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An Attempt of Feminist Art Historiography: Woman as an Artist in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and modern Russia

In 1971 the famous American art historian Linda Nochlin wrote the seminal article *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* In this article, she talks about the mechanism of social exclusion applied to the art field and the particular role that gender plays in this exclusion. With this article, she started a series of scholarships and publications that were focused on women in art history. Meanwhile in the Soviet Union in 1971, the official rhetoric was claiming the victory of gender equality and the idea of a "Great Artist" (commercially successful) was not on the table. In the Soviet Union, it was important to be a "People's Artist" not a "Great Artist," and among the Soviet artists there were several visible female names; for example, Vera Mukhina, Varvara Stepanova, Natalia Jablonskaya, Natalia Goncharova, and Zinaida Serebriakova. Notably, one of the two major art academies in Saint Petersburg had a woman's name. *The School of Arts named after Vera Mukhina* was renamed back to the *Stieglitz School* when a new gender and political order was established in the 1990s. When in Western Europe and in the United States discussions about women in art were becoming increasingly common, in the Soviet Union art was split into official and unofficial art and gender was therefore not that important. It was no wonder then that there were almost no scholarships focused on this topic. The situation started to evolve in the 1990s with the renewed exchange between Russia and Europe and the United States. In the present time, there are regularly women-only exhibitions and the gender dimension in art has become ever more vivid. But if you want to learn about women's art history, you will only be able to find Western ontologies and some books that cover several periods of Russian Art History, like avant-garde and the 1990s and rare samples of Russian scholarship, that are as well segmented.

The exclusion of Russian (Soviet, Eastern European) women artists is stronger than that of Western women artists because Russian artists of all genders experience exclusion in the global context. After all, they were isolated from the dominant Western culture and are still having difficulties in their attempts to change the situation in a country that very rarely stands at the artistic forefront. In fact, Russian women can barely call themselves artists because they are always pushed out off the field, even on the semantic level.¹ The artistic

¹ The word "artist" itself in Russian has a gender, which is of course masculine. This distinction is similar to the distinction in English between "actor" and "actress". To the present day, at lectures

and curatorial work that is conducted by women in Russia is often rendered as an additional service for the important (and mostly male-dominated) systems and institutions.² Existing awards and schools in the field of contemporary art in Russia always refer to the male gender of the artist: Kandinsky's Prize, Kurekhin's Prize, and Rodchenko Art School. Even if they are received by a female artist, the awards bear the masculine gender, for example, Man-Artist of the Year or Young Man-Artist.³ Women's contributions to art are largely ignored in modern Russia, and most of the names in the newly formed pantheon of "great artists" are men, while women are disdainfully excluded.⁴

Methodological approach I use in my work is: visual analysis of images (through the psychoanalytical and power structures perspectives), contextual analysis of art pieces made by women in different time, and feminist art theory. In order to establish alternative narrative I am writing the story of Russian art only using women artists and connecting them to the women who are working right now. My focus focus on specific aspects of the work of Russian and Soviet female artists, such as self-representation (self-portraits), work with nude females, the choices of techniques and mediums, (re)presentations of motherhood in the works and its place in the real life of artists, corporality, the theme of violence, as well as other gender-sensitive elements of the visual. In my analysis of the works of art, I rely on feminist critique of art by scholars such as Griselda Pollock, Simone de Beauvoir, Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, Nancy Chodorow, Laura Malvey, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Martina Pachmanova, Alla Mitrofanova, Olesia Turkina, Mila Bredikhina, Maria Godovannaya, and many others.

in art academies and in professional publications, rarely the word "artist" is never given a feminine ending. If a woman has made a contribution to art and takes herself seriously, then (in the opinion of the Russian majority) she should call herself an artist and in no way an "artistess". For more, see "Sushchesvuet li zhenskoe iskusstvo?" <http://w-o-s.ru/article/2042>

² Abramova, Evgenia "A manager vs. a girl", 2013, <http://archives.colta.ru/docs/21801>

³ For instance see: Kandinsky-Prize <http://www.kandinsky-prize.ru/dlya-uchastnikov/>, Innovation-Art-Prize <http://artinnovation.ru/nominations/nominations-2018/>, Rodtchenko school <http://www.mdfschooll.ru/events/>

⁴ For example: Astakhov, Andrey "100 Great Russian Artists", Belyi Gorod 2008.