

ARTICLE

Who Won in 1989? Approaching the Canon of Czech Art History from a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Drawing on the classic question of feminist art history, this article asks how and by whom the contemporary canon of Czech art history was constructed, and when the exclusion of women artists of the 1980s generation from it took place. It shows that the 1960s generation of women artists emerged from the disruption of the traditional gender order in the Stalinist era. In contrast, the generation of women artists who entered the art scene in the 1980s was disadvantaged by the declining power of art institutional structures and the growing importance of informal networks for career success in late socialism. Their lack of social capital, combined with the re-emergence of macho culture in the 1980s art scene, the persistence of traditional gender roles in the home, and the loss of more substantial state support for artistic production after 1989, led to their “invisible” role in the post-1989 art world.

In the middle of the gallery stands a man with a microphone in his hand and a mobile phone on his hip, while a girl smiles at him from the left, wearing nothing but satin lingerie and holding a book, watched by the audience in the background of the photograph. Surprisingly, this is neither a performance nor a scene from the early 1990s, when post-socialist societies were gripped by a frenzy for the sexualization of public space and political life, particularly in the Czech Republic, with the founding of an erotic political party in 1990. The photo was taken at the book launch at the exhibition *Tvrdohlaví a erotika* (The Stubborn and Eroticism) in a private gallery in the center of Prague in 2001, run by Tvrdohlaví (The Stubborn) themselves—a Czech visual group formed in 1987 by ten men born in the post-WWII years. The idea of establishing their own gallery came to them in the late 1990s after their very successful exhibition in the National Gallery in Prague, which was visited by over 20,000 people and where these artists met for the first time in years. Although their gallery project ended after a while, the fame of these men, who are among the most recognized living Czech artists, has endured to this day.

These artists are celebrities not only because of their popularity with the public. The playful exhibitions of František Skála and Petr Nikl appeal to a wide audience, and their interventions in public space, such as Jiří David’s installation of a glowing neon heart above Prague Castle, are internationally known, or at least loved by tourists, as in the case of Jaroslav Róna’s sculpture of Franz Kafka in Prague’s Old Town, one of the must-sees during a two-day

This article was financially supported by the Charles University Grant Agency, project no. 166121, entitled “Forgotten Women’s Voices of Transformation: Literary and Art History Discussions on Feminism between 1985 and 1995,” implemented at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University.

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stay in the capital. They are also recognized in the art world, have received many awards, work in art institutions, and are also among the main players in recent Czech art history.¹

In the canon of Czech art history, the art of the 1980s in Czechoslovakia is limited to a group of white Czech men who graduated from the two existing Czech art academies—the Akademie výtvarných umění v Praze (Academy of Fine Arts in Prague—hereafter referred to as AVU) and the Vysoká škola uměleckoprůmyslová v Praze (the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague—VŠUP).² Along with two dozen other colleagues and artists, Tvrdohlaví are seen in the classic narrative as a young, rebellious 1980s male generation who initiated a series of unofficial group exhibitions in the second half of the 1980s. Unlike the previous generations of “unofficial” artists, they were the first to assert their artistic expression within the official framework, and their artistic position was not primarily based on the dichotomy of dissent versus the ruling state.

In this article, rather than interpreting the artistic practices of this group of male artists or their problematic attitudes towards women in the art world, I intend to ask how they became the canonical Czech artists of the 1980s postmodern generation and what role gender played in this process. Using the same gender-based approach, another aim is to analyze why no women artists were included in the contemporary Czech canon of art history of this generation. My interpretation of the exclusion of women artists from the art canon, one of the fundamental questions of feminist art history, is based on grounding the 1980s art world in its historical and social complexity, and asking what role the year 1989 played in the careers of individual artists.³ In order to understand the political-social mechanism, I will use the interpretation of the post-socialist “transition” by sociologists Gil Eyal, Iván Szelenyi, and Eleanor Townsley, knowing that interdisciplinary research can shed light on certain power relations that the methodology of art history would not reveal.⁴

The 1980s Generation and the Canon of Czech Art History

In recent years, a growing body of literature on the history of state socialism has focused on evaluating state socialist gender policies and women’s political activism from a more

¹ Members of Tvrdohlaví are Jiří David (born 1956), Stanislav Diviš (1953), Michal Gabriel (1960), Zdeněk Lhotský (1956), Stefan Milkov (1955), Petr Nikl (1960), Jaroslav Róna (1957), František Skála (1956), Čestmír Suška (1952), and Václav Marhoul (1960). Three of them won the prestigious Jindřich Chalupecký Award for young artists under 35 (František Skála in 1991, Michal Gabriel in 1994, and Petr Nikl in 1995). František Skála represented the Czech Republic at the 45th Venice Biennale in 1993 and Jiří David at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015.

² By the “canon of Czech art history” I mean the narrative provided by Czech art historians in the syntheses published by the Czech Academy of Sciences. The “postmodern generation” of the 1980s is represented only by male artists—apart from Tvrdohlaví, artists such as Tomáš Císařovský, Martin John, Vladimír Kokolia, Petr Kvičala, Martin Mainer, Jan Merta, Otto Placht, Vladimír Skrepl, Antonín Střížek are mentioned. See “Confronting Postmodernism,” in Taána Petrasová and Rostislav Švácha, eds., *Art in the Czech Lands 800–2000* (Prague, 2017), 903–5; Ludvík Hlaváček, “Postmoderna a neoexpresionismus,” and “Rozvíjení osobních přístupů, nové skupiny a aktivity,” in Jiří Dvorský, ed., *Dějiny českého výtvarného umění [VI/2] 1958/2000* (Prague, 2007), 714–27; 728–51. From the perspective of global art canon the entire Czech 1980s generation is underrepresented because most international research has so far focused on the performance and conceptual art of the socialist states, while postmodern painting and objects have not yet received much attention. See Claire Bishop and Marta Dzierawska, *1968–1989: Political Upheaval and Artistic Change* (Chicago, 2009); Amy Bryzgel, *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester, 2017).

