of socialism as discussed above. The key aspiration after 'The Velvet Revolution' in 1989 was that Czechoslovakia was to 'return back to Europe' and to 'transform' from an authoritarian socialist country to a capitalist liberal democracy. This shift was understood not only as a shift from totalitarianism to democracy and from socialism to capitalism, but also from 'collectivism' to 'individualism', from 'cooperation' to 'competition' and, regarding particularly discourses on art, from the understanding of art as intrinsically entrenched in politics to its rejection and conspicuously self-proclaimed political neutrality. Furthermore, the understanding of the artist as a self-motivating and self-creating individual independent from his surrounding, who expresses his subjectivity through art, have correlated well not only with the rejection of politics but also with the

ideology of supreme individualism of a businessman or a consumer freely expressing himself on the new capitalist market. Indeed, it has not been uncommon that in the postsocialist context, both in the art world and the wider society, the newly re-gained freedom of speech and expression have manifested themselves by openly proclaimed xenophobia, racism, sexism and homophobia (see Imre, 2012). This particular over-identification with the model of modernist artist also gave rise to formations which sound like an oxymoron outside of the region, such as a persona of an artist who creates politically engaged ‘anti-establishment’ art and explicitly identifies himself with Western imperialism and corporate capitalism.³

Structuring of pedagogies: The Master and his disciples

The institutional sexism in Czech art schools is however not solely a result of the modernist view on art and artists reinforced by the identification with a persona of a masculine artist-entrepreneur-consumer. It is further strengthened by a second factor, the structural organisation of its pedagogies. More specifically, in the Czech Republic, fine art departments, or fine art academies, are divided into ‘ateliers’ (workshops or studios), where a small number of students study under the supervision of a principle master artist, a professional painter, sculptor or new media artist. As other feminist critiques also pointed out (Štefková 2013), one of the key reasons why sexism manifests so strongly in Czech art schools is because these leadership positions are, apart from few exceptions, almost exclusively occupied by artists who are men. Although I cannot agree more with my colleagues that Czech art schools desperately need to recruit and promote artists who are women into the positions of atelier leaders, I also want to problematise the very structuring of its pedagogies. In accord with other critical voices in the Czech art world, such as the student initiative *The Studio without Master* (Forman 2016), I see the ateliers’ hierarchical paternalistic pyramidal structure as a key

contributor not only to the institutional sexism but to the overall environment of patronizing and belittling.

In Czech art schools, ateliers are usually divided and officially named according to the various artistic media (e.g., 'Atelier of Painting' or 'Atelier of Video Art'), and the students receive training in the skills and techniques in that particular medium. However, it is the persona of the master, the artist-pedagogue, which epitomizes the atelier's *raison d'être*. Although a formative encounter with a strong and mature creative individuality is something we surely all long for during our studies, in Czech art schools, this encounter is set up in the context of a hierarchical paternalistic pyramidal structure, where everyone is subordinate to this single authority. An affiliation with an atelier therefore means much more than just studying one artistic medium or another. After being selected by the pedagogue-artist in an interview, one becomes a disciple, a member of an enclosed and close-knit camp which embraces the views of its master. This results in antagonisms with other camps at the school, a rivalrous relationship with the other students in the atelier and competition with the master himself.

Reading the structural organisation of pedagogies in Czech art schools through the lens of feminist psychoanalysis, we can argue that this pedagogical scene animates - 'in flesh' - the model of artistic progression through contestation and overcoming of previous generations, the battle between 'the father' and the 'sons' (Dalton 1999). According to feminist theorist Joan Copjec (1984, 76), discipleship is based on the 'Oedipal battle' between the master and disciples where men occupy both sides of this transference. In other words, the model of discipleship does not react to sexual difference but rather is founded on its exclusion. In the case of art education, however, this intergenerational educational relationship is further complicated. As already suggested above, the 'object' of the focus of this education – art - significantly

complicates this pedagogic scene. On the one hand, art schools refuse to conform to the university and its doctrines as well as to the norms that define the society in general, yet, on the other, they simultaneously fortify other norms - norms which, although are ubiquitous are made invisible, such as the binary gender divide or whiteness. This tension, furthermore, does not define only the way in which art schools position themselves in relation to the system of higher education or the wider society, but also the formation of the artistic identity.

As argued by Pollock quoted above, within the modernist paradigm, art is understood as the expression of masculine creative subjectivity or, to be more precise, masculine subjectivity that also epitomizes Europeanness that coincides with whiteness. This artistic identity is however not achieved simply through the exclusion of subjectivities that are envisioned as embodying sexual, racial, religious or civilizational other, but through the appropriation of features that are attached to this idealized otherness. This is what Mignon Nixon and Coco Fusco showed in their studies of the Surrealist and Dada movements. For the leader of Dada movement, Tristan Tzara, the stylization into 'African' was a way of establishing his artistic identity. However, as Fusco's famous performance with Guillermo Gómez-Peña *The Couple in a Cage: Two Amerindians Visit the West* (1992-1993) demonstrates, dramatizing the colonial phantasy of the racially other as a person who – in Western modernity – is positioned as embodying this racial and civilizational difference, creates entirely different effects (Fusco 1994, 145–50). Similarly, Surrealists celebrated 'hysteria' (understood as coinciding with idealised femininity) as a 'sign of forbidden desire', as a 'source of inspiration and a model of creative expression'. As Mignon points out, 'it is one thing to identify, as an artist, with the hysteria of the other, as the male surrealists did: to turn hysterical might feel exciting or terrifying, liberating or rebellious. It is however

something else to lay claim, as a “woman artist”, to the hysteria that is culturally synonymous with being a woman (2005, 32).

