A Summary of Feminist Art in Russia

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Feminist art in Russia has its own particular features. Before addressing some specifics of the Russianart scene a few general remarks are warranted. To begin, what is the distinction between “art made by women” and “feminist art,” and what is the answer to the question “What kind of art is feminist?”

All women artists’ work can be studied from a feminist point of view; nevertheless, “art made by women” is treated, in the works of some researchers, as a conceptpossessing a categorical meaning[[1]](#endnote-1) bound to its own understanding of feminist theory.

In Russia in 2010 the large-scale project “ŽEN D’ART. Gender art in the post-Soviet space, 1989-2009” (Moscow Museum of Modern Art, curators Natalya Kamenetskaya and Oksana Sarkisyan) showcased a twenty-year-old experiment in Russian “gender art” as understood by the project’s creators. The curators’ plans also included the creation of a “museum of women’s art.” Both “feminist art” and “gender art” pertained to the concept of “art made by women.” It was noted that although many female artists who were also participants in this exhibit did not position themselves as feminists, nonetheless, together they made up a particular phenomenon in the art world.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Feminist art (like art by female artists in general) does not consist of a single style or orientation; here, rather, one can talk about art of a certain socio-cultural or societal movement. However, in the Russian context, it is more accurate to talk about a number of styles and individual manners, and by doing so, the goal is to identify a change in the status quo in art (in art, so too as in society). The exact change that happens follows from feminist depictions of the world and the feminist system of values. Practical experience shows that even if an artist has inadequate knowledge of feminist theory, nevertheless, a person who calls him- or herself a feminist (or his or her work feminist) possesses certain ideas and convictions with regard to feminism and his/her/their work conveys precisely those ideas.

There is no precise definition of “feminist art,” just as there is no single feminism (there are feminisms). Nonetheless, it is possible to name some general characteristics of this phenomenon.

Above all, feminist art presupposes a combination of aesthetics and social activism.[[3]](#endnote-3) It is balanced between immersion in the “women’s world” and activism, it adapts essential forms in art and invents its own [forms], and ithelps to realize the changes that are occurring in society— for example, changing gender standards and roles. Unlike other types of art, feminist art proposes to bring attention to the default, everyday practices of power and obediencedissolved inpeople’s communication.

Feminist strategies in art are strategies based ondecisions that are often not connected with the tasks of art. This is a uniting feature of all feminist works: they all have goals. These goals can be diverse, from the task of drawing attention to the problems of parents who have small children and live in a city/region of specific demographics, to a change in an art trend in an artistic community.

Russian art-feminism loudly announced itself amidst the wave of the 2011-2013 protest movement. From one side, this looks like the activist art of Pussy Riot; from the other, it looks like that of the “Feminist Pencil” exhibit (curators Nadya Plungyan and Victoria Lomasko) and those media waves and discussionsthat have accompanied this phenomenon.[[4]](#endnote-4) Between these are various feminist art practices, which are often connected with the Russian Left movement.[[5]](#endnote-5) Pussy Riot’s actions were confrontational and directed against the entwinement of the state and the Orthodox Church. “Feminist Pencil” included an educational program that distinguished itself by a clear institutional critique: by the creation of its own precedent and by public performances based on the theme of curators in the media space.

Other initiatives have chosen a purely pedagogical direction. It arose naturally. The importance of initiatives for the education of feminism and its popularization is obvious. At the present time (article written in October-November 2015), there are no systems of study of feminist art. At the end of summer 2013, at the base of the “Muzeon” park, an educational platform called the “Moscow Experimental School in Gender Research” (curators Maria Dudko, Ilya Yakovenko and Pavel Ovchinnikov) was created. In October-December 2014 in Moscow the women’s artistic workshops “Kitchen” (project of Marina Vinnik and Mikaela)[[6]](#endnote-6), and at the beginning of 2015 in St. Petersburg the Lucy Lippard Feminist Workshops (organized by Anna Tereshkinaya, Anastasia Veprevaya and Polina Zaslavaskaya), were held. Since 2015, the reading group “Feminism and Modern Art”has been taking place in the library of the contemporary art museum “Garage.” Within the framework of this project, participants read texts by Rita Felski, Susanna Lacy, and Andrea Liss, amongst others.

It is already possible to speak about some of the concrete results of these initiatives: “Kitchen” released a catalogue of professional work by its participants, and the Lucy Lippard Workshops held the exhibit “What is Love?” However, it would be desirable to draw attention to the common fieldthat arose as a result of these initiatives’ activities. Gradually, different publications have begun to publish articles on themes connected to feminism more often, and art schools are bringing at least one lecture on feminist art into their syllabi. More and more young artists have begun to turn to strategies that are identified as feminist, but wherein they do not necessarily intend actionist or activist activity.

Activist initiatives, in their turn, have placed emphasis on the openness of different expressions, proceduralities, and horizontal relationships. In 2015, “Fem-Club,” an open discussion blog “for female and male feminists,” was started. The initiators of the project also created the International Festival of Activist Art “MediaBeat.” The project’s founders see its task as the uncovering of urgent feminist questions in society. The program was developed by an open horizontal moderators’group that feminists from different cities can join. Members of “Fem-Club,” and also of the movement Left-Fem and other initiatives at the 2015 Festival of Feminist Initiatives FEM FRONTIER in Nizhny Novgorod, organized an extensive educational/entertainment program: discussions, seminars, workshops, clinics, film screenings, and presentations about exhibits and performance art that had taken place in the recent past in various Russian and Belarusian cities.

