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The Depoliticization of Czech Female Art

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Abstract: Contemporary Czech art is heavily influenced by a history of Communism, the 1989 transition to capitalism, and the impact had on visual culture by the political and economic changes after the Velvet Revolution. Czech female art, defined as art made by women that is informed by themes of female identity, image, the body, sexuality, feminism, sexual identity, and gender theory, responds to how female identity has been affected by these social changes. This essay argues that Czech female art is depoliticized by its artists, through either neglect or resistance to political connotations and ramifications, but that it is simultaneously engaged with broad social issues through a unique synthesis of personal and public identity. Depoliticization is also discussed in terms of how it actually affects politics, including feminism, lesbianism, and corporeality, and how it reveals social and cultural relationships to political ideologies.

Introduction

Czech women in contemporary visual art are a small but diverse group of artists who are, for the most part, hardly recognized internationally. Their work spans genres of medium, style, and content, and engages with a variety of issues that are quite unique, as this art comes out of a recent post-Communist nation straddling its position between Eastern and Western Europe and increasingly having to negotiate the impact and visibility of capitalism's recent emergence.

The stability of gender roles, in particular the female identity, has been visibly affected by these political and economic changes, and Czech society is now witnessing the influences of contemporary visual culture's construction of the female image.

Based on interviews with artists and critics as well as readings of Czech contemporary arts publications and exhibition catalogues, many Czech women artists in the last ten to fifteen years have been actively responding to what they are seeing and feeling as women through their own creation of "female art."

I define "female art" as art made by women that is directly and intentionally engaged with concepts of female identity. This definition is highly variable and includes work that explores individual female identity, the female body, erotica, sexual politics, lesbianism, social issues surrounding female sexuality, theoretical discourse on gender, and feminism, in terms including but not limited to the biological, social, political, economic, and cultural.

I don't intend for the term "female art" to ghettoize art made by women, or art that touches on all of these issues. In fact, I believe "female" to be a highly problematic term, of

which the problematics have been developed within the realms of recent feminist, post-feminist, gender, and queer theoretical discourse. However, for my purposes in this essay, I find the term “female art” to suit my intention, not only because it is inclusive of the identities of its artists and the identities being examined within the art, but also because it is a term I came across in my conversations with *Czechs* in the art scene, and I am focused here on the Czech experiences of these ideas and not on definitions and meanings that might abound in discourses which are still fairly far removed from Czech society.

In my research, which was primarily interview-based, I found an overall tendency on the part of Czech artists to *depoliticize* their art. Here, I define “depoliticization” as an avoidance of or resistance to political or ideological frameworks, connections to political movements, or identification of the work as a service to any political idea or ideas, and as an overall neglect, ignorance, or distancing of oneself and one’s art from political connotations and implications.

In this discussion, which is confined to the context of Czech female art and artists, I argue that most Czech women artists tend to depoliticize “female art,” and that this tendency is the result of historical, social, and cultural conditions, definitions and terminology, and characteristics of the contemporary Czech art scene. I also discuss how audience plays a role in politicization and depoliticization, and how depoliticization can unintentionally politicize. I contextualize my argument within historical and artistic frameworks, and the first part of the essay is entirely devoted to describing and discussing Czech female art in context, form and style, and content, in order to distinguish it from other female art. Specifically, I have tried to synthesize the characteristics of aversion to the political with a unique artistic amalgamation of the personal and social.

In the second part, I discuss how and why Czech female art is depoliticized and the specific politics affected and illuminated by this depoliticization.

Part One: Czech “Female Art”

Context

According to art critic Tomas Pospiszl, the first Czech woman to explore sex and sexuality in visual art was Toyen, a Surrealist artist, with her work in the 1930s; “then there was a big gap until the second half of the 1990s.”¹ Forty years of communism will account for most of that “gap,” when visual art wasn’t permitted unless it served the ideals of the regime, but there was also a simultaneous absence of recognition and opportunity for women artists, as artist Milena Dopitova described. “Before the Revolution, art was made mostly by men. Women couldn’t do so much because they were not accepted—“you are a woman, you have family, you have kids, goodbye . . . our generation has a different view. I think something changed after the Revolution.”² Some people talked about specific gender division in the arts in the decades directly preceding and following the fall of communism.

In the 1980s, Pospiszl said the “the [Czech] art scene was still a ‘men’s club’” even though the art student population was split evenly between men and women. It was in the 1990s when many women became “equal with men, *partners* as opposed to *appendixes* in the art world,” said Pospiszl.³

Artist Jiri Prihoda, who began studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1990, immediately after the Revolution, said that at that time, the influence and quality of women’s and men’s art was equal, and he called Czech women’s art from the mid-‘90s “much more interesting” than men’s.⁴

However, the 1990s themselves were actually *dominated* by women artists, according to curator and critic Marisa Ravalli-Prihodova. “The biggest group of artists in the 1990s was ninety-percent women. [The group] was [Katerina] Vincourova, [Marketa] Otava, [Veronika]

¹ Personal Interview. 26 November 2004.

² Personal Interview. 7 December 2004.

³ Ibid.

Bromova, and [Jiri Prihoda]. And it was just because their work was really good.⁵ As Pachmanova writes in “The Muzzle: Gender and Sexual Politics in Czech Contemporary Art,” “the visibility of Czech women artists increased enormously in the post-socialist era and their gender-consciousness rose accordingly.”⁶

Pospiszyl also spoke about the 1990s in terms of women art historians. He mentioned a 1991 exhibition by artist Jiri David called “Dedicated to All the Female Art Historians,” which referred to how most Czech contemporary art historians at the time were women.⁷

The social context of the time was significant. Post-Communism permitted an inundation of sexual images into the Czech Republic that had formerly existed only underground. Art historian Martina Pachmanova described this “phenomenon of the eroticization of public Czech life,”⁸ the result of both the political change as well as the economic conversion to capitalism, in art magazine *Umelec* in 2002.

Under Communism, pornographic magazines and videos were smuggled into the country from the West; now . . . the streets of Czech cities are crowded with sex shops, peep shows, nightclubs . . . The main highways near the border resemble one large brothel.⁹

Pachmanova makes explicit here the social conditions several Czech women artists began to negotiate in their work in the 1990s, conditions largely resulting from the increase in advertising and new permission of free expression, and carrying with them what Pachmanova called the “exploitation of human sexuality.”¹⁰ The sex industry was everywhere.

When I asked Pospiszyl to give me a reason why Czech women were using certain forms, styles and mediums such as pornography in their art (Pospiszyl had previously mentioned that the way Czech women were using “the language of pornography” was

⁴ Personal Interview. 9 December 2004.

⁵ Personal Interview. 3 December 2004.

⁶ Pachmanova, Martina. “The Muzzle: Gender and Sexual Politics in Czech Contemporary Art.” www.artmargins.com: 2003; 1/12/04.

⁷ Personal Interview.

