

We Want the Whole Life. Feminisms in Polish Art

The art presented at the exhibition is a proof of intergenerational feminist solidarity. The title of the exhibition refers to the famous “whole life” postulate demanded by Zofia Nałkowska in her speech “Notes on ethical tasks of the women’s movement” (“Uwagi o etycznych zadaniach ruchu kobiecego”) delivered at the 1st Women Congress in Warsaw in 1907. By making reference to contemporary emancipatory artistic practices, the exhibition sees the whole life as coexistence, exchange and interdependence. Thus, the whole life means a turn towards the ethics of care and new a community based on the principles of mutuality. It also goes beyond the patriarchal cult of progress and subordination of all forms of life and knowledge to the logic of the market. The contemporary feminist art that imagines sustainable futures, fights for reproductive rights and celebrates affective work, offers a perspective to organise our view of visual culture of past decades.

We Want the Whole Life. Feminisms in Polish Art aims at introducing the viewers to the contemporary and historic art engaged in emancipatory activism and based on women’s social political and professional experiences. The exhibition documents development of that engagement in post-war Poland, during the political and economic transformation, and today. On the one hand, it may be viewed as an experiment in building intergenerational feminist alliances; on the other hand, it looks at the feminist art in Poland as a community of ideas, aspirations and practices. In this way, the exhibition refers to the concept of history as a polyphonic narrative, always constructed from the perspective of today’s struggles, questions, problems and latest events.

As the past political and social themes are revived or culminate in the feminist art of today, the works presented during this exhibition have been arranged around themes explored by subsequent generations of artists. These include sexuality, reproductive rights, work, and being an artist, shown from a perspective of changes in women’s empowerment and cultural transformations.

It is worth noting that *We Want the Whole Life* shuns heroics, hierarchisation and chronology. Moreover, it does not attempt at creating a new canon of feminist art, nor does it revise the existing canon. Rather, it aims at retracing, in an open manner, a genealogy of feminist art by engaging in intergenerational dialogues on important topics from the perspective of women’s emancipation and the struggle for an equal society. By juxtaposing the canonical works with

those less recognisable, or the historical works with the contemporary ones, the exhibition reveals possibilities for discovering complex relations between feminisms and art, as well as rewriting the history of art. Art history has traditionally been based on Western-centred chronologies, linear narratives and hierarchical concepts. Feminist art history, on the other hand, has made effort to develop other tools for a deeper and more complex understanding of culture by offering to replace the existing narrative with intertwined histories and herstories. Thinking of the diversity of strategies and the agency of people involved in creating art goes hand in hand with thinking about many possible effects of artistic work, both intended and unintended. This open approach is in line with the main idea behind the exhibition, which also looks at the ways in which works created under different political regimes can complement one another.

The feminist art history developed after 1989 established new canons and narratives, inscribing the names of many female artists into the male-centric history of Polish art. Contemporary artists often take inspiration from the neo-avant-garde women artists, creating their own genealogies. In this way, the juxtaposition of works from different political eras at a single exhibition is much more than an arbitrary gesture of a contemporary art curator.

What needs to be stressed is that despite exploring social and gender-specific aspects of art and life in their artistic activities, Polish women artists rarely identified with the “feminist art” label. This was mainly due to the fact that in socialist Europe of the late 1960s and the 1970s, feminist art meant art created in the Western world in the context of the women’s liberation movement. Yet their art was and has often been interpreted as feminist. *We Want the Whole Life* uses a similar technique, as it takes the works of artists who in their artistic practices expand the space of freedom, propose the systems of values other than patriarchal, or rebel against the norms of visibility and normative value systems, and then inscribes them into the story of feminisms and art in Poland.

The exhibition builds an open archive of artistic emancipation and tells a story of feminist art in Poland in three chapters reflecting the structure of the venue. The chapter *She Herself* includes works that explore the issue of female subject in art: the identity of a woman artist, her situation in the patriarchal system of art, and the visual representations of women. By intercepting and transgressing the existing narratives on the female subject, they touch upon issues such as embodiment, sexuality or spirituality. The presented works document the search for an individual language to describe women’s being-in-world without being subjected to the male gaze. Going beyond visual clichés and stereotypes of femininity, they tell about diverse areas and possibilities of experiencing and feeling. At the same time, the works demonstrate the capability of art’s visual

language to express experiences of people identifying as women – their sexual, political and social desires and fulfilments.

The chapter *Systems of PoWEr* shows the entanglement in the systems of power and authority such as the state, family or religion, and the restrictions imposed on women and minorities in the public sphere, both in the post-war socialism and today's capitalism. This chapter of the exhibition presents feminist art through activist and interventionist practices focused on making a change. These include practices of democratising the society and opposing inequalities. The works explore such topics as social and political constraints linked to gender stereotypes, or the essentialisation of femininity and masculinity as binary social norms, including through restriction of women's reproductive rights, economic violence, objectification of the body and consumerism.

Communities focuses on potential futures: the practising and designing of communities that can offer alternatives to neo-liberal capitalism. The artistic projects presented in this chapter recognise the value of collective actions and the so-called invisible work, crucial for maintaining social cohesion and traditionally performed by women: the work of caring, reproduction and affect. This part of the exhibition shows practices of support and respect for all forms of life; however, rather than creating visions of post-species utopias, it highlights scenarios for better futures. This is a political practice that must be inevitably accompanied by strategies of resistance. The latter are documented by *The Rostrum*, which shows materials from protests for reproductive rights, as well as women's protests for economic issues.

The exhibition shows feminist art as a tool for practising radical imagination and expanding emancipation, as well as a platform for expressing social resistance. Hence, it becomes a place where multiple voices and generations can meet to manifest the idea of the "whole life".

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