Activist feminism (in its various forms; it consists of actions, body art, agitation, etc.) is valuable in that it gives quick results. Namely, it gives top priority to feminist questions often ignored in dominant cultural discourse. In contrast, educational initiatives that concentrate on art and its relations with feminism often work in long terms to develop cultural strategies. One can consider the project “Feminist Pencil” an example of an event that placed emphasis on the development of an alternative in art: one of its intentions was precisely to make and demonstrate a different art not oriented towards the trends of the art community. The workshops(“Kitchen” and the Lucy Lippard Workshops) concentrated on feminist education. To an extent, they encouraged the professional growth of their members and gave them support and opportunities for self-organization without demanding purely activist work from them or assuming enforcedregular participation or readiness for self-sacrifice. Here the opportunity appeared for artists to show and discuss their art in a situation that took into accounttheir right to speak their minds on themes important to them. For some members of such workshops, this was possibly akin to art therapy; however, they could also receive theoretical knowledge, see the artistic process from the inside and, in their turn, become enlightened with the problem that is of interest to those who consider themselves professionals.[[7]](#endnote-7)  
 One can assume that the given — educational — strategy will develop further as a result of conservative processes in society, but it meets a number of obstacles in its path.

There is no organized feminist movement in Russian art, although one could certainly grow out of the “Feminist Pencil” project. There are, at the present moment, neither alternative spaces nor journals exclusively for female artists (this is partially compensated for by Internet-journals, magazines, and other forms). Presently, it is also impossible to say that there are associations of female artists in Russia that appoint, as their main purpose, the defense and promotion of their art.

Thus, in answer to the question “What art is feminist?” – any statement by a woman can be interpreted as feminist if it is placed in a corresponding context. There are difficulties when we speak about painting and other traditional mediums. But the fact that in the exhibit “A is for Art, F is for Feminism” a fair amount of attention was devoted to women speaks to the fact that for artists, it is important to also conceptualize traditions through a feminist lens.

While art-feminism has a limited influence on the artistic process, it without doubt enriches contemporary Russian art with new imagery and topical themes. In addition, it is worth noting the influence of feminist culture (subculture?) on art, which is expressed in the borrowing (or the recovery) of specific visual forms such as zines, networked publics, comics, handmade posters, banners, and leaflets.

About the dictionary

The idea of an exhibit-dictionary arose specifically because of the diversity of interpretations and positions in feminist art, the ambiguity of its assessments and the sense of the uncertainty of the future.

One serious problem in the contemporary art community and its relationship with feminism is the alienation of the languages used by artists, critics, curators and viewers. Questions arise about the boundaries of the usage of feminist ideas, of terms from gender theory and of stereotypes when discussing different exhibits touching on feminist problems.[[8]](#endnote-8) The situation is aggravated by negative everyday attitudes toward the ontology of feminism and by male artists’ and curators’ insufficient awareness of feminist strategies.

Discussions about feminism, which in Russia are presently conducted mainly on social media and only occasionally offline, give evidence about the desire (moreover, not just that of professionals) to outline the range of those phenomena that, regardless of the diversity of their interpretations, would permit us to more substantively and productively talk about the tendencies occurring at conjoining points of artistic and feminist viewpoints.

The project has a principally experimental character. First, the exhibit includes an examination ofwell-known ideas that demand reflection in a changing cultural context, as well as a reassessment through a feminist lens of stereotypes, codes of conduct and everyday practices important to the participants. Secondly, a few words and ideas have come to light that, in practice, are not part of a canon, though they are actively used. Thirdly, in the exhibit, diverse feminist strategies were presented, ranging from activist to conceptual-critical. Fourth of all, the dictionary is not academic: it presents a cross-section of opinions and approaches. When possible, authorial interpretations were preserved so that spectators could form a complete impression. In this way, the goal of the exhibit-dictionary project was to carry out a sociocultural study and also to offer the spectator a presentation of recentfeminist art.

In spring 2015, an open call was issued, to which artists from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Novorossiysk, Komarovo, Samara, Togliatti, Alma-Ata, Bishkek, Kiev, Odessa, Chișinău, Minsk, and London responded. In all, slightly under 150 applications were received (some artists submitted several applications at once). Chances are that because the project to a large degree was presented as a research and educational initiative, female artists of the older generation and a few artists who were occupied with their own feminist initiatives and personal projects did not respond to the open call (in both cases there are exceptions). It is possible to distinguish two basic groups who sent in applications: artists and activists who, judging by their age and background, could be considered a new generation of creatorsworking with feminist subjects.

The working group responsible for the development of the exhibit (and this is besides the author of this article andthe artists Marina Vinnik and Mikaela, who acted as organizers) focused not only on the visual aspect, but also on the contents of the dictionary articles— in the choice of terms and their explanations. It was important that the participants consciouslymanifest the feminist content of their works. There was one participant who, after realizing how important the feminist component wasin this exhibit, withdrew her participation.

The fulllexisof the dictionary is given at the end of this article. If one were to labelthe general groups of themes covered in the exhibit, they would be:

* gender stereotypes;
* binaries (male/female);
* the exclusion of women;
* motherhood;
* self-awareness;
* bodily identity;
* the media;
* power and resistance;
* emotional, physical, and reproductive violence;
* self-realization;
* woman and feminism in cultural narratives;
* the status of the woman artist, both within and outside of the art world.