⁸ Pachmanova, Martina. “Feel Like Some Art” Call 1-900-1LENKA.” *Umelec*. 6:2, 2002.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

something fairly unique to Czech and Hungarian women's art), he said that "[t]he reason is that we are flooded with pornography. It is visible to outsiders, but not so easy to see by insiders . . ." Pospiszyl went on to say that perhaps this heavy use of pornography in art is "a symptom of post-communist countries."¹¹

Art historian Zuzana Stefkova also mentioned the unique economic and social situations of post-communist nations. When I asked her what ideas she addresses in her own work, she included issues of "coming to terms with advertising, commodification of body . . . things that are not new worldwide, but that are quite visible here." When asked about Czech cultural attitudes toward sex and developments since capitalism, she said that "Czech society is right now going through this boom . . . that displays bodies and displays sexuality and people are not too sensitive. I think there is a sense of numbness in this society . . . before 1989 it was very hard to get any pornography . . . [Now] we are flooded with images of this kind. [People's] receptors are filled in. They can't take any more."¹²

Both Pospiszyl and Stefkova mentioned the particularities of time and place--"post-Communist countries," "Czech society" "now"--in their discussions of contemporary female art and its context, which emphasizes the significance of the free market economy and political change on female identity and its presence in visual culture.

In addition to historical context and change, Czech reception of female art is important contextual background for discussing its qualities and presence.

Stefkova told me that "I think Czechs are very liberal when it comes to sex. It's a private thing, but if you are not interfering with anyone else, you can do whatever you want."¹³ Stefkova described the piece *Chlupatice* (Hairy Thing) by Alena Kupcikova in which the artist created "drawings" made from her friends' pubic hair. Rather than interpreting the work as "a comment on how preset rules and body ideals challenge the way

¹¹ Personal Interview.

¹² Personal Interview. 18/11/04.

we look and that females are pushed into these changes,” as Stefkova explained, the audience considered the work light pornography and “took it as a nice object to look at . . . like arousal, provocation, voyeurism, that was fully accepted. From this specific problem, to make it more general, I would say that . . . it’s not easy to shock [people], it’s not easy to arouse some dramatic feelings that tackle sexuality or reveal human body.”

However, Stefkova went on to say that these liberal reactions could be due to the “selectivity” of art audiences in the Czech Republic. “Usually, the people who come to exhibitions of contemporary art are somehow prepared . . . It is maybe one of the reasons for this liberal approach to art, viewers are somehow selected. It’s not the common man who views these images, it’s someone who already has some knowledge.”¹⁴ Stefkova’s comments reveal some aspects of reception in terms of art audience, but there is a more public audience to consider.

Artist Gabriela Kontra actually spoke about how she felt *general* Czech audiences view art concerning gender, sexuality, and the body, and spoke specifically about the 2004 exhibition “This Month I Menstruate,” describing the audience in gendered terms. Her description of viewership here is extremely different from how Stefkova describes the reactions of a more “select” and “prepared” audience. The “Menstruation” show exhibited several artists’ works, by both women and men, related to menstruation in a number of contexts, from biological to social to ecological; depictions were sometimes highly explicit.

“During and after the exhibition, you could see the reactions of the people, especially the women . . . the women here have a big block about these themes and the men here are a little bit worried about these themes.”¹⁵

Kontra attributed some of this apprehension about such themes to the short time that has passed since the Revolution, and she said that in Western Europe “there is more space for

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

tolerance and the custom of people is not to be quiet,”¹⁶ implying that in the Czech Republic there is a reluctance to talk about issues of the body, and that when these issues are addressed, they shock. This is contrary to how Stefkova explained reactions to body art from *art* viewers.

I have briefly outlined these cultural contexts of history, social change, and viewership in order to provide a basis for some understanding of how and why Czech female art is situated as it is.

Form and Style

When I asked women artists in what mediums they work, and when I asked art critics to tell me in what mediums Czech women artists primarily work, I was constantly told “New Media.” “New Media” is a global trend in contemporary visual art and also a more recent department in many art schools. The field of New Media embodies a countless number of contemporary artistic methods including film and video, digital manipulation photography and sound art. Ravalli-Prihodova called the field of new media “very trendy,” and singled out video as a popular medium. She described it all as “the latest technology used as a means of expression” and mentioned that new media has been significant in Czech art since the early 1990s.¹⁷

Of the artists I interviewed, none of them worked outside either photography or New Media exclusively. Even when considering artists whom I wasn’t able to interview, there are few I came across who don’t work in New Media to some extent. However, this doesn’t mean that anyone I encountered felt a sense of homogeneity to Czech women’s art.

As Stefkova told me, “I can see that many women are tackling this issue [sex and sexuality] through photography and new media . . . [but] I can’t really see any unifying element because there are such strong personalities and people are still experimenting and you

¹⁵ Personal Interview. 13 October 2004.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Personal Interview.

can't talk about just one style.”¹⁸ I found Stefkova's statement to be true--the *use* of photography and new media is extremely varied.

Gabriela Kontra, a graduate of FAMU, used classical photography to document some very contemporary and taboo issues, such as the sexuality and transgendered identities of male prostitutes outside Prague, and the issues of drug abuse and HIV and AIDS that have permeated their lives.

Tereza Janeckova, a current student of new media at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, photographed herself as an unconventional nude model in a dramatized photo-series printed in *Hustler* magazine (Figures 1-3).

Jana Stepanova, a graduate student in photography, doesn't call herself a photographer because “photography in the Czech Republic is taken as pure photography, not mixed with other medias . . . I like to work with mixed media, instead of [presenting] photography like landscapes or still-life . . . I'd rather take fashion photography and put completely different content into it . . .”¹⁹ In terms of “completely different content,” Stepanova showed me a piece she is currently working on, *Leather and Muslin*, a color photo series in which two models play with stereotypes of the “butch-femme” aesthetic in lesbian culture. Stepanova's use of mixed media has combined classical photography with typography, video art, and serigraphy.

When I asked most critics why Czech women artists are working with photography and new media so prominently, I was usually told that the trend is a worldly one. However, Pospiszyl said he thought women might be working more with new media because in it “there is no burden of tradition” and it is “easier to move in.” He cited Bromova, Dopitova, and Vincourova as having all been self-taught in various mediums, Marketa Otava as being a

¹⁸ Personal Interview.

¹⁹ Personal Interview. 2 December 2004.

photographer who actually studied animation, and he singled out Bromova as having taught herself digital manipulation photography.²⁰

Pospiszyl's comment on "the burden of tradition" seems to speak to the possibility that women might find it easier to stake themselves out in the art scene with new media work because it doesn't have such a long history as a masculinely-constructed art form and discourse, nor a deep-rooted tradition built around men's artwork.

Ravalli-Prihodova disagreed with Pospiszyl's comment, insisting that the tendency to work with new media on the part of women artists is simply part of a global tendency among all contemporary artists to do so.²¹

Aside from new media, the only other aspect anyone I interviewed described as a *formal* commonality in Czech female art was "the language of pornography," of which Pospiszyl spoke. "[Pornography] is not only on the streets . . . If you saw this work by Lenka Klodova [depicting] lockers of factory workers, I'm pretty sure that these lockers are wall-papered with these images and it is considered normal. I've seen offices in factories plastered with hard-core pornographic pictures while women were working there as well. And I think it is really only a phenomenon of the last fifteen years."²²

Pospiszyl is referring to a project by Lenka Klodova in which she left naked female mannequins in factory workers' lockers and bathrooms and photographed the figures in this space; she also made clear the ubiquitous sight of pornographic images on the wall-spaces. Pospiszyl again brings up context of time and place here—the post-communist era has obviously brought about a surge of pornographic images in private and public spaces. Klodova was the example Pospiszyl gave of an artist who uses actual pornography in her art. Several of Klodova's projects use pornography. They include cut-out pictures of women in porn magazines collaged into paper dolls with complete sets of clothing and furniture

²⁰ Personal Interview.

