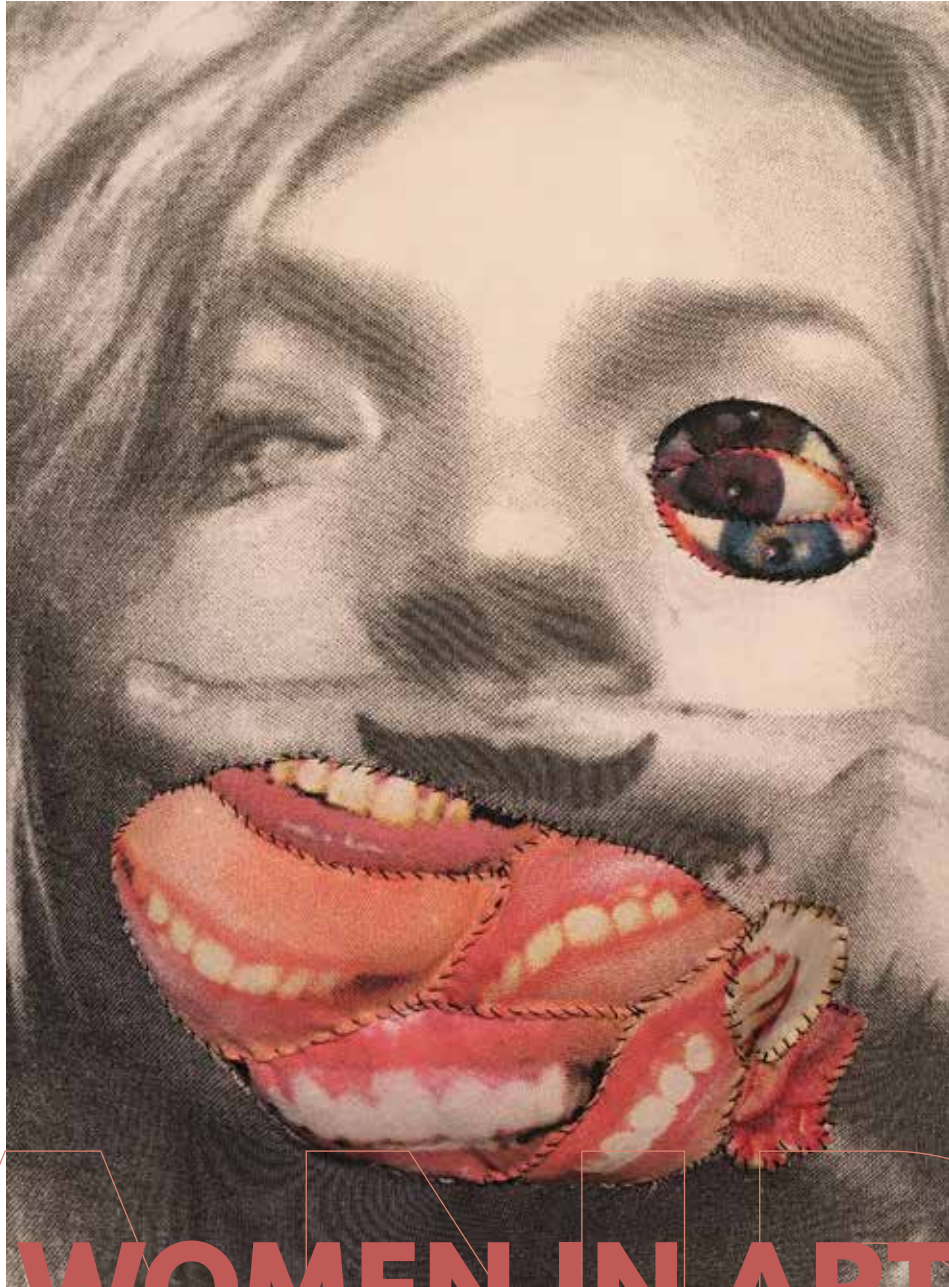


A piece from the *Matronki (2)* series



**WOMEN IN ART
YESTERDAY
WOMEN'S ART
TODAY**

Art used to be a tool to flaunt power, an ornament in the hands of wealthy elites, a synonym for luxury, and a show of social status. When you entered a museum, a church, a palace, or a house and looked at the artworks on display, you knew immediately who you were dealing with. Similarly, women in old art had a clearly defined role – they were a motif, an iconographic reference to the idea of beauty or function (a mother, a saint, or a lover).