³ See Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Woman Artists?,” *Art News* 69 (January 1971): 22–39; 67–71; Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York, 2003); Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (New York, 2003 [1981]); Nanette Salomon, “The Art Historical Canon: Sins of Omission (1991),” in Donald Preziosi, ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford, 2008), 344–55. More generally on the construction of the canon in art history: Hubert Locher, “The Idea of the Canon and Canon Formation in Art History,” in Matthew Rampley, ed., *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe* (Leiden, 2012), 29–40.

⁴ Gil Eyal, Iván Szelenyi, and Eleanor Townsley, *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists: Class Formation and Elite Struggles in Post-Communist Central Europe* (London, 2001).

analytical perspective. Researchers such as Francisca de Haan, Magdalena Grabowska, Zsófia Lóránd, Chiara Bonfiglioli, and many others have explored the question of women's agency, attempting to define feminist thought and political positions under state socialism and to write a more inclusive narrative that has usually been limited to the male political actors of the period.⁵ What these often interdisciplinary studies have in common is that their main protagonists are usually women intellectuals, politicians, and activists, or workers who negotiated their positions with the ruling regimes in various ways; artists are usually left out of the picture.⁶ Art historians, on the other hand, tend to focus on the interpretation of specific works of art, and the in-depth study of power relations in the visual art scenes under state socialism has not yet become part of their main agenda.⁷

Moreover, revisionist approaches to the interpretation of artistic practice, produced under state socialism, have not been widely used in art history. Since the exhibition *Gender Check*, curated by Bojana Pejić in 2009, which took a rather negative view of the experience of socialist women's emancipation, other exhibition projects emerged, such as the recently curated *Medea Insurrection* and *Feminist Avant-garde*, which focused mainly on the formal aspect of the works without deeper political and social contexts.⁸ Only a few publications have attempted to draw a more emancipatory picture of artistic practices before 1989 and to examine them in the context of state socialist policies.⁹ As far as the post-war art canon is concerned, the representation of women artists from central and eastern Europe is still minimal.¹⁰ Recently, however, with the rise of various artistic initiatives, projects, and exhibitions emerging from the goals of the fourth wave of feminism, more attention is being paid to the number of women artists from these regions.¹¹

Expanding the canon of contemporary art to include women who have been active in post-war Czechoslovakia is not the primary goal of this article. Rather, my focus is on examining contemporary power relations and exploring the social practices in the art scene that

⁵ See Yulia Gradszkova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the 'Whole World'?* (New York, 2022); Chiara Bonfiglioli, "Feminist Translations in a Socialist Context: The Case of Yugoslavia," *Gender & History* 30, no. 1 (2018): 240–54; Francisca de Haan, "The Global Left-Feminist 1960s: From Copenhagen to Moscow and New York," in Chen Jian, Martin Klimke, Masha Kirasirova, Mary Nolan, Marilyn Young, and Joanna Waley-Cohen, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building* (New York, 2018), 230–42.

⁶ An exception is the case of Yugoslavia, where activities of women visual artists are part of the narratives of feminist struggles in recent literature: Jasmina Tumbas, *"I am Jugoslovenka!": Feminist Performance Politics during and after Yugoslav Socialism* (Manchester, 2022); Zsófia Lóránd, *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia* (Berlin, 2018).

⁷ A good example of the study of power relations under state socialism in the cultural sphere is Libora Oates-Indruchová, "Unraveling a Tradition, or Spinning a Myth?: Gender Critique in Czech Society and Culture," *Slavic Review* 75, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 919–43.

⁸ Bojana Pejić, ed., *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (Vienna, 2009); Suzanne Altmann, Katarina Lozo, and Hilke Wagner, eds., *The Medea Insurrection: Radical Women Artists Behind the Iron Curtain* (Cologne, 2019); Gabriele Schor, *The Feminist Avant-garde of the 1970s: Works from the Sammlung Verbund* (Vienna, 2016).

⁹ Agata Jakubowska, *Sztuka i emancypacja kobiet w socjalistycznej Polsce: Przypadek Marii Pinińskiej-Bereś* Warszawa (Warsaw, 2022); Marianna Placáková, "Emancipation Despite Circumstances: The Prague Spring, (Dis)engagement on the Art Scene and the Emergence of Feminist Consciousness among Women Artists," *Umění* 70, no. 4 (2022): 383–405; Beata Hock, *Gendered Artistic Positions and Social Voices: Politics, Cinema, and the Visual Arts in State-Socialist and Post-Socialist Hungary* (Stuttgart, 2013).

¹⁰ In Fowkes' recent synthesis of central and east European art, for example, the generations of Czech post-war women artists are shockingly under-represented, accounting for less than 5 per cent, compared to 95 per cent of Czech male artists (they mention Běla Kolářová and Zorka Ságlová from the 1960s generation). Maja Fowkes and Reuben Fowkes, *Central and Eastern European Art since 1950* (London 2020).