²¹ Personal Interview.

(*Panenky I-X*; Dolls I-X, 2000-2001; Figure 5); traditional folk dresses drawn directly onto the naked bodies of women in porn magazines (*Lidove Zeny*; Folk Women, 2001; Figure 6); and the creation of a magazine evocative of a porn magazine but instead using pictures of dead trees scantily clad in pieces of colored cloth and provocative messages written below the photographs (*Magazin Briza*; Magazine Birch, 2000; Figure 7).

When I mentioned the higher visibility of pornography in the Czech Republic since the Revolution, Klodova said she began working with pornographic material while on maternity leave, when she began to notice pornography everywhere. “There was a boom after the Revolution. Porn was seen as some kind of freedom to express sexuality, part of personal freedom. Now, for the new generation, it is a problem.”²³

Pachmanova addresses use of pornography in art as it relates to Klodova’s work: “Klodova is very much aware that appropriating the language of pornography, while wishing to undermine it, is a risky game and that it’s only a short leap from banality and tackiness to cheap ‘artistic’ entertainment. But obviously she’s got a knack for the game of nakedness.”²⁴ Pachmanova used the same terminology as Pospiszyl, “language of pornography,” to describe a common formal trait in Czech women’s art—this “language of pornography” is evidently a visual one that has made its presence known to women artists. Pachmanova, however, seems to hint, in the quote above, that she believes Klodova is one of only a few Czech artists who is able to utilize it critically and cleverly.

While Pospiszyl believes pornography to be a unique aspect of Czech and Hungarian women’s art, no one else I interviewed mentioned it, and Ravalli-Prihodova disagreed. She said she couldn’t think of anyone else using it except for Klodova. She did mention that art

²² Personal Interview.

²³ Personal Interview.

²⁴ Pachmanova. *Umelec*.

students might be utilizing pornography more²⁵, and Tereza Janeckova, an art student, has done just that.

Janeckova created a photo series in which she and a friend posed naked in various theatrical scenarios on the woods and in an open field. What she had originally intended as just fun became a series she thought would be interesting to present in *Hustler* magazine, so she sold the series to them.

In this first series (Figure 1), printed in 2003, Janeckova and her friend pose pornographically, but there is an uncanny twist to the visual experience of this pornography; Janeckova does not physically resemble what we are used to seeing in porn magazines—she is plump, with short brown hair cut pixie-style, and she aggressively and powerfully stares down the viewer's gaze in almost every image. This first series was followed by a second the next month, in which Janeckova's premise was based on a poll of *Hustler* readers, sixty percent of whom voted for the subject of Janeckova's photos (played by herself) to be depicted raped in the second series (Figure 2).²⁶ Janeckova created the photos with a dramatic set-up of herself raped, but she took the concept and composition of the images in a divergent direction by also depicting the subject cutting off the rapist's penis and cooking it, as well as posing triumphantly over his body in the final frame (Figure 3).

There are a number of connotations to Janeckova's series, but one of them is the disruption of typical pornographic body image and submission of women with a contrary photographic display that is actually printed in the forum it is criticizing. This piece is another that uses pornographic language in an attempt to subvert that language, though it is student work, which could indicate that Prihodova's claim is correct—pornography itself doesn't seem to be used explicitly in a lot of female art here, other than perhaps in student work. Rather, it seems that women are appropriating meanings and issues in pornography, which

²⁵ Personal Interview.

²⁶ Janeckova, Tereza. Personal Interview. 20 October 2004.

have been made much more relevant in the last fifteen years, and addressing them through less direct imagery that often incorporates multiple meanings.

Overall, it is clear that there is little basis for making any claim that there is an underlying similarity of form and style at work in Czech women's art, or that pornography is a signature material or concept in Czech female art. Problems of pornography are definitely being addressed, and in some ways pornography is literally being used as physical material for the art, but Klodova and Jeneckova were the only artists I found doing this. More important, I think, is that women are exploring *issues* surrounding the topic, effects on the individual, pornography's social presence, and metaphorically examining these issues in their art through content and concept.

Subject Matter and Content

Here I would like to further clarify what I mean by Czech "female art." As stated before, by "female art" I am referring to work by women artists that, in content and concept, examines, explores, questions, or problematizes issues of female identity, image, gender, sexuality, sexual identity, and body. The flexibility of this definition cannot be emphasized enough; essentially, the definition attempts to encompass most of the ideas that would be considered *in* female art.

Pornography has been discussed as one subject being dealt with in Czech female art. Based on interviews and my own viewing, what I find most integral to an examination of content in this art is a discussion of exploration of personal identity versus that of identity in the context of broad social issues; I found exploration of *collective* identity to be significant only due to its near total absence.

Tomas Pospiszyl stated that in 1990s Czech visual art, artists who had previously worked with political and social themes suddenly turned to themes of individuality²⁷, and

²⁷ Personal Interview.

Dopitova, in agreement, called this progression a natural one, considering the ban on conceptual art under the regime.²⁸ Ravalli-Prihodova made it clear that exploration of personal identity in Czech art was not isolated to the 1990s—“it’s still going on,” she said. In fact, Ravalli-Prihodova said that rather than individualism dominating the 1990s Czech art scene, it was art that dealt with “travel and cultural context,” citing people’s new freedom of movement after Communism fell.²⁹ To any extent, personal and individual identity of *women* figures overwhelmingly as subject matter in some Czech female art.

One of the most internationally recognized Czech artists, Veronika Bromova, is noticeably immersed in very personal studies of the self in her work.

One example is her series of large-scale digital photographs titled *My Files* (2004). In this series, some of the pictures are huge close-up views of Bromova’s face-- her eyes, eyelashes, lips--which look almost alien to the viewer because of their massive size and presence, unusual angles (some upside-down), and the intimately close proximity between the viewer and Bromova’s uncanny features. The series also includes pictures, on a similar scale, depicting Bromova’s flat—the dirty dishes in her kitchen, her living space. At the opening of the series at the contemporary art space FUTURA, Bromova brought her personal computer to the show, allowing viewers to freely peruse its contents. As Ravalli-Prihodova, curator and Program Director of FUTURA, put it, “you can’t get any more personal than that.”³⁰

In this series, Bromova allowed complete strangers into the intimate details of her own life, from the imperfection of her home to views of her face only she gets to see, very close to a mirror, or perhaps a lover.

Bromova is usually her own model, and her own body often serves as a main topic in her art. In *Views* (1996), Bromova took photos of the human body, usually her own, and over the photos she digitally collaged anatomical depictions of bodily insides in corresponding

²⁸ Personal Interview.