While working on this project, we encountered a number of problems of a theoretical nature, as well as problems relating to the very practice of formulating a concrete understanding of feminism. Above all, this was often due to the weak theoretical reflexivity of the ideas of feminist theory and insufficient experience working with feminist themes, as a result of which the concepts in some articles required additional editorial work. The absence of sufficient translations in Russian of basic articles about feminist theory, institutions in which one can receive a more appropriate systematic education, and resources on the topic leadsto the fact that artists sometimes do not have a sufficient verbal or visual vocabulary with which to express the values important to them as feminists. In connection with this problem, the dictionary project can function precisely as one of the platforms where the conditions needed for the production of this language are present. Participation in such a project assumes the recognition that artistic activity, amongst other things, can function as the expression of ourselves as members of some sort of group, society, or community, or the expression of oneself on behalf of those who cannot express and assert themselves.

The recording and documentation of feminist art will help to allow greater involvement of different women in artistic processes. This, we hope, will create new opportunities for both female and male artists of different social groups (in particular, of marginalized ones).

While it is oriented toward academic publications, the dictionary-catalogue by no means pretends to be academic. Rather, it presents material for further morphological or descriptive analysis. Published texts can appear to readers in one case as fully finished articles, in the other as drafts of future articles. The dictionary does not provide a conceptual/logical unity belonging to some singular school of thought, research group, or specific author. Any aesthetic and research-related bias would be in conflict with the essence of the conceived project.

As any dictionary, this catalogue has parameters. Dictionary articles dedicated to the creative work of specific authors and collectives remained beyond the scope of this project. Aside from this, it was not possible to include in the catalogue all the applications we received in answer to the open call (work of that nature demands greater human and financial resources).

The catalogue, which follows from the exhibit, is dedicated to the clarification of feminist ideas, which should not discourage art historians and critics. Philological priority is to a large extent accounted for by the goals of research, indicated below, and the “literary-centricity” of many of the artistic projects presented at the exhibit.

Thus, the planned dictionary-catalogue, as follows from everything said above, is aimed at accomplishing the following tasks:

* To outline the interdisciplinary range of ideas (gender-theoretical, art-historical, sociological, culturological, etc.) necessary for understanding the functioning of feminist strategies in Russian art and activist practice;
* To present interpretations of these ideas, provided by the project’s participants;
* To clarify the cultural-historical context of the function of feminist strategies in art (the educational program of the exhibit and the articles by participants in this program are especially dedicated to this);
* To actualize the theoretical reflection of the sociological, art-historical, and art communities, which are interested in the clarification of the aesthetic and socio-cultural essence of contemporary Russian feminism.

Who is the potential viewer of our exhibit and reader of our dictionary-catalogue? Feminist projects are oriented above all toward the viewer as an independent subject. The exhibit and the catalogue were conceived as forms oriented not only toward specialists and the organizers of the contemporary artistic process, but also toward any viewers desiring to sort out for themselves the phenomenon of feminism in art.

We thank all the artists for supporting the idea of the creation of the dictionary-catalogue and responding to the call to take part in it. We sincerely hope that the presented materials will interest other researchers and artists in continuing work in this direction.

About the exhibit

Any exhibit of feminist art brings up the question: is an art object feminist because the artist who created it says that it is? So-called feminist criteria have not yet been worked out, and can hardly be worked out as a sort of official canon. Each of the works presented at the exhibit will be considered in this part of the article in the context of feminist strategies; however, this does not preclude other interpretations.

A certain section of the exhibit consisted of works directed against power as such, power that spills out into everyday practices and permeates society and all of its norms.

“Staircase,” a performance by Yana Smetanina (Moscow) presented at the exhibit as a video documentary, suggests the perception of the ascent of the stairs as a metaphor and the man standing in the woman’s way and pushing her off the staircase as a representation of a rough, inhuman power, intervening from above, impossible to resist. The unambiguity expressed by the participants’ costumes, as well as the musical accompaniment and the black-and-white film, all contribute to the aesthetic of silent film, of the characters’ certain puppet-like quality. The performance aspires to portray a core existential truth of women’s lives: the impossibility of breaking through a certain threshold established by those in power(here some ideas such as the “glass ceiling” and the “social elevator” enter), though, at the same time, a cliché is displayed, one often applied to women: the representation of female manliness. The representation is unproblematizing, portraying suffering andnot calling into question this cliché, but evokingempathy and a feeling of solidarity.

A different image but similar message is broadcasted by an artist wishing to call herself Agent Suceava (Odessa). In her video, she appears naked, but with her body hidden under a bulletproof vest, and on her head— a helmet. We see her beating a drum in a nursery with toys. The military equipment speaks to the fact that she is beating a war drum. The next camera shots— views of Stanytsia Luhanskataken from the window of an automobile— immediately show which war the piece is about. The rhythm of the drum quickens, superimposed over images of empty villages. The nursery at some point transforms into an almost completely demolished building, but eventually we return again to the nursery, where the woman in the bullet-proof vest is lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, and then starts to play the electric guitar. This captures the same condition of impotence; however, it is expressed not through suffering, but through a militarized image, albeit while remaining within the same framework of a child’s environment.

Ekaterina Nenasheva and Ksenia Sonnaya demonstrate a different strategy. Theirs is a type of partisaning, when artists represent societal Others. In the case of Ekaterina Nenasheva, the Other is a woman inmate. Over thirty days, the artist wore prison stripes in her everyday life. In the photographs, we see her on the subway, on walks, and in shopping-malls and other urban places (photographs by Viktor Novinkov). The final performance, “Liberation,” is also shown: on Red Square, participants took offNenasheva’s uniformand shaved her hair— a famous moment of ritual that symbolizes a new life. The photo, with the caption “Don’t be afraid” on the back, should have been sent to the prisoners of one of the female labor camps; however, this gesture was not carried out—the labor camp’s administration forbade it. Therefore, these images, with the same slogan, were addressed to spectators of the exhibit. They not only draw attention to the problem of former female prisoners readjusting to freedom, but also raise the question of how visible these women generally are in society: according to Nenasheva’s research, only 20% of people polled had heard of this problem before.