In earlier eras, only male members of society were allowed to engage in education and creative endeavours. Women were not allowed to study at the academies of fine arts in Poland nearly until the end of World War I, as their ability to take on the great tasks of high art was questioned. Women could only study at drawing and painting schools specifically intended for the representatives of their gender. At the beginning of the 20th century, crafts and drawing teachers were among the very few socially accepted professions for women.

SHE'S NOT A WOMAN, SHE'S A HUMAN BEING!

A hundred years ago, when the classmates of Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska, the first female student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, wanted to compliment her, they would say: 'Baltarowicz is not a woman! Baltarowicz is a human being'. Through her belief in the power of women and the tremendous amount of work and dedication, Iwona Demko, PhD, DLitt, artist and researcher at the Academy, recovers these and other interesting stories. That is why this short piece on women in art does not take into account cheap sensationalism about how those unyielding women disguised themselves as men or assumed pseudonyms in order to pursue an education or practise their learned professions.

'It is better to mention the attitude of herstorical empathy, of which the aforementioned Demko is a prime example. When a few years ago I invited her to the Institute of Fine Arts of the University of Silesia to present to my students some of the different practices of artistic creation, rumours started to circulate that I had invited a 'demon' (from her surname), a feminist, dressed all in pink, on top of that', recalls Paulina Poczęta, PhD, DLitt, Associate Professor.

A MODEL OF THE OBEDIENT AND PATIENT WOMAN

Due to the difficult access to education in fine arts and the stereotypical division into feminine and masculine roles, it was craftsmanship, with all its different techniques and designs typical of a given region, that became a strong field among women. Differences in socialisation had a significant impact on the settlement of women in private spaces and men in public spaces. The Marian devotion, particularly strong in Poland, shaped the model of an obedient, patient, modest, and quiet woman. On the other hand, the idea of the Polish mother as the protector of the domestic hearth stifled the creative imperative of women, such that only those exceptionally strong became artists, because they had to be strong – especially to choose a space considered foreign to themselves, contrary to the existing social model of a woman, the good wife and mother.

IN THE SHADOW OF THEIR ARTIST HUSBANDS

The lack of the same benefits in terms of access to knowledge and vocational opportunities diminished the creative potential of women. It took a great deal of determination and a little bit of goodwill, even on the part of their fathers, for this state of affairs to start changing. Thanks to the workshops and studios owned by their fathers, women were sometimes allowed to become artists; some of them also had the opportunity to do so alongside their (good-hearted) husbands who were well-known artists. In many cases, although the women were as talented as their husbands, and often even surpassed them, they would not develop their full artistic potential and aspirations. This was because it was customary for them to take care of the practical side of their spouse's artistic life. Moreover, they went down in history mainly as the wives of famous artists (e.g. Władysław Strzemiński and his wife Katarzyna Kobro burning her sculptures in the oven during particularly cold winters). After all, being an artist is not compatible with the mundane. The quiet co-creator of her artist husband's success will often stay invisible. The female artists who made a name for themselves in the art world are those who had consciously given up having a family, including the most famous, like Anna Bilińska and Olga Boznańska.