²⁹ Personal Interview.

places. For example, in one image, Bromova as subject has her legs spread open in a pornographic-like pose, but we see the inner organ of the vagina, the close details of the muscle tissue. According to Karel Srp, these images of Bromova's were created around the same time that art and culture historians were writing about corporeality and the relationship between the inner and outer body.³¹

Bromova even created a self-portrait photo series titled *Ja* (Me, 1998; Figure 8)), in which she poses nude in a variety of positions, often with props, in what seems like a lighthearted but significant play with herself and her own body. In one photograph she presses her breast against a misted shower door, in another wraps Christmas lights around her body, and in a third image she stares at us from an upside-down view, back arched, her body gymnastically contorted on what appears to be layers of plastic sheets with a yellow-tinted lighting effect. In all of these photographs Bromova, sometimes confrontationally, meets the viewer's gaze.

Bromova is clearly examining herself as an individual—her body, her space, her own as well as nature's construction of herself—all of which are informed by her identity as a woman. We are clearly seeing a *female* body in these revealing images, so even if the aspect of the personal is lost to a viewer unaware that the model is also the artist, there is an understood element of female identity and experience of space and corporeality at issue.

As personal as Bromova's work might be, the personal becomes social, as there is generality to her work as well. Ravalli-Prihodova describes a piece in *On the Edge of the Horizon* in which Bromova portrays the general viewer's gaze on the female body through use of her own. "She thwarted conceptions of beauty by taping up her body," and there is a

³⁰ Personal Interview.

³¹ Srp, Karel. "A Few Notes on Object, Space and Body." *Soucasne umeni: Contemporary Collection: Czech Art in the '90s*: 11-14.

“sexual element” to the work as the viewer gazes on the unknown; we don’t necessarily know it is Bromova, only that it is a woman.³²

In a 1999 interview, Tereza Bruthansova asked Bromova, “What was the basic creative impulse for your almost obsessive interest in the human body?” In response, Bromova talked about a greater context than her own self:

In essence, I don’t know what else could be more interesting . . . the human body is one of the most interesting subjects on the planet. It’s one of the most amazing and inexhaustible subjects . . . The body is nearest to me. It offers a lot of things that are completely natural and also some things about which we don’t know very much—things that are a mystery for us.³³

By using the term “we,” Bromova implies that her work addresses, *through herself*, what is relevant to everyone’s experience of body and space.

She also expands outside of herself in the specific context of female identity, speaking of the work in *Views*. “I’m interested in this kind of family psychoanalysis and studies of the phases of human age, especially for women . . . I’m also interested in the theme of pornography . . . in the picture of the spread-open legs, the crotch is exposed so that the muscles and tendons are visible.” She mentions that people were offended by the image, but states that “the picture is nothing more than an organism, an organ, which everyone has. I just allowed myself to uncover its physical reality of which we are not aware. If anything, I de-eroticized it.”³⁴

Bromova is just one example in my discussion of how Czech female art’s content bridges gaps in engaging simultaneously and sometimes nearly seamlessly with personal and social identity.

Lenka Klodova spoke about this bridging of identities in her artistic process when I interviewed her.

³² Personal Interview.

³³ Bromova, Veronika. *Zemzoo*. Exhibition catalogue.

³⁴ Bromova. *Zemzoo*.

I think my art is about my life. The general idea is to visualize topics from my life. It is influenced by quite a large family. If I want to do art, it is easier for me to relate it to my family and life. And I think this moves me to relate it to topics that are more general. After two years of a piece, I can realize that I have a chance to relate it to more general issues.³⁵

Although initially Klodova creates directly from experiences and surroundings in her own immediate environment, her works come to address and question far-reaching issues informing female identity and sexuality, such as social harms of the sex industry.

In making *Magazin Briza*, Klodova initially felt personal pity for dead birch trees in a forest; she thought they looked “raped.”³⁶ She took these very personal and particular inner feelings and created an artistic project that addressed women in compromising positions. She clothed the very thin, white trees in short skirts and tops and photographed them from specific angles to create an evocation of provocative, even assaulted, women; the trees were reminiscent of women in porn, prostitutes, and even rape victims. Outside interpretations of her work included feelings that the piece comments on the anorexic, white, revealing body image girls are taught to live up to through magazine culture. The issues addressed by the project definitely expanded to include not only her own sorrowful feelings about a dead forest or even her own interpretations of porn magazines, but problems with female body image and exploitation of women in visual culture.

When I asked Milena Dopitova if she examines personal and social issues differently or separately in her work, she said “Where is my personal identity and where is the boundary of the social? For me, if I speak about something [in art], I want to show something about me, but I live in society, so I feel [the two] are connected.”³⁷

Pospiszyl spoke specifically about Dopitova’s most recent video piece, *Sixtysomething*, in terms of the merging of personal and social qualities. [*Sixtysomething*] deals

³⁵ Personal Interview. 18 November 2004.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Personal Interview.

with old age and aging. The theme is something you don't see very often because it is so unphotogenic and unpopular, but I think it is quite brave and political and feminist . . . She and her twin sister asked makeup experts to make them look seventy years old, and we are watching the process of them turning from young women into old women, which is the opposite of what we see on TV. This would be an example of taking personal identity and shifting it somewhere and exploring issues that are wider than just personal feelings about age. I think it is describing also the situation in society in a much wider sense.³⁸

When Dopitova commented on the piece's social context, she said she was definitely addressing social conditions of the elderly and what happens to people who have spent time and energy in their youth being productive members of society, and are eventually physically incapable of making the same kind of contribution. "After that, they are treated like rubbish." She mentioned that this issue seemed extremely pertinent in the United States, where the work has already been shown in New York. "People don't want to think about this, how society counts more on young people," said Dopitova.³⁹

Jana Stepanova sees her personal and public identities as inseparable.

I don't think I am addressing issues that are not touching my personal life, because I am dealing with feminist issues, and these questions which I try to answer, like the nude or male gaze . . . it's not just a question of female body but of female identity. So this touches me because I am a woman and I consider myself a woman, even though I can deconstruct the category perfectly . . . Of course, another part of my identity is as a lesbian, and it's very combined. Everything I am doing in art is coming from me, and my personal is of course my public. My personal experience is really transformed into a public statement.⁴⁰

Stepanova is a feminist and lesbian activist, and she was extremely adamant that the social issues and problems she presents in her art are issues she deals with personally. Her individual identity is a public one as well, and so her personal life is affected by how society treats her as a woman and as a lesbian.

In contrast to Bromova, it is often easier at the outset to see the social commentary Stepanova makes in her work rather than her individualism; the personal facets run deeper.

³⁸ Personal Interview.

³⁹ Personal Interview.

For example, she is currently working on a series of photographs of women dressed as brides; the compositions are evocative of classic bridal magazine images. The twist is that these brides are lesbian couples, and the work openly addresses the absence of homosexual legal rights in the Czech Republic, specifically the right to marry. As a lesbian, Stepanova personally experiences the denial of citizenry rights to homosexuals.