¹¹ An important example is the Secondary Archive project, initiated by the Polish Katarzyna Kozyra Foundation in 2020, which focuses on the presentation of women artists from central and eastern Europe. Similarly, the online Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibition, a non-profit organization based in Paris, is increasingly expanding its database to include women artists from these regions.

contributed to the current form of the canon. My aim is to question the contemporary image of the 1980s generation of Czech artists as we know it today, and to reflect on what was crucial for them to make it into the canon. In doing so, I build on the recent book *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond*, in which the authors see the use of the category of generations as a problem of symbolic power distribution.¹²

It is always worth questioning who is and who is not the subject of generational narration; what is and what is not a generation-forming impulse, and who or what determines this; and finally, which generations go down in history according to which concepts, and thanks to whom or when this happens.¹³

We can argue with Natalia Jarska that generational divisions are subjective and blurred, and that to understand a generation as a construct, we need to challenge the homogeneous image of shared experiences of people born more or less in the same historical period, to recognize the diversity of their generational experiences, and also to ask how these constructs—based on a series of subjective assessments—have been used in political and historical processes.¹⁴

In the division of the history of state socialism according to generations, no research has been carried out in the Czech case, as in other east European historiographies, to characterize the “last socialist generation.”¹⁵ Most attention is usually paid to the generation that was politically and artistically active in the 1960s, considered as the “golden age” of Czech culture and an extraordinary political experiment on the way to “socialism with a human face.”¹⁶

The canon of Czech art history usually limits the term “1960s generation” to artists born in the interwar period.¹⁷ Unlike writers and intellectuals, visual artists born during or just after World War II did not come into prominence in the 1960s, probably because art academy students were not encouraged to exhibit during their studies, and their careers often began in their early thirties or later.¹⁸ At the same time, this generation of visual artists is not perceived as a “generation of builders,” as in the case of well-known intellectuals or writers. It is still approached from politically biased positions in Czech art history, with the result that the biographies of individual artists whose work from the 1960s is now artistically appreciated are interpreted in an anti-communist context. Agreement exists, however, that the 1960s generation had a clear and distinctive artistic program with a multitude of manifestations—something that then emerges strongly in the 1980s generation. In this sense, the 1970s generation is somewhat lost in the canon of art history. In the common interpretation, it consists of artists who studied in the 1960s, and the onset of “normalization” did not allow

¹² Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik, eds., *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond* (New York, 2020).

¹³ Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik, “Generational and Gendered Memory of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe: Methodological Perspectives and Political Challenges,” in Artwińska and Mrozik, eds., *Gender, Generations, and Communism*, 13.

¹⁴ Natalia Jarska, “‘Old’ Women and ‘Old’ Revolution: The Role of Gender and Generation in Postwar Polish Communist Women’s Political Biographies,” in Artwińska and Mrozik, eds., *Gender, Generations, and Communism*, 127.

¹⁵ Ljubica Spaskovska, *The Last Yugoslav Generation: The Rethinking of Youth Politics and Cultures in Late Socialism* (Manchester, 2017); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2005).

¹⁶ On the generational conflicts of the Czech post-war intelligentsia, see: Miloš Havelka, “Česká kultura a politika před různými horizonty generační zkušenosti,” in Zdeněk Machát, Ondřej Slačálek and Milan Znoj, eds., *Sborník k 70. narozeninám Františka Svátka* (Brno, 2007), 98–117.

¹⁷ Although I understand “generation” as a construct, in this article I use the description of generations (“1960s,” “1970s,” and “1980s generation”) as it is usually used in Czech art history—the main factor is not the artist’s date of birth, but the time when the artist entered the art scene professionally.

¹⁸ Jiří Šetlík, “Umělecká a občanská odpovědnost poválečné generace,” *Výtvarné umění* 6, no. 3–4 (1995): 8.

them to develop their careers; even after 1989, they never made a great comeback, unlike some artists of the 1960s generation.¹⁹

As far as the representation of women in the Czech post-war art canon is concerned, its current form differs from other statistics on Czechoslovak society, where, for example, the general employment of women increased steadily in the period between the war and 1989. The strongest and most representative generation is that of the 1960s. Artists such as Běla Kolářová, Eva Kmentová, Adriena Šimotová, Alena Kučerová, and Zorka Ságlová exhibited not only in Czechoslovakia at the time—for example, at the avant-garde Václav Špála Gallery, run by the theoretician Jindřich Chaloupecký—but also internationally, and are still the most internationally recognized.²⁰ Women artists of the 1970s generation are part of the Czech canon. They are not recognized abroad (with the exception of Magdalena Jetelová, who emigrated to West Germany in 1985 and had an international career), but some of them were important for the Czech scene. After 1989, Adéla Matasová and Jitka Svobodová were the first to become heads of fine arts studios at Czech art academies (the former at the VŠUP, the latter at the AVU), and others, such as Marie Blabolilová, Ellen Jilemnická, Petra Oriěšková, Jaroslava Severová, and Inge Kosková, made art and held exhibitions throughout their lives, and their work is known to Czech art historians today.

Compared to this, the 1980s generation of women artists is virtually absent. The only one well known is Margita Titlová Ylovsky, the only one whose work has been presented at Czech exhibitions and also at international projects.²¹ Erika Bornová and Kateřina Štenclová also have recognizable careers, but their works are usually not included in representative or historicizing projects.²² Titlová Ylovsky is also the only woman artist representing the 1980s era in the permanent exhibition “1939–2021: The End of the Black-and-White Era” at the National Gallery in Prague, which opened in May 2023, making the 1980s section the worst in terms of female representation. Other artists of this generation, who live in cities other than Prague (Dana Chatrná, Bohuslava Olešová, Mirka Slámová), are mostly presented in projects conceived within provincial frameworks and do not “make it” into Prague’s canonizing institutions.²³ In short, since the 1960s, women artists have seen a gradual decline in the “success rate” in the art world: in the 1960s generation, a number of women had recognizable careers; the 1970s generation did not have “big careers” but mostly made art as their main occupation; and the women artists of the 1980s generation, if they continued to make art after graduating, did so as one of their occupations.²⁴

¹⁹ I am referring here to those artists, who are perceived as belonging to the “unofficial” art scene. The “official” art scene of the 1970s and 1980s has not been studied at all.