The marginalization and vulnerability of another social group— female migrants— are examined in the work of Ksenia Sonnaya (Moscow). Having felt from her own experience what it means to be excluded on a national/religious basis, she created simulations in which she herself performed the role of a female migrant and took performative photographs. In these documents, we see this woman’s alienation and invisibility to others, as well as her attempts at incidental, spontaneous interaction. The artist did not limit herself to just a series of photos, but also crossed over into activist work— she created a newspaper with published data from sociological studies (Sonnaya contacted the sociologists privately) and the recorded speech of migrants themselves. The newspaper was distributed at the opening of the exhibit.

In both works, it is important that the artists who make art about marginalized people do not transform someone else’s real life into entertainment or a metaphor.

Inclusion, solidarity, and concrete steps of mutual assistance could also be observed in the work of Ulyana Bychenkova (Moscow) and Aleksandra Talaver (Moscow). Over a lengthy period, the artists and researchers staged discussions dedicated to the general problem of the gendering of urban spaces, the skill of minimizing risks in an urban environment, strategies for resistance to violence, master classes in female self-defense, master classes in feminist stencil graffiti, the publication of zines, etc. At the exhibit, zines were presented that viewers could take with them in exchange for a donation to the sexual assault survivors’ help center “Sisters” and to the event “Nail Body: Woman as Sexual Subject in a Patriarchal City,” which was dedicated to the discussion of possibilities and secure spaces for the search for sexual pleasure in the metropolis.

In the indicated examples, the artists did not turn to didacticism, choosinginsteadthe technique of documentation and including in their work a compulsory educational moment and the opportunity for viewers to join in their activities (Nenasheva distributed sheets with additional information about how to help imprisoned women; Sonnaya offered printed materials for those interested in the possibility of distributing them later; Bychenikov and Talaver’s zines presented collections of articles, discussions, practical information, and contacts, and also gave viewers the opportunity to support a concrete initiative).

A certain kind of didactics is peculiar to a handful of activist genres (leaflets, posters, etc.). Polina Dobrina (Ekaterinburg)heads several publications about motherhood. In her work, she turns to the genre of poster art in order to draw attention to the themes discussed in the resources and information that she has curated. The main task here is to guarantee societal opinion: to remind viewers, for instance, that it is the mother’s right to choose the place of birth, that it is normal for women’s bodies to change after giving birth, that motherhood is work, etc. Reproductive rights are alsodefended by the Samara-Tolyatti Feminist Group (Elena Dragunova, Anna Skorodumova, Svetlana Chernova, Aleksandr Chindin, and Natalia Chindina), which presented its activist material, as well as objects used in illegal abortions, at the exhibit.

The theme of motherhood is touched upon in one of the collagesby Diana Ukhina (Bishkek), who used as her source copies of linocuts by the artist Lydia Ilina of the Kyrgyz Republic. If Ilina’s woman holds a child in her hands, then Ukhina’s lifts high above her head a book on feminism, gender, and queer sexuality. Instead of calling for peace, the women depicted in Ukhina’s art unite under the sign of the struggle against patriarchy. This is a very direct statement, “poster-y” in the very meaning of the word. This strategy, meant to cultivate awareness, exposes familiar stereotypes. At the same time, it was important to Ukhina to offer a new interpretation of the works of one famous Soviet artist who, in Ukhina’s opinion, was embedded in the logic of the dominant language. Ukhina replaces Ilina’s themes, which seem to her to be no longer relevant, with themes that are important to the younger generation of artists: emancipation, the subjectivity of women, equality, and independence from gender identity.

It is interesting that “mother/motherhood” and words relating to them seemed to be the most popular terms presented in the dictionary: “motherhood” as a social role and a cause for social pressure (Polina Drobina, Samara-Tolyatti Feminist Group), “motherhood” as a duty (Mariana Mangilyova, Moscow), “motherly love” as an important value (video by Ales Kochevnik, Moscow). Even the exhibit’s only piece by a male artist is connected with the artist’s mother (“Mamochka” by Maksim Derevyankin, Moscow). There is also the painted portrait of a smiling elderly woman in a kerchief with a bare, muscular chest (the sex could be male or female) and with a rifle on her back, by Ales Kochevnik. This painting unintentionally refers to the cultural imageof a Soviet woman (“Soviet person”), armed, but above all gender marked only by the kerchief—a sign both of the woman’s age and of her subjugation.

The literary book *The Steaua Roșie/Red Star Factory* by Tatyana Fyodorovna (Kishinev) is based on the memories of the artist’s mother about a textile factory where she worked for over twenty-five years. An important part of the book is its documentation of the experiences of women working in this place in our own time. The comparison shows that for women, labor conditions have changed little since Soviet times. Finally, the photographs of this factory’s products, taken against deserted landscapes, speak to the material expression of women’s work in culture (work as art) and evoke loneliness, invisibility, and emptiness.

The experience of generations of women living in the Soviet era appears to be important in understanding present female roles, including professional roles. Mikaela (Moscow) made on a cutting board a portrait of her grandmother, creating an image of a woman whose creative potential is realized in everyday life and remains unseen.