The synthesis of personal and public identity can be applied to all of the artists with whom I spoke. Even Janeckova's series for *Hustler* began as a spontaneous piece with a friend, taking pictures of her own body. It was only later that Janeckova decided the piece could be used to create a productive and revealing public dialogue.⁴¹

The "public" or "social" identity that has been discussed thus far is not a *collective* identity, because I don't equate the terms. A collective identity lies completely outside the realm of the individual and personal—in fact, at the other end of the spectrum—and already I have attempted to make clear the unique fusion of personal and social identity exploration present in Czech female art. This fusion works against a schism of the individual and social identity as well as a lumping together of many individual identities (collective). It is the collective identity that negates the importance of personal and broader social identity as entities of their own working together.

Not surprisingly, I found Czech artists to be rather averse to the concept of collective identity in their work, because the connotation of "collective" enters into the realm of the "political" for them, especially considering the term's connection to Communism, and it is the *political* that is evaded and comes undone in Czech female art.

Part Two: Depoliticization of Czech Female Art

"Political Art"

⁴⁰ Personal Interview.

⁴¹ Personal Interview.

While female art is often quickly politicized in many general art circles, Czech women who make female art have an apparent tendency to *depoliticize* their work, whether by ignoring or neglecting to notice the political ramifications of their art, declaring outright that their work is not political, or leaving political connotations up to interpretation. In any case, these artists are often not willing to connect female art with any political movements or group actions or identities, most notably feminism, nor do they strive to make the personal political. I encountered this tendency in nearly all of the artists with whom I spoke, and it was also mentioned by the critics and theorists I interviewed. The first interview to make me realize the tendency to depoliticize in Czech art was with Zuzana Stefkova.

According to Stefkova, Czech art in general tends to be depoliticized because of historical connotations of political art. “Here, the art that was produced for the sake of the liberation of the regime is really something that we are ashamed of, and I think that dissident artists wouldn’t feel their art was a political issue because they felt that political art was something they were trying to do without. At the same time, people are not willing to embrace the idea that art *is* political . . .”⁴² Stefkova goes on to problematize the claim that Czech art is completely depoliticized. “People are not aware that these two things, art and politics, interact. It’s a connection that you can ignore but it’s always somehow there. And even depoliticization is political.”⁴³

Stefkova makes explicit that *within* depoliticization there is also politicization. That politicization happens when something that is expected to be political, or that is labeled political, is declared unpolitical by the artist or by respondents, and the shape that art then takes in art media, journalism, market, and history. Thus, critical and public response can play just as strong a role as the artists in the politicization or depoliticization of art.

⁴² Personal Interview. 18/11/04.

⁴³ Ibid.

Stefkova's statement is also informed by the factors of Communism and post-Communism in Czech art's political tendencies. She said that "[f]or many people, I think that art has nothing to do with politics and politics has nothing to do with art, and political art is something like Socialist Realism or Nazi propaganda . . . but bold images of Stalin don't have to be there for art to be political."⁴⁴ Stefkova is referencing the Communist era, when Socialist Realism was the only accepted artistic style, an art that had to conform to the Communist regime's ideals in form as well as concept. For Czech artists now, who have really only been able to exercise their artistic freedoms for the last fifteen years, "political art" carries with it the negative connotations of propagandistic art that exists solely in support of government or collective movements, which Jana Stepanova touched on.

"[T]here is a misunderstanding in Czech society of political art, because during the Communist regime there had to be official art, overtaken by politics—it was so politics could make propaganda. It was in music, poetry, fine art, visual art, film, sculpture, everything."⁴⁵

Both Stefkova and Stepanova describe the general Czech understanding of art as different from that of politics; for Czech art, it's almost as if "art is art and politics is politics," and the two have nothing to do with each other, because for Czechs, "politics" really means a direct relationship to the *government*, the political system. "Jiri David, David Cerny, Lenka Klodova, me, Gabriela Kontra, Milena Dopitova . . . these people are doing political art because they are addressing political issues. It doesn't have to do with the current political system, it has to do with exploring the female body . . . anything," said Stepanova.⁴⁶ How she describes Czech political art here is very different from how most Czechs understand it.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Personal Interview.

⁴⁶ Personal Interview.

Definitions aside, the key issue is that what I call “politicization” *is not happening* in Czech female art. Like Pachmanova says, “. . . unlike many women artists in the West, [contemporary Czech women artists] rarely address political issues explicitly.”⁴⁷

In one sense, a lot of Czech female art isn’t digging deep enough, according to several sources. Pachmanova wrote about the exhibition “This Month I Menstruate” (March 2004):

While the show accentuated physical functions and body-related hygienic proprieties . . . it repressed the political and ideological frame of gender differences: i.e. something that Czech society, outside academic circles, pays only a little attention but is actually crucial for the formation of social relations between men and women.⁴⁸

Pachmanova accused the show of being too descriptive, showing sexualities as a “biological given,” and having “flattened the meaning of menstruation.”⁴⁹

Stefkova comments on how Czech female art has yet to intellectually problematize itself: “. . . sometimes [the works] were very descriptive, very basic, about things that we need a more sophisticated discourse [on] . . .”⁵⁰ She goes on to talk about an exceptional exhibition in this respect.

Already we can view [female art] as something that is captured, that was identified . . . it can be viewed as a “ready-to-serve” formal approach that loses its impact . . . because it is just so easy. You just take some hair and some nail clippings or some menstrual blood and pack it in pornographic magazines and that’s female art. [This show] was heavily critical but . . . these are exceptions. [These artists] are willing to address this issue from a different point of view than the intuitive approach of “it’s my body, and it makes sense to experiment with it without any intellectual background. These [other] people are trying to find some more sophisticated ways of addressing the problem.”⁵¹

Jana Stepanova agreed that issues in female art are not being dealt with complexly enough, but that it shouldn’t yet be expected in Czech art. She talked about the

⁴⁷ Pachmanova, Martina. “The Muzzle.”

⁴⁸ Pachmanova, Martina. “This Month I Menstruate.” www.artmargins.com: 19 March 2004. 1/12/04.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Personal Interview.

⁵¹ Personal Interview.

“Menstruation” show’s visibility and exposure of these issues to the public as its most important feature, even if much of the art was working on a very surface level.

Perhaps this scraping of the surface is a symptom of tendencies to depoliticize female art; artists intentionally don’t cross too many boundaries of cultural acceptance and avoid revealing or recognizing clear connections between their art and its political ramifications and connotations associated with female identity and sexuality. Clearly, there are areas of politics directly affected by this depoliticization, and sometimes politics actually become *apparent* when they are neglected, they grab attention.

Depoliticized Politics: Feminism

Of the politics that go depoliticized in Czech female art, at the foreground is feminism. Feminism in the Czech Republic is a topic that warrants its own extensive discussion, but I spoke with people who were able to give me some understanding of how and why Czech female art specifically distances itself from feminist ideology.