²⁰ Their works have been presented in the exhibitions *Cutting Realities: Gender Strategies in Art* (Art Exhibit, New York, 2008); *elles@centrepompidou* (Art Exhibit, Paris, 2009); and *Medea Resurrection* (Art Exhibit, Dresden, 2019). In 2013, Běla Kolářová had a solo exhibition at the Raven Row Gallery in London. Among internationally recognized Slovak women artists of the 1960s generation are Jana Želibská and Mária Bartuzová, who recently had a solo exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London. However, in comparison with the strong 1960s Czech women artist generation (apart from those already mentioned—Zdena Fibichová, Věra Janoušková, Olga Karlíková, Emila Medková, Naděžda Plíšková, Vlasta Prachatická, Hana Purkrábková, Eva Švankmajerová, Jitka and Květa Válovás, and many others), this was not the case in Slovakia.

²¹ Zdenka Badovinac, *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

²² Thanks to the current greater interest in women artists by Czech institutions, all three recently had major exhibitions: *Erika Bornová. Šílenství je stráž noci*, (Art Exhibit, Prague, 2021); *Margita Titlová Ylovsky. Purpurová vertikála*, (Art Exhibit, Prague, 2023); *Kateřina Štenclová. Na hladině času*, (Art Exhibit, Kutná hora, 2023).

²³ *České a slovenské umění v 70. a 80. letech na Ostravsku* (Art Exhibit, Frýdek-Místek, 1991); *Brněnská osmdesátá* (Art Exhibit, Brno, 2010).

²⁴ I am aware that the term “success” is a problematic and difficult to grasp phenomenon rooted in the power mechanisms of the art world. In this article, I use it to refer to the artistic production of artists whose quality is recognized by experts (curators and art historians) and state art institutions (the National Gallery in Prague, the Prague City Gallery, the Moravian Gallery in Brno), both of which are involved in the formation of the art canon.

In order to address the lack of women artists of the 1980s generation in the canon, I will use, among other things, the interviews with artists about their generational positions and experiences. First, interviews with male artists of the 1980s generation, conducted by the Czech NGO Post Bellum in recent years, and second, interviews with women artists that I did myself.²⁵ My aim was to address women who represented the widest possible spectrum of actors on the art scene at that time, whether in terms of their place of origin and later work (big cities such as Prague and Brno or the peripheries), nationality (Czech, Polish), education (secondary art school or art academy) or different life situations (single, married, with children), and who were primarily engaged in painting and object making as the main protagonists of the 1980s generation.²⁶ I chose the period of their studies as the main rule for selection. After all, experience with a particular type of art institution at a particular time is undoubtedly one of the most important factors in an artist's socialization in the art world, and during state socialism institutions played an even greater role, because graduating from an art academy meant gaining official status as an artist, which offered far better opportunities and conditions for art production.

I have therefore approached the 1980s generation as women artists who, if they graduated from an art academy, did so in the 1980s and did not experience the breakthrough year of 1989 in these institutions. Women artists also responded in some way to the postmodern aesthetic of the 1980s. It is significant that many of their works from this period no longer exist. Because the artworks were not owned or circulated by institutions or anyone else, the women artists often destroyed or discarded them at some point in their lives. Of the fourteen women I contacted, I interviewed nine who were born between 1948 and 1964, some of whose artworks are presented here. These include Bohuslava Olešová (born 1951) (Figure 1), Marie Birchler Suchánková (born 1957) (Figure 2), Erika Bornová (1964), Erika Pfeifferová (1956), Eva Prokopcová (1948) (Figure 3), Nadja Rawa (1953), Mirka Slámová (1952), Kateřina Štenclová (1959), and Eva Vejražková (1956).²⁷ Their age difference was based, among other things, on the fact that in late socialism the age of university graduates generally increased due to a shortage of university places relative to demand.²⁸

Art Academies

In retrospect, it is difficult to assess the mechanics of the admissions process at Czech art academies, as it was often a very complex and opaque process in which candidates were admitted on the basis of the so-called comprehensive assessment of the applicant. In addition to knowledge and talent, the political commitment of the applicants and their families and their class and regional background were also taken into account. At the same time, the process was influenced by a number of informal “interventions” at different levels—first,

²⁵ Lists of art academy graduates, and the book *Splátka na dluh*, written before 1989 to record the rising generation, served as a basic orientation. Jiří Luhan and Petr Pouba, eds., *Splátka na dluh. Dokumentace českých výtvarníků narozených v padesátých a šedesátých letech* (Prague, 2000). The Post Bellum project, from which I drew interviews for this article with František Skála, Jiří Kornatovský, Jaroslav Róna, Tomáš Císařovský, Stanislav Diviš, and Jiří David, was realized in recent years; see *Memory of Nations*, at www.memoryofnations.eu/en/artists (accessed June 12, 2024). Although the project's activist anti-communist stance is problematic for me, I use the interviews as the only source of oral history on the subject, and they also give a good idea of how artists reconstruct their life stories retrospectively. The women artists of the 1980s generation are not present in the database.

²⁶ In terms of the national and ethnic composition of the art academies at the time, the most common graduates (apart from Czechs and Slovaks) were students from other socialist countries in eastern Europe and occasionally people from the west and Global South, who are hard to trace today.

²⁷ The interviews took place from October 2022 to March 2023. I was not able to get in touch with Katarzyna Czerpak (1962), Jaromíra Němcová (1959), Magdalena Rajnišová (1958), Martina Riedlbauchová (1963), and Margita Titlová Ylovsky (1957).

