

# FEMALE DOMINATION?

## Czech Visual Artists at the end of the XXth century<sup>230</sup>

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*"Czech culture has always been lucky with women. The question is, however, how much luck it brought to them ..."*

Antonín J. Liehm, 1966

*"My first creative works were drawings on a wet mirror in the bathroom, drawing pictures into the fog ... of course, they disappeared but I never understood, why I shall leave a Work of Art behind, I always wanted my work to leave an impression on people, just to touch them"*

Katerina Vincourová  
a leading contemporary Czech artist, 1997

Lifting of the Iron Curtain was accompanied by high expectations, especially in the sphere of free expression, in the production and distribution of knowledge and information. Perhaps nowhere were these expectations so high as in the area of arts and culture. According to the Western media the "artists and intellectuals made the Czech *Velvet Revolution*". Did these dramatic events bring to Czech creative women the 'luck', they deserve? How have these expectations been reflected in their lives and art work? How did it influence their position in the Czech society? Moreover, what are the new opportunities and potentials for Czech women active in the arts to contribute to the changing Czech public and communal life?

### 1. Finding Information - Information Finding

The first achievement in the first stage of this investigation was not a particularly encouraging discovery: no academic institution in the Czech Republic in late 1990s, including the *Institute of Contemporary History* and the *Institute for Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic*, or any other department at a Czech university, has any data providing at least a basic overview of the position of women in arts. One of the major resources of information, beyond the interviews we conducted, are occasional articles published in the Czech media and collected in the archives of the *Center for Gender Studies* in Prague. Therefore this study cannot offer more than a 'competent estimation'. Any deeper analyses of these issues including original insightful theoretical issues, would have to be based on a consistently conducted research and on a large set of data which at this moment are not available in the Czech Republic. While discussing a few points related to women in creative professions I hope to generate

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<sup>230</sup> This text was originally produced in English.

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interest in further knowledge as well as practices in gender analyses of arts in the context of transitional social conditions.

## **2. Working Women**

Since women active in the arts and media would be considered as working women, it is important to notice that the major trends in women's employment place Czech women in a specific position when compared to other European countries. One of the most significant points is the unusually high rate of women's employment which culminated during the 1960s and 1970s. Regardless of the predicted flee of women away from so called enforced jobs which were, according to some social theories, imposed on them by the 'old regime', the social practice turned out to be more complex. The high female employment rate has not significantly changed since 1989.

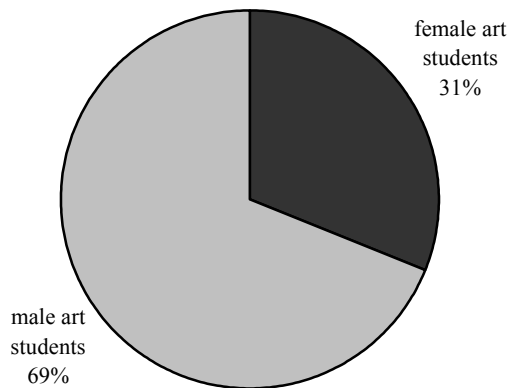
Up until today, women have represented almost 45% of the work force and over 90% of women in active age are fully employed. Some of the professional spheres are still heavily feminised. Even in the mid 1990s, women represented 77,8% of all employees in health care, 74,5% in education and 58,% in services and trade. [*Statistická ročenka*, 1994; Čermáková, 1995]. What has been changing since early 1990s, however, was the qualitative aspect of women's labor, a process which had had a deeper impact on professional artists as well.

One of the major points to keep in mind while looking at the question of women in the arts is that this is not an interest group with easily definable characteristics, but primarily a body of individuals with specific features and life stories. Following several interviews with Dr. Marie Čermáková, the leading expert in the sociology of gender in the Czech Republic, it became obvious that the problem of the position of female artists resists analyses by methods available in social sciences. This social group have not participated in a standard labor market, since most of them worked as freelancers. Therefore it is very difficult to trace this social group in the statistics available. Today, they would be most probably included into the category of 'independent entrepreneurs'. According to the major statistical survey of the CR [*Statistická ročenka*, 1998], there were about 29% women in this group in 1997.

Since women artists are missing in the available Czech statistics and empirical data sets, there is an urgent need for a profound qualitative research, which would help us to understand their attitudes, values and life stories.