Pachmanova talked about a special 1993 issue of the Czech arts magazine *Vytvarne umeni* about women in art. The issue featured a Q&A section with ten Czech women artists, but “the word feminism didn’t appear at all” and “eight of the ten artists claimed that art is either good or bad and flatly rejected any and all association with the category ‘woman artist.’” Pachmanova then states that most of those artists would probably answer differently today.⁵²

However, from her critical perspective, Pachmanova still sees a serious problem of engagement with these issues in Czech art today. As she asks in the beginning of her article, “[w]hat are the reasons for ignoring, or even ridiculing, any serious debate about feminism, gender, or women’s emancipation and sexuality in contemporary Eastern European art? Why are these issues marginalized, domesticated, or assimilated?”⁵³

⁵² Pachmanova, Martina. “The Muzzle.”

⁵³ Ibid.

When I asked Tereza Janeckova if her *Hustler* series was “feminist,” she said that “this could be considered feminist, but I don’t feel it.”⁵⁴ Stefkova, who had written about the work for *Umelec* magazine (September 2003), talked to me about how Janeckova’s relationship to the piece revealed something about Czech women artists’ relationships to feminism. “It was very surprising for me to hear that [Janeckova] was not really informed about possible connotations her project could have with feminist issues, because the text that accompanied these images was written by her friend, and it was heavily packed with feminist vocabulary and feminist constructions, but I realized [Janeckova] was not identifying with it.”⁵⁵

Stefkova elaborated on possibilities of why Janeckova, and other Czech female artists, might not identify with feminism. “[There is a] general neglect or even antipathy toward feminism, it’s not a popular thing here to be called “feminist.” I would say that many artists are sensitive enough to disregard the issue of feminism. ‘I am working with my body, but I’m not a feminist,’ like [Veronika] Bromova says. Some of these girls, like Janeckova, don’t know much about feminism, they are not against it, they are interested . . . but at the same time, their work could be charged or could be interpreted in very specifically feminist ways. These people are not stupid, it is just their choice to neglect it or to feel that it is something that they can do without.”⁵⁶

Thus, depoliticizing the feminist connotations in Czech female art is really a result of cultural attitudes toward feminism. Jiri Prihoda said a major characteristic of Czech women’s art has been that “it is not so feminist, the gender issues are not so sharp. The [Czech Republic] kind of missed the feminist movement, and now there are very problematic and conservative views on it; it’s really a negative term here.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Personal Interview.

⁵⁵ Personal Interview.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Personal Interview.

The concept of the term “feminist” was a key point made by many on this topic. Most women I spoke with probably would not identify themselves as feminists. Ravalli-Prihodova spoke with me about this.

“The problem with artists not calling themselves feminist is that you can be a feminist and you can be an artist, and not make feminist art,” and she said this is something a lot of Czech women artists don’t recognize. “They don’t want to be labeled political, feminist, or women artists,” said Ravalli-Prihodova.⁵⁸ Her comments were supported by my interview with Lenka Klodova.

“There is a feeling that if someone wants to label your art feminist, they want to put it out of normal art, to apply other criteria. That’s why I think Czech women artists are really afraid of this term,” said Klodova.⁵⁹

Klodova’s comments made me suppose that perhaps this depoliticization of feminist ideas in Czech art is actually a *strategy* of artists to avoid their work being pigeonholed by viewers, critics, journalists, theorists, and even other artists. However, Ravalli-Prihodova said that the automatic “feminist” labeling of art by women is a global phenomenon, and the space for contention really lies more in the artist’s own identity as “feminist” or “not feminist.”⁶⁰

In “The Muzzle,” Pachmanova writes that “while some Czech women artists claim to be feminists, they wouldn’t dare to repeat the claim in front of a journalist.”⁶¹

When Pospiszyl called Dopitova’s piece *Sixtysomething* “feminist,” I asked him if he thought Dopitova herself would call it that. He said “no” and partly attributed his answer to women being afraid to call their work feminist. Using Dopitova as an example, Pospiszyl said “it is not a terminology embedded in her head. I think it is more a linguistical problem than

⁵⁸ Personal Interview.

⁵⁹ Personal Interview.

⁶⁰ Personal Interview.

⁶¹ Pachmanova, Martina. “The Muzzle.”

anything else. Of course she is very much aware of what she wanted to express in her work, and I think she would be one who is less afraid of this “F” word.”⁶²

Pospiszyl refers to a “linguistical problem,” a completely different understanding of feminism for Czech women than, for example, myself. The opinions of Ravalli-Prihodova, who is American but has lived in the Czech Republic for twelve years, are concurrent with those of Pospiszyl. She believes that the understanding of feminism here is often radical by American standards; she described newspaper articles from the early 1990s identifying feminists as “women who would punch a man if he opened a door for her” as the primary exposure Czechs had to concepts of feminism.⁶³

Dopitova herself talked to me about her history of negotiating feminist terminology’s application to much of her work, such as *Don’t Be Afraid to Take That Big Step* (1994; Figure 9), an installation piece consisting of a pool table covered in blue felt with a black and white image of Joan of Arc (90 x 130 cm) hanging on the wall next to it, or *Egg Masks*:

“With *Egg Masks* [four black and white photographic self-portraits, large scale, with different coverings on each face—masquerade mask, netting, cream, etc.], I started to hear that this is feminist work. In the Czech Republic, it looked like representation of women in society. When someone asked if it was feminist, I said ‘no, I am a woman, and this is my language.’ Before Revolution, feminism was very negative. I was in a newspaper from a symposium saying that [*Egg Masks*] was not feminist, but now I say ‘why not?’ If you see it, it can be feminist. In 1994, my first time in the US, I met with radical feminists and it looked . . . unhealthy to society . . . I wore curlers and a skirt to my show, and someone said, ‘you will look like a woman,’ and I said ‘yes, I *am* a woman.’ Now critics today in 2004 ask me about what I said about feminism in 1991, but then I had a different experience . . . I had a different life. Now, if feminists see [my work] this way, why not?”⁶⁴

While Dopitova is apparently more open to feminist interpretations of her work than many other Czech women artists, her stance still exemplifies my argument: *she* won’t call her work, or herself, feminist. She sees a feminist interpretation as just as acceptable as any other,

⁶² Personal Interview.

⁶³ Personal Interview.

⁶⁴ Personal Interview.

now that her understanding of feminism has changed since the early 1990s; but as the artist, she distances her work from feminism, and blurs any definitive links to it by avoiding an open declaration of its feminist implications.

Gabriela Kontra talked about herself as a feminist in these terms: “We want it fifty-fifty . . . we like men. We want equality. And we need big communication between men and women. In the Czech Republic, there are old ideas of ‘men’ and ‘women’ and that they are very different. We want the two sexes to have a better understanding of each other.”⁶⁵

However, if Kontra was working with this definition of feminism, she didn’t apply it to her work or to the “Menstruation” show in which she had participated. “I don’t think [the show] was feminist. I don’t like to call it that. We wanted to open the minds of the public. We wanted to open this part of a woman’s world up to all worlds. It came from gender studies and from feminists, but it could have been thought up by anyone.”⁶⁶

Perhaps Kontra thought that this “public” who needed their minds opened up would actually be resistant to an exhibition that pronounced itself to be “feminist,” and thus the event would backfire, since this public would go without exposure to the show’s themes.

Jana Stepanova was the only artist I interviewed who openly identified both herself and her art as feminist. I see her as an illustration of the exception in my discussion, a Czech artist making female art who chooses to overtly politicize her ideas and work.