“Gypsum Tutu,” by Angelina Merenkova (Moscow), seems to be a kind of monument to unrealized potential, and, at the same time, a reminder that self-realization is a difficult journey. Having in mind the life story of the ballerina Olga Spessivtseva, Merenkova makes that which is light (a ballerina’s tutu) too heavy to lift, creating an effective visual representation.

Janna Gladko (Minsk) investigated the situation of women in the Belarusian art world: over the course of a week, she provided driving services to seven successful male artists. All the trips were connected with the artists’ professional affairs: studio work, purchasing materials, work meetings, etc. Dedicating her own working time to the service of others’ professional interests, the artist stood in the place of the marginalized—in this case, the invisible assistants of famous men.In particular, Gladko emphasized that for one reason or another the artists did not have their own cars, or they did not have drivers’ licenses. The assistant here appears as a “grey cardinal:” she is invisible, but she steers, in the literal sense of the word.

A different question— from the audience’s point of view— is raised by Irina Kudrya (Kiev). She presents two videos showing her work as a cleaner. The videos are identical except that under one video is a label reading “Cleaning the Societal Research Center,” and under the other is a typical exhibit label. How does the viewer’s perception of an exhibit of contemporary art change depending on whether he/she knows that what he/she is seeing is an art object, as opposed to a random recording? Is there a difference between an artist who cleans an office and an office cleaner? What changes if the cleaning process is called an artistic process and the cleaner an artist? Who is the artist? Where does art begin and end in the life of an artist? The answers to these questions are left up to the viewers.

Elena Polyshchenko (Novorossiysk) presents a dictionary article about the idea of “women’s art.” Her works feature subtle ironic drawings executed in a literary**-**artistic style using traditional mediums. They raise the question of why the word “women’s” sometimes frightens female artists: “Women’s art is similar to semen or fish eggs. Unrealized potential. Something as yet not developed.” In her article, she emphasizes that the term “women’s” is not so easily filled with content.

Nevertheless, precisely this “women’s art” consciously shows societal constructions of “woman,” female roles and functions and criticism of these roles, as well as criticism of hierarchies in art. The most obvious and recognizable strategy in the last case is the use of techniques of handmade and applied art. Artists borrow methods characteristic of different schools of art, interweave them (at times literally) with handwork, and thereby demonstrate different, female identities. Anna Ivanova (Tashkent) places emphasis on this: “For me, women’s art is the possibility of the most improbable combinations of traditional techniques (drawing, painting) with that which has been pleasantly named ‘applied art’— embroidery, weaving, bead weaving, patchwork, and so on. This opens up a new field for different experiments and gives development to new themes in art.” By way of a starting point for her collages, Ivanova uses decorative national fabrics with recognizable motifs and ornaments.

Olga Osipova (Moscow) ironically plays at once with two ideas— “modernist lattice” and “patchwork quilt in the gallery”— in the piece “Patchwork.” Figurative art is not important to her: she will take something figurative and use it to create something utilitarian. The lattice that she made from figurative art emphasizes her resistance to mimesis. However, the cross-reference to patchwork undoes this resistance: the work does not succeed in remaining autonomous or closed-off. Feminist art pulls it into the realm of female handwork; the geometry of the lattice, which in another time was endowed with various symbolic meanings, here serves as something concrete: an imitation of a patchwork blanket.

Tatyana Dospekhova (Moscow) and Oksana Vasyakina (Moscow) used handwork as art therapy: they cut fabric scraps out of clothing connected to memories or people and braided them into different objects. The project attracted artists known to the creators, as well as others who were interested. Creating knitted items, the participants transformed their own emotions, feelings, and experiences into material objects.

The strategy of the inversion or reversal of traditional roles in art can be seen in the example of the works of Camilla Bryzgalova, Alena Tereshko, and Tatyana Sushenkova.

Camilla Bryzgalova (Moscow) creates works jointly with her models, or, more accurately in this case, participants or co-artists. Usually these are girls and women, each one of whom chooses for herself a pose to hold for an extended period of exposure as a way of representing herself in a public space. The photograph in this case exists only to document the moment of candor; however, Bryzgalova also offers her participants the opportunity for a moment of reflection: each one of them answers, in handwriting, questions about their participation in the project. Before each exhibit, the artist asks the participants’ permission to display their photographs, and she displays only those of participants whose consent is received. Thus, models, who usually appear objectified, became full participants in the process and can have an influence over the presentation of the project as a whole.

Alena Tereshko (St. Petersburg) and Tatyana Sushenkova (Moscow) modeled for their own artwork. Tereshko sketched multiple “snapshots” of her body, using only those parts that she could see without the help of a mirror— that is, always “not entirely,” fragmentally. The animated video “Field” permits the viewer to see this process of examining oneself, recognizing one’s body, and documenting one’s view. The animation here is in conflict with academicism, excluding similar perspectives and offering an entirely new tradition of self-portraiture.

Tatyana Sushenkova, apart from that fact that she modeled for her own art, investigated questions of the perception of gender through the medium of photography. In addition to self-portraits in which she presented images in the spirit of *gender trouble*, the artist broke her portrait into several fragments, in each of which a razor is present. A facial razor is a reference to the male and a leg razor to the female gender—overall, a mixed-gender image that fluctuates between “masculine” and “feminine.”

The theme of gender, its ambiguousness and the set courses it creates is raised in the “medieval comics” of Susanna Oriordan (St. Petersburg). Twins, a boy and a girl who are outwardly identical, receive entirely different commentaries about their participation in the same activities. This determines their subsequent positions in society: their social roles. The difference between society’s treatment of boys and of girls is demonstrated ironically.