## **3. Her Visions - From Education to Recognition**

Due to the respectable position traditionally enjoyed by the arts as well as by women artists in the Czech society, there seems to be a generally shared view that women do belong to the sphere of arts, be it as creators/subjects or as inspiration/objects of representation, as well as members of the audience. We can trace this trend historically: for example, the first studio of drawing and decorative arts for girls was opened immediately after its foundation at the prestigious *Academy of Applied Arts in Prague* in the 1880s. Figure 1 demonstrates that more than a century later, in 1998, out of all students in art schools 1902 were male and 852 female. This is seen as a relatively positive proportion, but is in fact a rather low share if compared with the 50% and more found in other European countries.

**Figure 1: Share of women and men in arts schools, 1998**

Most of the female artists interviewed have expressed their conviction that there is no discrimination in their field, while pointing to a number of prestigious prizes awarded to women in the last decade.

"The Czech visual art scene of 1990s has been dominated by women" was the first argument Karel Císař - a representative of the youngest generation of Czech art critics - made in the interview. Indeed, Kateřina Vincourová, Veronika Bromová, and Markéta Othová, just to name the most visible ones, collected an impressive number of national as well as international awards already in their early thirties. Vincourová - as the first women - was nominated for the locally most prestigious Prize of Jindřich Chalupecký in 1996, Bromová successfully represented Czech Art at the *Venice Biennale* and so did Othová at the *Carnegie International*. Their work combines variable forms and materials of creative expression from plastic objects to conceptual photography and video art. According to some critics, this is just a fashion which will soon be over, according to others, this generation is not afraid anymore of moving beyond the traditional motives of female sensibility towards feminine and even feminist discourse, even though they have never come up with any proclamation of a common program.

To the question "Why women?" Císař replied: "Because they are the best". To the question "Why now?", he replied: in 1990s when women have been considered by many feminist social scientists as the major 'losers of transition', and therefore this question "is more difficult to deal with". In the transitional Czech economic and cultural environment, the classic art market does not yet exist. There are still very few art dealers who would be buying and reselling art objects to those who are willing to and able to invest in arts. Very few Czech artist can support himself or herself just from sale of his or her work and is dependent on a variety of grants and stipends, often funded from abroad. Some of the young women seem to be more flexible in fund-raising (not selling !) and in promoting their work. They do not insist on the idea of an Artist and Breadwinner whose pride must not be harmed by asking for support. An explanation of their success, however, goes beyond the specific political economy of Czech arts scene: this young Czech women's generation was able to communicate with current world-wide trends of 'softer' and emotionally sensitive aesthetics. One of the most obvious evidences of the generation and gender conflict in the contemporary Czech art was recently brought by a grandiose show the 'Tvrdohlaví' [The Hard-Headed] in the spring of 1999.

It presented the work of an art group formed by the most successful - entirely male - artists of the 1980s generation. Emptiness of, what at some point might have appeared as a powerful and self-confident performative gesture, was shocking; even for their equally 'hard-headed' fans.

Even the Czech media which are far from being user-friendly when it comes to gender issues, could have not overlooked this phenomena. A respectable art journal *Výtvarné umění* [Visual Arts] presented biographies of, and interviews with leading Czech female artists of several generations already in 1993. The cultural and social journal *Labyrint* devoted a 200 page issue on the topic of Women and Arts in 1997. The media debates on booming women's art, however, opened up a number of problematic and uncomfortable points. So did the critic Marek Pokorný in his insightful article "Today Hopefully Nobody Can Claim that There Is No Women's Art Here" published in the leading Czech daily *MF Dnes*. Even though he admitted that independent female voices began emerging since the early 1990s, Czech women themselves "rarely express a direct criticism of the phalocratic, enterprenual, pseudo-emancipatory and egalitarian society which is still stuck in the past. Even though women have recently been a more visible and significant part of the art scene, they have only randomly defined themselves against the male world". [Pokorný, 1998]

Following the general tendency to avoid gender-based organisation, Czech creative women resist establishing any organised women's groups with a defined structure and program. Rather they tend to form groups whose existence is limited to particular projects, such as joint exhibitions *Four Women in Glass* or *Woman and Ceramics*. Given the interviews conducted, or their interviews presented in media, it is obvious that most of them explicitly refuse any reference to gender identity, not to speak of the feminist one. First of all they consider themselves to be artists, and only then they admit that their work might be influenced by their femininity. Such claims as "Differentiation of art according to gender is of no interest for me. I do not deal with these issues, in fact it does bother me quite a bit". (Markéta Othová in *Labyrint Revue*, 1997); "In my opinion, a difference between male and female art does not exist or ever existed". (Jana Žáčková, *ibid.*) dominate the discourse of talking gender identity among the female Czech artists. In most of the interviews, however, they did not deny that their creative expression is always a matter of individual testimony, which is connected with particular experiences and feelings. They admitted that female art can hardly be the same as the one carried by men.