I would really like to encourage women to see what they really do, see it in a political context, in a social context, without hiding and without trying to lower what they actually do. Feminism has a very bad connotation here. It’s seen as a very controversial and problematic thing, scaring people, scaring men . . . [Women who support men and masculinity] have learned how to deal with things that are not necessarily good for them, like domestic violence or lower-paid jobs . . . There is no solidarity among women here.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Personal Interview.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Personal Interview.

Stepanova identifies how Czech women artists remove themselves and their work from “a political and social context,” a result of which is this “lack of solidarity among women” that seeps into artistic contexts, much in the way I spoke of earlier.

Denial of collective identity as well as a lack of work that artists claim adheres to any collective movement (like feminism and women’s rights), might definitely be an effect of a distaste for anything reminiscent of communism. However, other elements are at work.

The specific aversion to feminism is a complex issue, and yet feminism is only one of many politics in female art that can be invalidated by this depoliticization. In turn, of course, the depoliticization of feminism by these women makes a political statement—it is telling of where Czech women stand in relation to feminism, women’s rights, and feminist principles.

Depoliticized Politics: Lesbianism

Jana Stepanova serves as the exception here as well—she is the only lesbian artist I interviewed. Both Stepanova and others told me that she is the only Czech working with lesbian themes who is still based in the Czech Republic (the only other contemporary Czech lesbian artist about whom I was told, Anna Daucikova, works in Bratislava).

When I asked Stepanova if she makes “lesbian art,” she described her work to me like this: “I am definitely working with lesbian issues . . . transforming some of the problematics or specifics of the lesbian lifestyle, transforming it into visuality and into art, and also addressing stereotypes which are running under lesbian relationships . . .”⁶⁸

It could be said that lesbianism in female art is depoliticized simply because it is hardly recognized or spoken about in general Czech society. As Stepanova said, “[during] the Communist regime, there were no visible lesbians around, no patterns, nothing, no clubs . . . even though I had my big love and it was a woman, I didn’t consider myself a lesbian because I didn’t want to be dirty.” Stepanova said she identified as a lesbian only after the Revolution,

⁶⁸ Personal Interview.

when sexuality opened up more, but she also spoke with me about the consistent “invisibility” of homosexuality in the Czech Republic.⁶⁹

The invisibility of lesbianism also permeates perception of Czech art, including female art. When I asked Stepanova how Czech lesbian art is politicized or depoliticized, and how people generally respond to it, she said that it’s hardly considered “art” at all.

“Maybe [it’s considered] erotica, but it’s not at all politicized. [People] don’t even see it as art. They see it as ‘creativity.’”⁷⁰ Because Stepanova, the seemingly only Czech artist currently working with lesbian themes in her work so openly politicizes it, lesbianism in Czech female art is perhaps an area that is depoliticized more by critical and public commentary than by artists themselves. While other artists might not have considered Stepanova’s work politically involved, *she does*, and so the depoliticization is created by viewers who won’t even call her work “art,” let alone be open to its subject matter.

Stefkova also spoke a bit about lesbian art to me: “In general, something that I find problematic for lesbian art is that it can easily be mistaken for pornography for men and their pleasure rather than for the pleasure of the female. If you present your body and your own pleasure, like through masturbation, it can always be appropriated by male viewers.”⁷¹

This appropriation also serves as depoliticization of lesbian art. Stepanova clearly makes her art about women—their issues, various identities, sexualities, and politics that affect their social, cultural, and corporeal positions. However, if art she made with these themes in mind were to depict, for example, lesbian sex, the art could easily be reduced to some sort of pornographic pleasure for men, and the political engagement with women’s issues would be nullified.

Depoliticized Politics: Corporeality

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Personal Interview.

The body is a crucial component of female art, used as an instrument, a subject, a point of departure. The female body has been reconceived as a commodified object, rather than *just* an object, an image to be bought and sold, in contemporary culture. Current transactions on the female body have taken a severe toll on social mentality, attitude, use and abuse of it, and through female art women have been responding to the commodification, cultural construction, and violation of body for the last few decades.

When I previously described Lenka Klodova's project *Magazin Briza*, I didn't mention that Klodova herself didn't read the piece as a commentary on female body image. When I asked her about this kind of interpretation others had expressed, such as that the photographed trees were suggestive of emaciated, anorexic, white bodies (thus, a criticism of images that make women think they must be skinny and white to be attractive), Klodova said she was surprised by this, and that she hadn't intended for this connection to be drawn at all.⁷²

Klodova's reaction was a depoliticization of her own work. Body image, as well as eating disorders (though still in the first stages of being seriously addressed in the Czech Republic), are sociopolitical issues in the Western world, considering the politics behind the money that goes into the media that produces the images which help shape negative body image and the near-epidemic of eating disorders that has resulted.

Klodova, by neglecting to recognize this connotation in her art, is passively disengaged with a huge political aspect of the work; what she did tell me influenced the piece, her "pity" for the mangled, dead trees,⁷³ was a depoliticized interpretation of the work, a much more emotional rather than critical (or rather than emotional *and* critical) one, even if the work did ultimately engage at least with politics of pornography. Yet even so, Klodova never described her work in political terms to me; other projects in which she used

⁷² Personal Interview.

⁷³ Personal Interview.

pornography she also described as instigated by her “pity” for the girls in porn magazines as they were being depicted.⁷⁴

Janeckova actually spoke to me directly about concepts of body image in her work for *Hustler*. She said it was important for her body type, as well as for “a woman who looked Czech” to appear in a porn magazine; she wanted to focus on how “beauty is not on the surface” and said she intended “to use [her] body to get people to talk.”⁷⁵

Although Janeckova did talk about the issues of female body image and beauty in regards to the work, she still maintained that she personally did not invest any gender or feminist-related themes in the work, though she welcomed the interpretation from others if they felt it for themselves.

Janeckova might be someone who illustrates Ravalli-Prihodova’s point well: that feminism’s meaning is very different in the Czech Republic than it is for me. I would still argue, though, that for the artist to claim that this piece is completely unrelated to issues of gender, women’s rights or female identity is an entirely depoliticized relationship to the work; Janeckova might be unaware of the political connotations many others will find in the work, or she might just reject them outright. Either way, both visually and conceptually it is apparent that issues of contemporary concern to women are raised by the work itself; and while Janeckova might not call the work political because of different understandings of the term, she distances herself and the work from the politics generated by the piece.

Depoliticized Social Issues

It is important to clarify that what I discussed earlier, an engagement with social issues in Czech female art, is not negated by the lack of politicization of these issues. These artists are often consciously and deliberately working with social context in their art that extends beyond the individual, but which is often expressed through depiction and analysis of personal

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Personal Interview.

experience, of which I spoke earlier. The most important reason for my description of the unique synthesis of personal and social in terms of content of Czech female art was to illustrate how these artists *do* engage with social issues that they don't connect to politics.

Even if the artists are often averse to connecting their art to realms of the political and related movements, they are usually still aware of broader implications. In interviewing artists, it was really the contexts from which they chose to distance themselves or their work, various political contexts they felt, or said, weren't a part of their art, which most clearly indicated depoliticization on their part. For female art this meant that, with few exceptions, no artists with whom I spoke defined their work in terms of feminism, sexual politics, women's rights, or a women's movement, even if others do so.