²⁸ Katka Volná, Jakub Jareš, Matěj Spurný, and Klára Pinerová, *Prověřená fakulta. KSC na Filozofické fakultě UK v letech 1969–1989. Edice dokumentů* (Prague, 2009), 38; Marcel Fišer, ed., *Diplomové práce na Akademii výtvarných umění v Praze 1969–1989* (Cheb, 2018), 4.



Figure 1. Bohuslava Olešová, *Bez názvu / Untitled*, 1987, mixed media, © Bohuslava Olešová

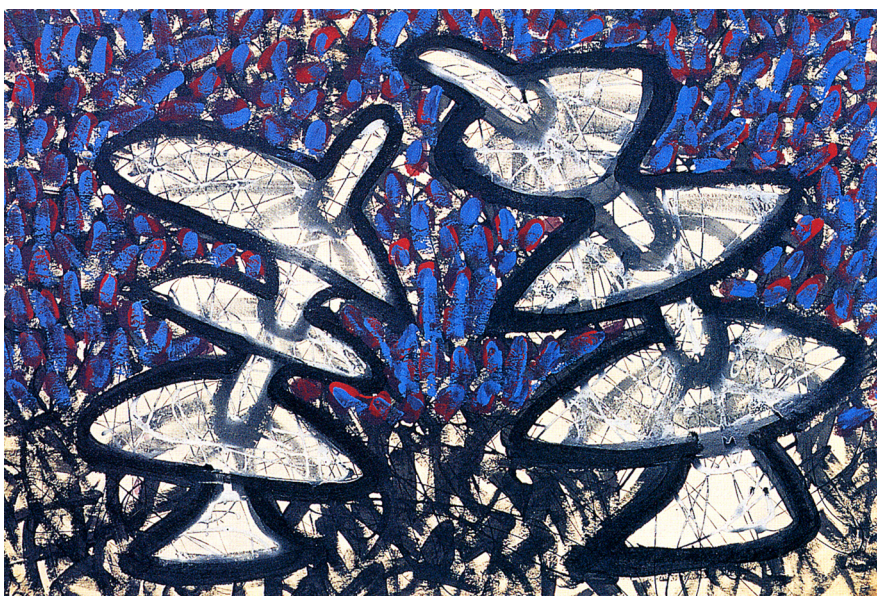


Figure 2. Marie Birchler Suchánková, *Dialog / Dialogue*, 1985, mixed media on paper, 105 x 85 cm, © Marie Birchler Suchánková

the fact that someone (a parent, an authority in the field, a person with a political or institutional position) “vouched” for the applicant, then there could be a kind of “quid pro quo” (financial bribe or “consideration” for medical services) or even a kind of political blackmail.²⁹ The art academies themselves functioned as an inherently elite environment, and it

²⁹ The analysis of the university admissions process was carried out only in the case of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. See Katka Volná, Jakub Jareš, Matěj Spurný, and Klára Pinerová, *Prověřená fakulta*, 307–13.



Figure 3. Eva Prokopcová, *Zevnitř ven / From the Inside Out* (cyklus *Čtverce / Square series*), 1987, oil on canvas, 100 x 90 cm, © Eva Prokopcová

was considered a career achievement for an applicant, some of whom applied for eight years in a row, even to be accepted.

The post-1989 anti-communist oral histories provided by graduates of the AVU and VŠUP are therefore mostly concerned with glossing over who entered the art academies in the 1980s and on what basis. Jiří David, for example, in a self-legitimizing style, recalls the formation of the 1980s generation, to which he belongs, in such a way that 1982 was the first time in many years that a larger group of people entered the AVU solely on the basis of talent and not political favoritism.³⁰ The dynamics of remembrance and the self-positioning of individual artists are partly shaped along the axis of the center versus the periphery, where people from the peripheries are perceived by those from the center as more politically engaged, also in terms of art production (“the boys from Moravia who painted horses”).

The preference for regional applicants is visible in graduate lists at the family level (siblings were often admitted to the same studio), but the individual stories of regional applicants show a rather complicated way to be successful in the admissions process. Two of the Moravian artists interviewed did not get into the AVU at all (Bohuslava Olešová

³⁰ Jiří David, “Tak jo, Konfrontace,” in *Stanislav Diviš* (Prague, 2008), 25, 26.

and Mirka Slámová), and Eva Vejražková from Moravia and Eva Prokopcová from South Bohemia entered it only after many unsuccessful applications. Their stories, like that of Jiří Kornatovský (or the aforementioned Jiří David), illustrates the long-term efforts of people from the “peripheries” who’s lack of social contacts in the capital often played an important role. Kornatovský (born 1952), for example, who came of working-class background and did not graduate from high school until his late twenties, says that it was crucial for him to get a job at the National Gallery in Prague, where he was in charge of building security, which helped him gain insight and orientation in the artistic environment.³¹

Social and cultural capital and its reproduction within the family continued to determine access to the “art world,” which was not much interrupted after 1948.³² Students at art academies were often the children of artists and art historians, whether their parents taught directly at these schools or were otherwise involved in the art world. In terms of class background, my selection of interviewees was random, and this sample shows that, of the seven women artists who studied at the AVU and the VŠUP, five came from “good Prague families”: two had aristocratic roots; there were also families of doctors, lawyers, architects, or intelligentsia; without exception, at least one of the parents had had a university education. The mothers of the artists worked in various professions—translator in foreign trade, researcher at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, mathematician. The only maternal housewife was the wife of Adolf Born, the famous Czech illustrator, which may have been related not only to her husband’s high income, but probably also to the more conservative gender roles that often appeared in the Czechoslovak cultural elite during the period of normalization.