And yet, some of the female art groups were born in the 1970s, such as *Femina*, or *Zararaka* established by textile designers in 1980s. The *Academic Association of Women*, or *Kosa Nostra* (1993) both created in the 1990s focused on the arts combined with various other public activities in relation to urgent social topics. The rate of women in major Czech art associations (the history of many of them goes back to the pre-communist times), is approximately one third of the entire membership: one of the most traditional associations *Manés* includes 129 women out of 354 members; there are 88 women out of 180 members of the *Association of Prague Visual Artists*, and the well known group of graphic artists and print artists *Hollar* includes 58 women out of 164 members. The *Association of Art Critics and Theoreticians* has 57 women out of 133 members. The almost 50% female membership of this organisation represent another local assumption - the Czech art criticism is considered to be a 'reflective' sphere as opposed to the 'productive' arts sphere and thus remains as a domain 'occupied' by women.

**Table 1: Representation of Women in major Czech Art Associations, 1998-99**

Art Associations	Total Membership	Women	
		Total	%
Manés	354	129	36
Association of Prague Visual Artists	180	88	49
Hollar (graphic and print artists)	164	58	35
Association of Art Critics and Theoreticians	133	57	43

#### 4. Women's Employment Patterns

Although there has been a "mini-boom" of several female Czech artists, it does not necessarily represent the entire art scene. Many of Czech female artists seem to be following the more general trends in female employment in the Czech Republic - that is a relatively high flexibility (compared to men) on the job market, willingness toward re-training and re-qualification, and less resistance towards alternative carrier shifts than men in general. Thus a large number of female artists earn their living from educational activities at Czech art schools, both at the secondary and university level, which includes the *Academy of Visual Arts*, *Academy of Applied Arts*, the *Department of Architecture of the Czech Technical University*, *Academy of Musical Arts*, under the departments of arts education at various universities all over the country. At most of the arts academies, a subject of 'arts education' is a compulsory part of the curricula. A significant portion of women can be also found among the conservation and restoration professionals in all genres of applied arts. They supply photos and other graphical material for the advertisement sections of periodicals and other media.

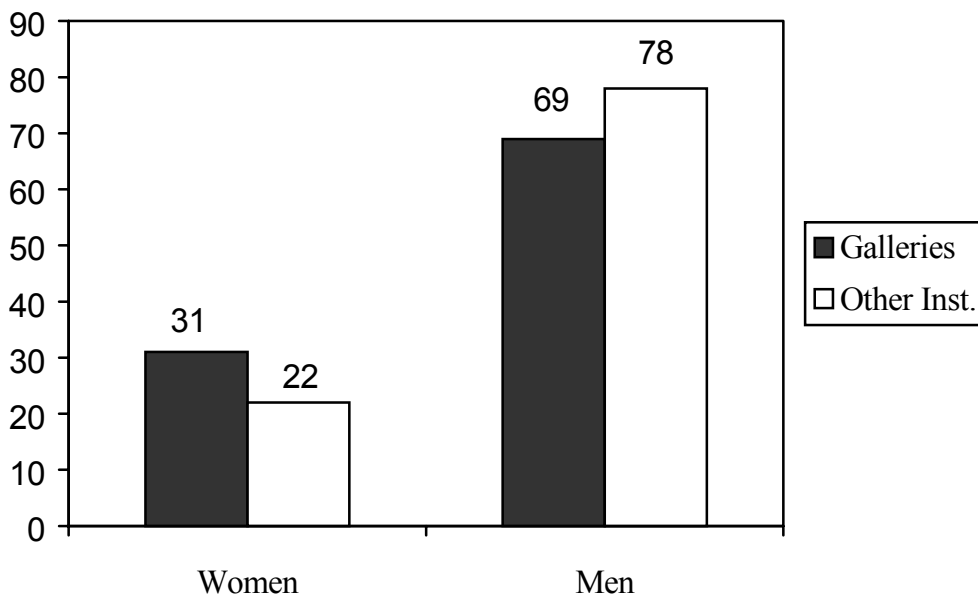
Not surprising, many female artists tend to support themselves by financial resources different from those generated by their art work. In addition, this trend has been enforced since mid 1990s by the increasingly emerging difficulties of the 'transitional' Czech economy and their resonance in the general conditions for freelance art work. These include increasing expenses of material necessary for the realisation of their works, ongoingly increasing rents for studios and show rooms. Due to the overall growing life expenses in all Czech families, spending related to the cultural life are usually the first to be cut from family budgets.