Depoliticization as Politicization

The tendency to depoliticize in Czech female art can inadvertently politicize the work, but not by suddenly imbuing the art with politics that weren't originally present, for the politics are always there, nor by suddenly drawing attention to these *a priori* politics. Rather, depoliticization in and of itself makes a political statement. As I stated earlier, Czech artists who depoliticize female art say something about their stance on women's political issues when they choose to separate themselves and their art from the politics of those issues. The politicization is thus not intentional—in fact, it might work in direct opposition to intention—but it reveals beliefs and understandings about political connections, connections to politics, and the politics of connection.

Conclusion

My intention has been to reveal one of the most unique aspects of Czech female art that I have experienced in my interactions with artists, critics, journalists, and theorists in the Czech art scene, which is the tendency of Czech women artists making female art to depoliticize their work. There are many reasons why this art is depoliticized, and I have

described some of them—a communist past, a new transition to capitalism, and cultural attitudes toward sex, gender, and women’s issues. However, because I have claimed that this art is depoliticized does not mean that I believe it to be disengaged. In fact, in many ways I find Czech female art to be *very* aware of itself, especially in the very exceptional way it synthesizes experiences of the personal and the social that artists identify as different from the political.

I have specifically spoken about the difference in words’ meanings that exist between my understanding and that of Czechs, and I believe these differences are highly important in considering my communication with my interviewees and my study of this subject. However, my argument stands that, once these terms are clarified, there is still a basis for asserting that Czech female art is depoliticized, that this depoliticization is influenced by a number of historical, social, and cultural factors, and finally, that depoliticization can actually work to reveal cultural and social relationships to a range of politics.

Research Evaluation

My research changed drastically over the course of the semester, though within the confines of my primary interest, which was contemporary visual art by Czech women. I originally intended to write exclusively about feminism in Czech women’s contemporary art, but I soon realized that feminism had a completely different meaning to Czechs. I decided that if I was going to write specifically about feminism in the context of art, I would need to analyze a significant portion of historical background information pertaining to communism and post-communism that I felt there was not sufficient time for. Nor did I really want to have to devote a lot of my research time to this area, because I wanted to write chiefly about contemporary art.

My second phase in narrowing down my topic was to write about Czech women artists’ engagement with themes of sex and sexuality, sexual identity, erotica, and female

identity in these contexts. I soon realized that while my interviews were informative, I didn't have a very concrete thesis or direction for all the information, and I found my topic to be extremely vague.

Eventually, in analyzing several interview transcriptions, I discovered one of the most prominent patterns to be a discussion of how Czech artists resist politicizing their art. I was able to notice and further investigate how this "depoliticization," as I came to call it, worked specifically within the framework of "female art," or art made by women that dealt both with my original topics (sex, sexuality, sexual identity) but also female identity, gender theory, the body, and female image as it has been constructed and affected by the transition to capitalism.

I was able to draw plenty of connections with this new theme and thesis, finding several dialogues at work between critics, theorists, curators, and artists that explicitly illustrated the complexity of these issues. Major questions emerged, some more concerned with female art specifically, others pertaining to the tendency of female art to be depoliticized: Why were artists depoliticizing this kind of art? What effects had communism and post-communism had on the art world, attitudes toward social movements like women's rights, feminism, and homosexual rights, and this current depoliticization? How did artists tend to identify with their work? What were major subject matters and areas of content obvious in Czech female art? What mediums were being used, and why? How were artists examining personal versus social or public identity, and how was this working in contrast to an open aversion to political identity?

Thus, I have to say that it was only *after* several interviews that the topic of depoliticization became an actual topic in my question sets, but these early interviews are what revealed the topic to me—obviously, the issue was being discussed throughout my research process, it simply took me time to synthesize my information and for the specifics of what became my actual thesis to reveal themselves to me.

I think I can attribute my improved findings to my good research practice that definitely improved with time. Also, I found that this topic was much more conducive to the stipulation that the ISP be a project that cannot be conducted outside the Czech Republic. I definitely would not have been able to do secondary source research to conclude that Czech female art is depoliticized, and the intricate historical and cultural details that go into shaping this argument are not printed anywhere—I needed to speak with the artists and knowledgeable art critics and theorists themselves, people exemplary of my argument, or who could speak of it with very informed and experienced thoughts.

Thus, my research methodology—heavily interview-based, with secondary source research limited to contemporary Czech arts publications, articles, and exhibition materials—proved successful. Initially, I had been looking for too much information in gender politics and associated theory, and I realized that most of that material covered economic conditions during Communism and post-Communism and the effects on women, or it spoke in broad socio-economic terms about feminism, but it quickly became obvious that the information was really not relevant to my project, in the sense that I would have to expand my research to include huge discussions of feminism and economy.

One major change to my project that came late in the process was the removal of what was going to be the last section of my paper—“public reception.” I realized that not only did the first parts of my paper need all the time and space to which I was limited, but I also didn’t have a well-rounded pool of sources for this section. This part would have been heavily biased, because it would have claimed that audiences influence politicization or depoliticization, but I only had art critics’ and artists’ opinions of how this plays out and not the actual “public.” In addition, I was getting the weakest responses from interviewees on this subject. I wasn’t really able to connect my data into a coherent analysis of this topic, partly because I had so many differing opinions on it; thus, this section was cut out, for the better.

Aside from weak data on public perception, the rest of my data was strong. As I mentioned previously, a lot of interviews seemed to speak to each other, issues were revealed through the agreement or argument of various interviews.

Problems with data came from a few sources. The language barrier was most significant. While most of the subjects I interviewed spoke from good to excellent English, I was prevented from interviewing many of the people with whom I was interested in speaking because I found out they spoke no English whatsoever.

In transcribing interviews, sometimes I didn't understand what the person meant, and I hadn't caught this misunderstanding during the interview; often, this was a language issue. I avoided quoting sources if I was unsure of what they meant by their statements. Once or twice my tape recorder didn't pick up sound well, and I often was forced to leave out some piece or relevant information because the recording wasn't audible, in contrast to an actual communicative misunderstanding.

Language and culture obviously affected terminology as well, but this actually became a part of my final discussion. The connotations of the words "feminism" and "political" for Czechs is entirely different from my own, and I had to become sensitive to this while probing these topics, finding out what shape their understanding of these words really takes, and the reasons for that shaping.

The other major problem with my data comes from an imbalance of gender in my sources. Obviously, most of the artists I interviewed were women because of the subject of the paper, and I wanted to speak with the people who created the art and on whom I was making claims, but I think I would have come away with slightly more well-rounded research if I had been able to speak with a few more men in the critical and artistic side of things. I spoke with one male art critic and one male artist, and this was the extent of my male sources.

There were several failed attempts at contacting others. This issue of gender balance is the most significant source of bias, other than the language barrier, that affected my data.

On a final note, the Czech art scene is very small, and this made it easy to contact people, but also influenced bias as everyone knew each other, and I think a lot of my sources didn't want to be critical of the work of those with whom they had connections.

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