Eva Zhigalova (Moscow), who presented ultrasound images of her unborn child at the exhibit UZL (“Boundaries of the Norm”), draws attention to the fact that set courses (gendered and otherwise) sometimes take shape before birth.

Lana Lokk (London) focused her attention on the experience of the survivor of a dysfunctional relationship, connected with conflict between identity and constructed gender stereotypes. The so-called standard of femininity, which includes external, social, and psychological characteristics, cannot include all women. Some of them have to undergo “social recycling:” unsuccessful attempts to unite the disunited—as the artist demonstrated in her video.

Nastasya Karasevich (Moscow) and Oksana Kita (Moscow)’s use of gender was brought to a point of absurdity with their proposal to assign a gender to objects— for example, to different foods or items of clothing. Here the viewer was given the authority to assign genders to items; however, the absurdity of this task exposes the conventionality of the definitions of "male" and "female" and how these definitions can vary depending on different conditions.

In her sculpture made from blocks of earth, Marina Androsovich (Moscow) used plants shaped like pigtails. Plaited when they were still young and pliable, the plants were forced to grow in a distorted manner, which was done for decorative value. Thus, Androsovich displayed an image of false representation— women’s embodiment of masculine desire in their own images. The earth, which, on its own, exists as something “horizontal,” here acquires a vertical— somewhat anthropomorphic— form. The anthropomorphism also reinforces that the plants are alive, and, despite their corruption and absence of voices, continue to grow in the sculpture. This silent presence is also that “voice” that, according to Androsovich, women possess.

In the acoustic installation by Olga Kozmandidze (Moscow), on the other hand, only the voices of women were presented, investigating the theme of corporeality and narrating its praxis.

These monologues transformed into various stories about different bodily experiences: about the body as conflict, about movement, about pauses, about that which is unspoken (each separate fragment is composed of interjections, akanye,[[9]](#endnote-9) sounds used for the connection of speech). The montage of different speech fragments created different meanings; the viewer was free to enter and exit the installation at any moment.

The investigation of bodiliness and the body (its biological particularities, sexuality, etc.) is one of the important approaches present in feminist art from the very beginning. All the same, it cannot be said that this is the most popular theme amongst Russian feminist artists. In the context of Russian art, bodiliness (female, male, and transgender) has yet to be “translated” into the artistic language. Nonetheless, the iconography developed in the 1970s by Judy Chicago and other artists,[[10]](#endnote-10) and indeed the very theme of corporeality, even if it does work its way into the language of art, does so through feminist works.

Olga Komandidze’s work is an example of the search for a language with which to express a natural and shameless relationship between a woman and her body.

Lita Polyakova (St. Petersburg) investigates in her works the plasticity of physiology. An anatomy devised by the artist calls above all on physiological sensations and is shown as sickly and abnormal. It calls to mind at once the interior of a body and the interior of a flower or a fruit.

An illusory picture, almost a “mirror-world,” is shown by Anna Rotayenko (Moscow) in a work dedicated to emotional strength. In indoor scenes and landscapes, painted and collaged from both construction and everyday materials, figures of victims and he excluded are arranged harmoniously. The transparent silhouettes are illuminated from the inside and are practically not connected at all with the surrounding environment; this emphasizes the alienation of victims from the situation that caused their victimization. The works are also surrounded by short texts of aggressors’ phrases and victims’ testimonies, which Rotayenko took from public sources.

The artist is presented as this same kind of “transparent” figure in the video “Requiem for Romantic Love” by Anastasia Vepreva (St. Petersburg). A split screen

consists of three fragments, with the center one containing the artist herself, framed by clips from Soviet films and cartoons somehow or other referring torepresentations of romantic love. Although these images are connected with Soviet culture, they oppress the post-Soviet woman: “For me romance was always that which I desperately desired, but, upon receiving it, always spat out. This gap in perception, discrepancy between desire and reality, did not give me the opportunity to form harmonious relationships and enjoy them.” You could say that the artist presents to us a picture of frustration and her heroine is the same woman-martyr as the one presented in the films if it weren’t for the ironic comments that appear here and there over the course of the video and give evidence of Vepreva’s detached viewpoint.

A critical viewpoint on media is also presented by the group REPA, made up of Alina Belousova and Anastasia Kolechikova(Saratov), in the work “Santa-Barbara.” The piece consists of a series of assemblages from classical stories of the Annunciation, the Flight into Egypt, the Adoration of the Magi, and others; Chinese counterfeits of Barbie and Ken, cut-outs from magazines, and pop images are used. In this way, the vulgarity of the repetition and duplication of the images shown on television is emphasized.

While the text that accompanies the work and the article itself (“Mass Media”) transmit a critical, even moralizing view on phenomena like “soap operas,” the work itself can hardly be considered critical. The amalgamation of its images does not call for some kind of denial or rejection; rather, it emphasizes that attraction to romance novels, the desire for a story with a happy ending, and the illusions coupled with them have existed throughout human history and will continue to exist, changing only their outward appearance.

In connection to topics that somehow explore the relationship between feminism and the media, the statement by Diana Burkot (Moscow), who believes that mass media actively seeks out feminist ideas and appropriates them, seems premature: the example of the channel “You,” to which the artist appeals, speaks to the contrary of this observation.