In the 1980s, however, social influence played an increasingly important role, sometimes overshadowing the cadre profile of the applicants. Coming from a family of Charter 77 signatories, Tomáš Císařovský was admitted to the AVU in 1983 on the basis of the “friendship” of his father, the art historian Josef Císařovský with AVU professor Jan Smetana dating back to the 1960s. Similarly, Marie Birchler Suchánková, who had a bad political reputation because of her father (the Catholic poet Jiří Suchánek who spent several years in prison in the 1960s) was admitted to the AVU thanks to the intervention of her professor, with whom she took preparatory art courses at the Václav Hollar Art School, the famous secondary school for fine arts in Prague. Art education also played an important role in recruitment, in terms of the visual style and form of artworks expected in the entrance exams, which were more familiar to people from the capital (thanks, for example, to preparatory courses specializing in academy admissions) than to those from the peripheries. Coming from the periphery, it was far more difficult to establish a network of advisers and counsellors for the admission process.

Despite the limited importance of economic resources (education was free), social and political influence played a crucial role in the admission process to the academy. These influences were not only evident through connections to individual actors who intervened actively in various capacities, but also in facilitating access to information and specific knowledge, which in turn bolstered professional success. Interpreting the extent of gender discrimination in the admission process proves nearly impossible due to the absence of applicant lists in the archives. At the AVU, women artists achieved adequate representation by Czech standards at the time. In the 1980s, the printmaking department saw a graduation rate of 40 percent for women, while the painting studios witnessed rates

³¹ Jiří Kornatovský entered the Academy of Fine Arts in 1982 at the age of thirty. According to his classmate Stanislav Diviš, Kornatovský was the only member of the Communist Party in their class. Kornatovský denied this fact in his interview.

³² According to John Connelly, Czechoslovakia saw the smallest change in the class composition of university students after 1948 compared with Poland and the GDR. One reason for this may have been the fact that the Party structures failed to prepare workers for university study, and traditional patterns of social domination in society remained largely intact. See John Connelly, *Captive University: Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education 1945–1956* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

ranging from 30 to 40 percent. Only the sculpture studios fared worse, with rates between 10 and 20 percent.³³

Informal Social Networking

Once accepted to the academy, it was important for career success to establish good relationships with professors who could help students not only to make further contacts in the art world, but also participate in financially lucrative public and government commissions. The hierarchy of professors and students resulted from the political power of professors, who, as members of the Communist Party, often held various political posts, and whose personal decisions could determine the students' future. At the same time, there was a large generation gap—professors who had been at the AVU for more than two decades (most of them took up their posts in the 1960s) were only gradually replaced by a wave of new teachers during the 1980s, when they were on average around seventy years old. Men were the predominant faculty in all departments except applied arts.³⁴ Not only did female students have no role models to possibly identify with, but this may have contributed to the fact that none of the women artists I interviewed had a good relationship with their professors. Reaching a mutual understanding with professors was more difficult for them than for their male classmates.

The interview with Jaroslav Róna, one of the founding members of Tvrdohlaví, paints a very different picture of his relationships with professors, his social network in the 1980s, and how they came about.³⁵ The story goes that Jaroslav Róna gained acceptance at the VŠUP in Stanislav Libenský's glass studio because Róna was introduced to Libenský by his father's acquaintance, the designer of Libenský's villa. In the interview, Libenský plays the role of a privileged guru for Róna, someone whom he wanted to follow. Although Libenský was not a member of the Communist Party, his considerable political influence came from his international recognition and the privileged position of the glass industry in the Czechoslovak economy, which allowed him to travel to the west and maintain a fairly independent position within the institution. Looking back, Róna interprets his own position at that time as a new generational approach to "career" and lifestyle, in which political opposition to the regime and the individual's "responsibility" to society, as proclaimed by the post-war generation, was no longer important. For his own 1980s generation, he argues, it was crucial to adopt a position that contained no moral appeal. Their work was to be primarily entertainment—something they enjoyed doing and wanted to be successful at.

In his narrative, Róna thus divides the actors in power into "Communists"—those who were members of the Communist Party and were "politically active," whom he wanted "nothing to do with," and those who, because of their significant social or economic status, were able to advance in the system "outside" their political careers within the Party, whom he wanted to become. In his performance, the relationship between Libenský and himself is based on mutual trust, creating the impression of Libenský's studio as a place of "freedom," shielding the students from the "politicized" environment of the rest of the academy.³⁶

Róna's statement reveals not only his strategies aimed at establishing and reproducing social relationships, but also the role that gender played in establishing and maintaining this kind of social network. The meetings between Róna and Libenský were meant to be a performance of traditional masculinity—while discussing works of art, they drank whiskey and smoked Marlboro cigarettes, and Libenský encouraged Róna to make increasingly daring

³³ *Dodatek k Almanachu Akademie výtvarných umění v Praze 1979–1989* (Prague, 1989).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Memory of Nations*, "Jaroslav Róna," at www.memoryofnations.eu/en/rona-jaroslav-1957 (accessed June 12, 2024).

³⁶ For political beliefs and ways of life of different generations in the Czech art scene of the 1980s, see Josef Ledvina, "České umění kolem roku 1980 jako pole kulturní produkce," *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny* 4, no. 9 (2010): 30–55.

experiments in his art. The emphasis on “courage” and the struggle to “do what I want” was a classic trope of this generation, defining itself against “official” art and the structures that were to be used but not taken too seriously; but it is also part of the anti-communist rhetoric that developed after 1989.³⁷ At the same time, even if, as Jiří David claimed in 1988, the generation’s strategy, in terms of its artistic position, could be described as not relating to official politics, the question of which approach to take in building one’s career in late socialism was still a moral dilemma for many, usually based on their family and social background.³⁸ Róna’s classmate, Zdeněk Lhotský, for example, whose family was affected by the post-1968 political purges and who was in contact with dissident circles, saw his classmate’s career approach as morally questionable and too ambitious. Their friendship, however, played a crucial role for Lhotský because later it led to his membership in the Tvrdohlaví group.³⁹

A series of seven exhibitions called *Konfrontace* (Confrontations)—held outside the official framework in private studios and apartments—was a 1980s generation-defining experience. Its aim was to show students’ works of art that were more experimental than those presented in the academies. The initiators of these events were Jiří David and Stanislav Diviš, then students at the AVU in Prague, who asked their classmates and friends to come and exhibit.