REVOLUTION IN THE PHILHARMONIC

Restoring knowledge about notable and overlooked female artists is an arduous and still ongoing process. What would help promote and increase the visibility of women's work today? More gender quotas in oversight bodies or those selecting a range of works for art reviews and thematic exhibitions in secret modes. This perhaps seems controversial, as there will certainly be those who believe that the gender of the artist should not be a criterion in selecting artistic works and that the selection should only be made on the basis of their quality. But if it really did not matter, then perhaps the New York Philharmonic would still have only male members. Turnover in orchestras is low, the ensemble line-up of about a hundred musicians is rather static, and the people involved often work until they retire. It is rare for a musician to be fired from such a job. For most of the 20th century, there were no women in the New York Philharmonic, until suddenly something happened that

caused the percentage of women in the orchestra to spike from 0% to 10% in a single decade. The reason for the change was the introduction of blind auditions in the 1980s, following a lawsuit. In such an audition, the performer is behind a screen and therefore not visible to the recruiters. Thanks to this revolution, already in the 1980s women accounted for almost half of the new recruits (Caroline Criado Perez brought up this interesting example in her book *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Abrams Press, New York, 2019).

THE CATEGORY OF GENDER STILL EVOKES MIXED FEELINGS

In 2012, the Silesian Museum in Katowice hosted the exhibition 'Art of Women – Women in Art. Silesian Female Artists 1880–2000'. Paulina Poczęta, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof. was invited to participate in it. 'I accepted the invitation, as I had no objection to being called a female art-

ist living, working, or coming from Silesia. However, the list of participating female artists did not include a sculptor from my alma mater, whom I hold in high regard. She argued that something either is or isn't art, so there is no point in dividing it into art made by women and art made by men. I get it, after all, because we are all entitled to our own, distinct opinion on one subject or another'. Although categorising the choice of artists by nationality or the regularity of their work is not controversial, the category of gender still evokes mixed feelings. The presence of men in all decision-making sectors of social and scientific life and, unfortunately, the still thriving misogyny within the artistic community itself, make it difficult for women to break through in the arts even today. Meanwhile, they make up the majority of students at art academies, but not a majority of staff in these institutions.

Biogram by Paulina Poczęta





Sweetdelights (8) by Paulina Poczęta

THE MILK OF DREAMS

The supposedly feminine traits of resilience and patience seem to be slowly losing their appeal, which is why the art community waited with bated breath for the one-year-delayed 59th Venice Art Biennale, curated by Cecilia Alemani. A lot has happened since 2019, from the pandemic to climate and refugee crises – to the war in Europe. In view of these cataclysms, the slogan of the previous 58th edition resounded like an ominous prophecy: ‘May you live in interesting times’.

‘Cecilia Alemani’s curatorial proposal is a dream come true, in which female artists are given a voice because unlike in all previous biennales, this time they are the overwhelming majority of the authors whose works are presented. She has thus reversed the long-standing proportions. Yes, men are also present, but they are in a clear minority, which is a true rarity as far as the history of art is concerned’, says the artist from the University of Silesia.

This year, the event’s theme is ‘The Milk of Dreams’, taken from the title of a novel by Leonora Carrington, a forgotten (unlike her partner Max Ernst) surrealist, artist, emigrant, and scandalist. Her biography becomes a certain key to understanding selected pieces of art made by women, non-binary, or transgender people in opposition to the phallogocentric system of conventional art representation in gallery circulation. The works presented at the 59th Biennale cease to seduce and flatter male audiences, and the increased visibility of art created by women illustrates the liberation of every subject entangled in one way or another in the previously leading, only legitimate ideological and identity models. The oneiric works presented during the biennale are full of ethnic diversity, evoking a desire for a reality that does not require a rigid uniformity of identity, which is often a form of repression and constraint.




Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska in her studio in Lviv
Photo: public domain




Maria Niedzielska School of Fine Arts for Women
in Kraków | Photo: public domain

TRANSFORMED INTO ART

In an interview, the artist Louise Bourgeois, who is particularly highly regarded by Prof. Poczęta, once said the words that often give her some needed reassurance: ‘There are things in this world that I can’t cope with, and I am fortunate that I can sublimate what is beyond me in the form of art. I’m very grateful to be able to do that’.

 Adam Bała

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