Alisa Tayozhnaya (Moscow), who chose the word “awareness,” confronted her inability to complete the work she originally intended to create. At the outset, the artist had planned to have published self-corrections of her own sexist statements in the press; however, re-reading old articles, she felt that it was difficult for her, physically, to confront her own misogyny, even if it was far in the past. As a result, at the exhibit, Tayozhnaya presented documentation of this moment of realization. The phrases “Shameful” and “I understand,” typed on basic office paper, worked in the context of the exhibit to create empathy and sympathy for the artist. They also served as a unique trigger, setting in motion the viewer’s own process of developing awareness.

Here self-representation in the media and in one’s own past is brought to the foreground, and it is emphasized that their meanings are generated by society: “In the evolution of feminism, it seems to me, it is very important to understand that misogyny is not an intrinsic personal quality, but a system of views that can be corrected. It is also important to realize that self-criticism and constant development allow oneto influence both like-minded people and opponents.”

On the first day of the exhibit, performances also took place in a separate space. Each one of them includeda processual activity, which viewers could opt into at any moment, although they did not have the opportunity to interfere with or affect the proceedings of the event.

“Metanarrative,” by Marina Simakova (Moscow), presented the artist’s practice of “transcription of the world.” Simakova transcribed “male” texts: a page of one famous book aspiring to explain the world (for instance, Darwin) was filled with the text of a different book (for example, by Lenin). Books by influential theorists and ideologues were chosen for transcription. It was important for the artist to make the point that the letter itself was handmade by a woman (not mechanically reproduced). Together with the transcription, recognition, understanding, and, possibly, but accordingly, the overcoming of (= liberation from?) a masculine picture of the world took place.

Ksenia Ermakova (Moscow), entering into dialogue with Rebecca Horn, created an expansion of the possibilities of the body: a drawing-suit. From one side, it calls to mind the traditional female form of clothing— the dress. From the other side, it becomes a drawing instrument. The artist, moving within the boundaries of sheets of paper, drew, with the help of a special suit, fine multicolored lines. Through the restrictions of this technique, Ermakova demonstrated the limitations of women in a certain frame, as well as in the field of art. One’s own body, outlined in vague shapes, puts forward an appeal to authorities, although it is to female authorities. The body itself is defended by the drawing equipment. Entering into the space of art, the artist chooses to remain silent, replacing speech with uniform movement. It is interesting that the result that eventually comes to shape on the sheet of paper is an obvious reference to that same central “female imagery.”

The abovementioned artists Tatyana Dospekhova and Oksana Vasyakina, who presented the works of other participants in the project, also held the performance “Connection,” in which they knit together their own objects, accompanying them with stories about past relationships and memories. Oksana Vasyakina cut scraps directly from dresses she was wearing, but she did not weave them completely into knitwork. Here, besides the indicated art-therapeutic effect (it is not by chance that the word “Inclusion” was chosen), we also observe a reconstruction of female hardship— for example, the knitting of rugs and ottomans from old rags was popular amongst women during the Soviet era: with these objects, they ornamented Soviet everyday life. Here the suffering role of women, which finds an outlet in traditional gestures— in knitting—is also emphasized. However, weaving in real-time has its own cultural associations (the gods of Fate from Greek mythology, etc.) and reminds the viewer of its own properties, those, like monotony and repetitiveness, which, on one hand, are therapeutic, but, on the other, are boring for viewers, compelling them to sink into the procedurality and to feel on a physical level the burden of the memories the artists are recounting through their knitting.

Thelecture-performance “Intermedia” by the “Creole Center” from Alma-Ata, which took place during one of the workshops featured as part of the exhibit, served as the transition to the exhibit’s educational program.Maria Vil’kovskaya and Ruth Dzhenrbekova created their imaginative activity with the goal of presenting an alternative to the institutional art process in Central Asia. The Center’s work, as they themselves assert, does not go beyond the production of texts, cards, drawings, signs, and other meaningless and useless things, although in the performance they raised questions of the construction of identities and those identities’ representations; in particular, the question is about the “global migrant, a mosaic-like, always unready-made (quasi-) identity.” “These are the ones,” explain Vil’kovskaya and Dzhenrbekova, “who are ready to conceive of themselves as an autonomous open project of development, at once purposeless and necessary, reducible to neither a clear-cut teleology nor a clean contingency. In other words, it is anyone who is oriented toward the definition and attainment of adulthood in the sense of Kantian emancipation.” The formats of lectures, conference presentations, and concerts are problematized here: the philosophical problematics are interspersed with irony and absurd claims as the serious tone of the lecturer is unsettled by her colleague’s spontaneous dancing, which is interpreted as a “story about the institutionalization of art in Kazakhstan in the language of the body”; “Kreol’skoye Radio” airs a program about how to correctly write applications to art institutes, and a question is also raised about feminist subjectivity as about “new subjectivity” (“After all, feminist criticism takes its content from the difference between an existing woman as she is already constructed in fact... and that woman who is still yet to be, who will create herself”).

As exemplified by the described works, by extension, one can say that on a formal level feminist art offers the following strategies: the strategy of the embodiment of topical themes in abstract and/or traditional forms, and/or forms of professionally recognized art; the strategy of changing traditionalized symbols by the means of art (redefining); the strategy of searching for a specific female language, visual, plastic, auditory; the strategy of critiquing existing stereotypes of gendered and sexual behavior; the strategy of the recovery, valorization, and reinterpretation of traditional women’s tasks (beginning with handwork and ending with housekeeping); the strategy of introducing activist methods into the realm of art; and the problematization of conventional frames of spectators’ perceptions of different formats and identities.