This first exhibition was held in Jiří David’s studio in 1984 and featured nineteen men.⁴⁰ Nowadays, the organizers explain the absence of women artists by saying that women artists were not brave enough, or not interested enough, or had nothing to present.⁴¹ But, as Kateřina Štenclová recalls, this had more to do with the lack of socialization of women in the patriarchal art scene: “The men’s world was closed. At parties there was usually a division of collectives into women and men. Shows were arranged by the closed male team in the pub, who would encourage a woman artist to join in here and there, but usually in the background at a designated spot.”⁴² The representation of women steadily increased in later *Konfrontace*, which were held continuously from 1984 to 1987.⁴³ Repetition, a certain formality, and the larger dimensions of the event played a role, making it, first, known to more people “outside the circles of male friends” and, secondly, a more “open” space than the studio of Jiří David, who was known for his negative attitude towards women, whom he did not regard as equal partners in the art world.⁴⁴ “I exhibited for the first time at *Konfrontace V* because Petr Vaněček, a graduate of the AVU and also a friend of my then-husband Vít Vejražka from high school, invited him and me together,” said Eva Vejražková, recalling the male network of the time.

As with the exhibition in David’s studio, another important show, *30 výtvarníků v Lidovém domě* (30 Artists at the People’s House, 1987), exhibited only and exclusively men.⁴⁵ This exhibition, where the 1970s and 1980s generation of artists met for the first time, was again organized by Jiří David, Stanislav Diviš, and Kurt Gebauer, an artist of the 1970s generation. The unofficial framework of these exhibitions, now interpreted as “expressions of freedom,” was

³⁷ On memory politics in post-socialist states, see: James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven, 2010).

³⁸ Jiří David, “Totální distance v období sociální vybledlosti,” in Jiří Ševčík, Pavlína Morganová, and Dagmar Dušková, eds., *České umění 1938–1989* (Prague, 2001), 405, 406.

³⁹ Jiří Olič, ed., *Výtvarná skupina Tvrdohlaví: 1987–1999* (Prague, 1999), 42.

⁴⁰ The number of participants in *Konfrontace I* varies from source to source, but it is always men only.

⁴¹ *Memory of Nations*, “Stanislav Diviš,” at www.memoryofnations.eu/en/divis-stanislav-1953 (accessed June 12, 2024).

⁴² Kateřina Štenclová, email correspondence, October 28, 2022.

⁴³ The representation of women at *Konfrontace II* amounted to 10%. At *Konfrontace* that followed, their representation ranged from 15 to 25%. According to the Archive of Fine Arts, at cs.isabart.org/ (accessed June 12, 2024).

⁴⁴ Jiří David reflected his negative attitude towards women in the art world also in his artistic projects. His exhibition *Věnováno významným pražským kunsthistoričkám* (Dedicated to the Distinguished Women Art Historians of Prague), held at the Pi-Pi-Art Gallery in 1991, was one of the most sexist exhibitions to have been held in the Czech Republic after 1989.

⁴⁵ Jiří David, Stanislav Diviš, and Kurt Gebauer, *Lidový dům Vysočany* (Prague, 1987).

therefore far more gender-discriminatory than the official group exhibitions organized by the state-run Union of Czechoslovak Artists, which tended to have a higher percentage of women artists, partly because they presented a far wider range of visual media.⁴⁶

Konfrontace gave birth to Tvrdohlaví in 1987. The story of how exactly this happened varies from source to source, but Stanislav Diviš and Jiří David from the AVU and Jaroslav Róna from the VŠUP are usually cited as the main protagonists. Allegedly, they met and selected five graduating artists from each of these two institutions, which traditionally compete with each other. David and Diviš had a privileged position in the art scene, mainly because of their pioneering role in *Konfrontace*, but coming from the peripheries themselves, they lacked the social influence possessed by some of their classmates from Prague.

Jaroslav Róna, who had spent two months in the US in 1984 as Libenský's assistant, was the opposite. Although he did not take part in first *Konfrontace*, this extraordinary experience in the west was guaranteed to make a difference. The formation of the art group on the basis of the "list," and the negotiation of the individual names give the impression of a well-considered move, in which people with different kinds of influence were strategically brought together. These were people with middle and upper middle class backgrounds and contacts in Prague (the "golden Prague youth," as Jiří David put it), as well as with the cultural capital and prestige of avant-garde artists and the possibility of monetizing the group's artistic production (the inclusion of Václav Marhouľ, the movie manager and influential post-1989 figure, as the director of the Czech film studio Barrandov, as a member is significant here).⁴⁷

Therefore, it was the informal, non-institutional environment that was crucial for networking in the 1980s. In interviews, the members of Tvrdohlaví reconstructed the image of this era mostly through a series of stories about who was "friends" with whom, and from which friendships, rock bands, and parties each art project was born. The camaraderie between the men here acted as the main driver of the cultural scene. Contacts between them took place mainly on two platforms: sports, including boxing and fencing, and leisure activities, such as sauna, pub visits, and attendance at events like concerts and carnivals that proliferated in the 1980s. Their statements give a sense of the 1980s lifestyle as a successful combination of work and entertainment. Through mutual acquaintances (for example, Róna met Václav Havel shortly before 1989), contacts were made that were crucial for Tvrdohlaví (in this case because it was Havel who negotiated their most important exhibitions in the west in the early 1990s). This may have happened during a visit to a restaurant after a sauna with his friend from the film industry; Róna recalled that it was a pure coincidence. In fact, such encounters were the result of a dense and diverse social network. In the case of the Tvrdohlaví, at a time when the art scene was newly opening up to hybrid formats, it included various people working in the fields of visual arts, architecture, music, theatre production, and even film, with different political and institutional positions.