Fusco’s and Mignon’s critical readings are essential for my understanding of the experience I have with studying visual arts. In the art schools where I studied, discontent and protesting women were not perceived as artists with access to ‘sources of inspiration’ or ‘creativity’. Nor was the rebellion against paternal authority of students who were women understood as a legitimate way of forming their artistic identity. These art students were, on the contrary, seen as immature, ungrateful, or, eventually, immoderately ambitious ‘daughters’. The structuring of pedagogic model in Czech art schools based on the Master-disciples relationship, where it is disciplines’ rebellion that proofs and fulfils the ‘Oedipal’ bond thus might, undoubtedly, be a ‘spur to creativity and intellectual development’, a way of establishing one’s artistic identity. It, however, works only ‘for boys’ who are ‘white’. A rebellion of those who are not perceived as embodying masculinity and/or whiteness – and do not aspire to do so – receives entirely different interpretations, some of which I briefly outline in the following section.

The Politics of Resistance: Discarding feminist interventions

In Czech art schools as in other Western or Westernised countries, the imperatives of modernism have been critically reflected by the more ‘progressive’ or ‘open-minded’ pedagogues and students. For instance, names of critical thinkers associated with what has become to be known as ‘postmodernism’ - such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler or Gayatri Spivak - have been referenced in conversations and taught in seminars. However, most commonly, these critical approaches have been accommodated by the modernist paradigm. Their challenges were interpreted as manifestations of a rebellion against the old artistic generations, an idea central to the modernist conceptualisation of art progression discussed in the previous section. As

Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have pointed out (1987, 104), the modernist paradigm of the artist as a supreme 'gifted' male individual thus hadn't been challenged in any significant way. Instead, through its 'postmodern' incarnations, it evolved and adjusted to better minimize the effects of critical interventions and thus protect the masculinist, colonial and bourgeois status quo.

According to my reading, at least three interrelated yet distinct, even conflicting, narratives that aim to minimise the effects of feminist interventions have proliferated postsocialist Czech society. The first narrative portrays feminism as an artificial import from the 'oversensitive' West which is depicted as too preoccupied with political correctness. Within this framework, feminism has been represented as a powerful lobby which forces agendas that are considered foreign to Czech tradition, a lobby which seeks to limit individual freedoms of both men and women by imposing new regulations and control. The second narrative targets feminism's emphasis on solidarity and collective action. More specifically, the insight that discrimination does not happen only on an individual level but structures legislation, media, education or intimate relations, and therefore also must be addressed on a collective and structural level, is made to resemble another 'movement' ending with '-ism', the condemned 'communism'. Represented as communism's kin, in this narrative, feminism is positioned as opposing the key aspirations of the current time: the development towards democratic and capitalist society and its exorbitant valuation and enforcement of individualism and free choice. Finally, the third narrative repeats a mantra that has proliferated Western art world as well as the wider culture particularly since the 2000s - that feminism is 'obsolete' and 'past-its-prime'. By invoking 'post-feminism', sometimes presented as an 'advanced' and 'up-to-date' version of Western feminism, this narrative eagerly identifies with a portrayal of feminism as essentialist and identity-based, and thus

condemned as unfit for the ‘post-patriarchal’ age in which those inhabiting ‘the West’ apparently live in.⁴

In postsocialist Czech society, feminism thus has been depicted as being both too progressive and conversely too regressive or as imported from the ‘West’ as well as the ‘East’; yet, despite these contradictions, always as unnecessary and unwelcome. In the art schools in particular, it has manifested in the refusal to acknowledge feminist interventions as integral to art and art education. More specifically, the challenges brought by them have not been recognized as belonging to the pool of practices that open art, art education and the society in general beyond pre-given boundaries, that is, practices which otherwise have been seen as epitomising the *raison d’être* of (modernist) art and art education. On the contrary, feminist interventions have been excluded as the ‘other’, as ‘mere’ theory or politics, or sometimes even as expressions of militant and dangerous ideologies.

As already argued, particularly students who are women and/or are not white and who express their discontent and protest against the unjust hierarchies and power relations that structure the institutions of art and art education are perceived as ‘a problem’, as if ‘when you expose a problem you pose a problem’ (Ahmed 2016, 36–38). In addition to receiving hostile reactions from their peers, pedagogues and the wider art community, they however also face the uneasy task of navigating through the contradictions of the narratives that aim to minimise the effects of their interventions. Echoing postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholars (see Tlostanova et al., 2016; Tlostanova et al., 2019), I will conclude with a reading of a video by *Čtvrtá Vlna*, suggesting how feminists interventions in Czech art schools not only challenge institutional sexism and anti-feminist discourses, but also other manifestations of Western modernity and its hidden logic of coloniality.