For all the movement’s strategies, we can consider the work to be about awareness of women’s status in society and opposition to “sterile” (Lippard) art, in which gender, sexual identity, and other essential characteristics are ignored. Feminist art is distinguished by, amongst other things, awareness of the fact that it is created by female artists or activists, or men, or people of another gender, who are in solidarity with feminist values and attitudes. Here the figure of the Artist with a capital letter does not dominate. In feminist art, it is emphasized (sometimes unwittingly) that a given work or object was created by a specific woman; for example, one living in Russia, one who is a single mother, or that the artwork was created by the alumna of an art college, taking on the courage to share her diploma with unknown artists.

When it comes to the politics of culture, the search for a balance between realityand itssocial problems and art itself will be of great significance for curators and organizers who work with feminist art. Political actions belong to the realm of politics; concrete actions within the boundaries of feminist art include a wide variety of methods and movements that undermine mainstream trends in art and the status quo in the art community. These are bridges through which art enters into society and through which societal problems and social criticism find their way into art.

It is clear that networked publications, publications in the news and media, etc., as opposed to art exhibits, are accessible to a large number of women, and thus are more effectual. However, to abandon the format of the exhibit entirely, fearing accusations of elitism, would mean taking away the opportunity for artists and activists for whom the visual language is a fundamental one to make their statements. It is also important to remember that this project was carried out by artists of different artistic practices and that theyalso, in their own time, supported other feminist projects.

We hope that this catalogue-dictionary can serve as a platform for further feminist initiatives and discussions.

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1. Martha Rosler, analyzing the characteristics of the feminist art of 1970s California, writes: “Occurring at the moment when *subjecthood* could be identified as an elementary concern of art, the concept [of “women's art”] was clearly a response to nonformal pressures that can be summed up as women’s push for fully recognized subjecthood in society,” “the women artist’s movement owes its genesis, its rhetoric and its goals to the women’s liberation movement”. See Rosler M. Личное и общественное: феминистское искусство в Калифорнии (“The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California”)// Гендерная теория и искусство. Антология: 1970—2000 / Пер. с англ.; под ред. Л.М. Бредихиной̆, К. Дипуэлл. — М.: РОССПЭН, 2005. — pg. 69 (*Gender Theory and Art. Anthology: 1970-2000* / Trans. from Eng.; ed. L. M. Bredikhovaya, K. Dipwell – Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005), pg. 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The sociological research approach of this project was also adopted by a curatorial group (Natalya Kamenentskaya, Marina Loshak, Olesya Turkina) in the preparation of the exhibit “Международный женский день. Феминизм: от авангарда до наших дней” (“International Women's Day. Feminism: from the Avant-Garde to the Present Day”) (2013).   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Activist art is, generally speaking, similar; however, in it the bias to the side of social/societal activity, at the expense of aesthetics, is obvious. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See the definition by the Doctor of Art History, curator, and artist Nadezhda Plungyan: “... feminist art is activist art, it is art by women with a defined political position that is positioned in the public field as ridiculous and strange due to its supposed bias”. — Nadya Plungyan. Феминистское искусство в России (“Feminist art in Russia”) // Политическая пропаганда (“Political Propaganda”) // politpropaganda.com/blog/2012/10/28/261/.   [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, the discussion organized by the festival “MediaWave” in the section «Феминистская кухня» (“Feminist Kitchen”) on the theme «Почему феминистки приходят в левое движение и почему они оттуда уходят?» (“Why do feminists join the Leftist movement, and why do they leave it?”) (3 November 2014).   [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Projects such as “Feminist Pencil,” “Kitchen,” “Fem Frontier,” “Feminist Art Criticism,” and “The School of Involved Art,” the alumna of whom (Anna Tereshkina, Polina Zaslavskaya, Anastasia Vepreva) organized the Lucy Lippard Feminist Workshops, were also supported by the Rosa Luxemburg Fund.   [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Anastasia Vepreva raises the problem of the audience in similar projects: “On one hand, artists recognize their removal from gender theory and art history, and thus the process of self-education becomes important; on the other, the desire and necessity to share these pieces of knowledge with one or another societal group has appeared. Domestic politics does not encourage the open discussion of current problems, because it itself creates them, which means that it must be understood which audience a given initiative is targeting: the artists themselves, youth, interested or disinterested spectators. Desiring to create a project for all, curators or artists necessarily center themselves. This does not benefit art at all.”

   33  [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Nadezhda Plungyan notes: “... the endless substitution, rearrangement, and overturning of the concepts “gender” and “sex”, “feminist” and “female,” “female” and “womanly,” “feminine” and “gendered” in different combinations became a characterizing trait of exhibit projects of 2014—2015.” See Plungyan N. В горящей избе. Феминистское искусство России 2014—2015 (“In the Burning Hut. Feminist Art in Russia, 2014-2015”) // www.artguide.com/posts/779.   [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. A type of vowel reduction found in Slavic languages. –Trans. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Lucy Lippard notes that the concept of “female imagery” stems from the works and texts of Judy Chicago and Miriam Sharipo: “The initial notion (central-core abstractionism, boxes, spheres, ovals) emphasized body identification and biologically derived forms, primarily in painting and sculpture.” See Lippard L. Боль и радость рождения заново: европейский и американский женский̆ боди-арт (“The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art”) // Гендерная теория и искусство. Антология: 1970—2000 / Пер. с англ.; под ред. Л.М. Бредихиной̆, К. Дипуэлл. — М.: РОССПЭН, 2005. (Gender Theory and Art: An Anthology, 1970-2000 / Trans. from English; ed. L. M. Bredikhnaya, K. Dipwell. – Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2005), pg. 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)