Top Czech artists, however, tend to be rather individualistic. Those who used to be supportive of and supported by the 'old regime' expected their work to be a major source of income. Such expectations are becoming less and less realistic under the transitional economic conditions. Members of the older generation are not flexible enough to participate in larger group based enterprises, and if so, then only out of a financial necessity. The younger ones do not anticipate much from social or communal support. What makes a Czech contemporary artist successful, is less related to gender. Success is often based on the informal networks of friends, supportive circles, and even relatives. There are no special grants or rewards for women. Both men and women are equally dependent to a large extent on such networks. This phenomena is after all not at all exclusionary of the arts. On the contrary, it is a symptomatic feature of most of the spheres of anyone's professional life in a country small in size, where 'everybody knows everybody else'.

## 5. Representation in Top Positions

The influence of the informal networks and social contacts in the 'right' places can take various forms. As one of many examples can serve the hot debates on corruption surrounding the competition for a post of Director of the Czech National Gallery in the local media in the summer of 1999. The (male) winner - of what a number of persons involved labelled as unfair competition -- replaced the originally nominated female acting director. It may be noted that out of the 26 directors of major Czech galleries sponsored by the Ministry of Culture in 1999 there were eight women. Those galleries managed by women are located mostly outside Prague. There are also 8 female directors out of 37 other cultural institutions run by the Ministry (State archives, research institutions, theatres, operas etc.), most of them in state science libraries in provincial cities.

**Figure 2: Share of women in major galleries and other cultural institutions sponsored by the Czech Ministry of Culture (1999)**



The question still remains, however, as Michael Holquist puts it "how to interpret the enormity of the disparity between what *was* and what *now is*, and the rapidity within which that fissure opened up in history " [Holquist, 1994: 8].

## 6. Instead of a Conclusion

The complexity of Czech women's position in the sphere of arts and creative cultural activities includes a number of interrelated, though mutually contradictory aspects. All these variable energies, individuals, and events provide a culture made up of unlimited, often contradictory practices and experiences. It is a mixture of continuities and discontinuities and combinations of traditions and experiments which resist a one-dimensional interpretation.

The first point to be emphasized is that no universal model of relation between gender and cultural change can be identified here. No one can deny the noted visible place of younger women in contemporary Czech visual arts. At the same time, however, the feature films in-

dustry became extremely hostile to women's intervention in 1990s, whereas relative accessibility of new technology allowed a high participation of women in documentary film making. When it comes to classic music, for example, perhaps the most symptomatic would be a recent statement of the Chief Conductor of the famous *Czech Philharmonic Orchestra*. He claimed in a published interview that its unique sound is related to the fact that there are no women and foreigners playing there.

Secondly, there is a number of aspects related to the social and cultural construction of gender issues in the Czech transitional society, a construction which is to a large extent rooted in the continuity of gender relations of the pre-1989 social system. The rather frozen and traditional images and representations of masculinity and femininity in both the private and public spheres have a significant impact on the self-construction of the individual artists questioned, on the imaginations and expectations of their position in society.

As if contrary to this, however, there is an apparent respect and appreciation of individual women artists' contribution to the world of arts and culture, combined with the traces of legal and economical position of women in the Czech society as they were established in the course of the period of so called state socialism. A creative woman does belong to the arts, as well as to any other public activities in general. These include a high rate of women's employment in arts, access to arts education, legal and constitutional rights. The image of a working and self-sufficient woman has been fully accepted in the Czech society and the sphere of arts and culture is no exception from this trend.

Perhaps the most important feature of Czech women's participation in the public sphere, including *creative arts*, is their *capacity to negotiate*. To negotiate the 'room of their own' in the context of the slightly schizophrenic social and cultural system defined by the conflicting tendencies towards freezing the old orders on the one hand, and the relatively advanced women's positions in some spheres of cultural and artistic activities on the other. Such negotiation capacities have resulted in a relatively peaceful gender contract between the male and female parts of the Czech society, a contract which, as I would argue, has a larger historical background. Needless to say, no contract is perfect and can be taken as a frozen given. To take it for granted would be one of the major failures of both, the Czech women and men.

The major point resulting from this project is the recognition of a profound lack of information and knowledge on gender and arts in the Czech 'transitional' context. A consistent support of both governmental and non-governmental resources will be needed in order to identify real needs and prospects of women in the Czech art at the turn of century.

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