You keep belittling us and we are sick of it!

‘Sexism in Czech Art Schools’, a 1 minute and 32 second video by feminist collective *Čtvrtá Vlna* exposes and stands up to humiliation, belittling, discrimination and abuse which the authors and other students who are women encountered during their studies in Czech art schools.⁵ Leaving aside the many and manifold reactions and debates that raised after its release in December 2016 (Kabátová 2017; 2017; Svobodova and Smutna 2017; Vlasáková 2016), I will outline one of the work’s possible readings.

The footage begins with a hand opening a big glass door into a corridor full of boards, panels and frames. The first caption that appears over the screen reads: ‘During my entry exams, the teacher told me that I was not a whole woman yet’. Accompanied by a dark and monotone soundtrack, the viewers, who are in the position of a person holding the camera, continue walking along the crowded corridor. Climbing up the stairs, one of the other captions says: ‘His response to my paintings was: Only a woman could think up a piece of shit like this’. The interior design, particularly the yellow safety signs on the stairs and old bulky heaters suggest that the building is an institutional facility: a school, correctional institution, hospital or museum. The hand opens another big heavy door, this time with an Art Nouveau-decorated handle, leading us into a spacious foyer. Just before we pass a large column, another caption reads ‘He said painting just was not for women ... because women lack the passion’.

From the short stories that testify to humiliation, belittling, discrimination and abuse women experienced during their studies of visual arts and a view of the wrapped-up paintings propped around the foyer’s walls, it is evident that the building is an art school. Those familiar with institutions of Czech tertiary art education can furthermore identify the place - the footage is taken in the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, the oldest institution of this kind in the country. Established by a decree passed by Franz I, the Emperor of the Austria-Hungary in 1799, the Academy moved to its current

building after its completion in 1903. Built in a historical style that references architecture of the great past Empires back to the alleged ‘Cradle of European Civilization’, the ancient Greece (Dussel, Krauel, and Tuma 2000), with temperate but progressive Art-Nouveau façade and interior, the building epitomizes the aspirations of the time – a struggle for independence and a formation of a new national identity, which - despite cultural, historical and religious differences in the region - resulted in the establishment of ‘Czechoslovakia’ in 1918 (Lukes 2000).

Walking through the Academy’s corridors thus reminds us of the role institutions of art and education have played in the construction of the new self-definition of a Czechoslovakian nation as well as - when put in a broader perspective - that of imperialism, Eurocentrism and nationalism characteristic of the Western modernity in general (Sauer 2012). Yet, this ideological mission - that manifests in the building’s architectonic style - sharply contrasts with an unmistakable attribute of today’s Czech art schools, the ever-present flagrant untidiness. In the Czech art community’s as well as popular discourses, this contrast is considered to manifest art schools’ refusal to conform to the university and its doctrines as well as the norms that define the wider society. However, resonating with the argument of this article, this is a narrative which the video does not want to re-dramatize but to challenge. By adding a layer with students’ testimonies, it provocatively exposes that the neat grandiosity and its opposite, disorderliness, are only two variations of a shared common foundation, the modern/colonial gender system, which Czech art schools – through paradoxical and intricate means - do not challenge but keep and fortify.

Accompanied with a change in the soundtrack to a fast-beat electronic music, a cut transports the viewers to the building’s top floor. The space is over-crowded with art materials and junk of all sorts. The footage ends with the caption that reads: ‘We are

female students of AVU, UMPRUM, FAVU and FaMU and we have a message for you: You keep belittling us and we are sick of it!’ In so doing, the video voices a powerful message by women who have studied at The Academy of Prague (AVU), Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague (UMPRUM), Faculty of Fine Arts at the Brno University of Technology (FAVU) and Film and TV School of Academy of Performing Arts (FaMU). It declares not only that ‘they’ve had enough’, but also that they are not alone and are ready to continue fighting.

¹ See Jacque M. Alexander and Chandra Taplade Mohanty for a differentiation between ‘transnational’ as ‘a normativizing gesture’ and ‘transnational’ that ‘performs a radical, decolonizing function’ (2010: 24). For a discussion on transnationalism, globalization and feminist visual art see Marsha Meskimmon (2006; 2020).

² Following Madina Tlostanova, Suruchi Thapar-Björkert and Redi Koobak (2019: 82), I use the term ‘postsocialist’ to refer to the post-Soviet and Central and Eastern European countries that were in the former Soviet sphere of influence. Similarly to the above authors, while I am aware of the significant differences between those countries, I use the term in order to acknowledge ‘the shared legacy of the Soviet presence across the region’. (2019, 82)(2019, 82)

³ In the Czech art scene, the most wellknown example is an artist David Černý.

⁴ For an elaboration on how narratives that produce ‘anti-feminist’ effects, and that are told both inside and outside Western feminism, see Clare Hemming’s book *Why stories matter: The political grammar of feminist theory* (2011).

⁵ The video with English subtitles is accessible on <http://politicalcritique.org/cee/czech-republic/2017/the-fourth-wave-sexism-czech-universities/>.

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