In short, the inclusion of women artists in the art world of late socialism was poor. Artists discussed collaboration on art projects in the informal setting of pubs, where adherence to traditional gender norms resulted in limited invitations to women. Even those who collaborated with male artists rarely took leadership roles in projects. Similarly, stronger informal contacts between female classmates were not common, nor was there much intergenerational collaboration between women artists. Furthermore, given their role as primary caregivers (four of my interviewees had children while at the academy), their contacts with women tended to occur outside the art world, which hindered their career. Choosing a male artist as a life partner could potentially "elevate" their status within the scene, providing access to better information and contacts, and gaining more respect, as the status of women artists was to some extent derived from their association with a respected partner.

⁴⁶ Marianna Placáková and Eva Skopalová, "Ženy vystavující, ženy vystavené. Oficiální výstavní politika v období tzv. normalizace," *Sešit pro teorii, umění a příbuzné zóny* 13, no. 26 (2019): 86–118.

⁴⁷ *Memory of Nations*, "Jiří David," at www.memoryofnations.eu/cs/david-jiri-1956 (accessed June 12, 2024).



Figure 4. Eva Vejražková, *Figura planoucí / Blazing Figure*, 1988, acrylic on hardboard, 200 cm, © Eva Vejražková

This phenomenon is evident in the prominence of Margita Titlová Ylovsky and Erika Bornová, who today are among the most “visible” women artists of the 1980s generation, in part through partnerships with the successful artists Vladimír Merta and Tomáš Císařovský. There are also cases of artists giving up their own careers in favor of their husbands, however, such as Eva Skálová and Milada Gabrielová, wives of two members of Tvrdohlaví. Nadja Rawa, who experimented mainly in the field painting (Figure 4), describes how her divorce from Tvrdohlaví member Čestmír Suška in 1982 contributed to the cooling of her relations within the art scene and led to open conflicts at joint exhibitions; for example, in the form of arguments, when Jaroslav Róna shouted at her: “Who asked you to butt in among us sculptors?,” at the *Barevná plastika* (Colored Sculpture) exhibition in 1988. Collaboration with male artists often meant a lack of recognition for the work of women artists who worked in pairs or in larger groups. The use of the authorial input, insights and opinions of female partners, who also provided emotional and practical support to their male artist partners, was common.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Petruška Šustrová, “Rodinný portrét v interiéru. Rozhovory s manželkami umělců,” *Výtvarné umění* 4, no. 1 (1993): 69–75.

1989 and the 1990s

With the founding of the Czech political movement Civic Forum during the revolution of 1989, the process of “replacing” those in power began. In the case of Czech art, this manifested itself to a large extent in the institutions and art academies into which many representatives of the 1980s generation, all men, managed to enter right at the beginning of the 1990s, replacing the old cultural elite.⁴⁹ After the change in political discourse, the persecution of people by the state socialist regime was a newly appreciated experience, and “unofficial art” became a major interest in art historical research, which continues to carry its moral significance to this day.⁵⁰ This shift raised the question of the political and civic position of individual participants in the pre-1989 art scene. Unlike writers, however, visual artists before 1989 operated in much more “blurred contours” between the “unofficial” and “official” frameworks that guaranteed them material conditions for their work; for example, they represented a negligible percentage of those who had signed Charter 77. So it was a complicated business, based on many factors, to assess “who belonged where.” Zdeněk Lhotský recalls that after 1989 he was given the opportunity to join the ranks of artists who had been discriminated against by the socialist regime and whose works were newly acquired by the National Gallery. But as he felt no trace of discrimination on the part of the official structures against him and Tvrdohlaví, whose work was appreciated by some authorities before 1989, he refused the offer.⁵¹ Since then, however, the public image of Tvrdohlaví as heroic and non-conformist, fighting against official structures has emerged and their mythologization has begun to take shape.

The women artists I interviewed used adjectives such as “depressing,” “terribly exhausting,” “stressful,” “cramped,” or “suffocating” to describe the 1980s. At the same time, they also expressed ambivalent feelings about the transition to the new social order after 1989. One of the most important changes that affected them was the change in economic and financial conditions. Almost all of the interviewees lost their studios through privatization. The Union of Czechoslovak Artists was dissolved, and its policy of scholarships and grants disappeared, as did the possibility of earning extra money by selling artworks through the state-owned company Dílo (Work).⁵² Foreign dealers increased their purchases of Czech art, which, in retrospect, had been sold to them by local artists for ridiculously little money. The art market was slow to develop, and state support for the arts was negligible compared to before 1989. With a sense of disillusionment, they also describe their surprise at the rapid change in values, coupled with the commercialization of the art world, which for some posed a moral dilemma, with more intense competition between artists, or newly emerging disputes between the Czech and Slovak art scenes.

At that time, new institutional structures began to develop, and with them the phenomenon of private commercial galleries. One of the trendsetters was undoubtedly the MXM gallery in Prague, where a circle of the new post-1989 elite—from artists and actors to politicians—gathered for openings. Since its foundation in 1990, the gallery owner, the lawyer Tomáš Procházka, was working on the gallery program together with art historians Jana

⁴⁹ Of the men of the 1980s generation who entered the AVU in the early 1990s (including Igor Korpaczewski, Jan Pištěk, Vladimír Skrepl, Jiří Kovanda, Otto Placht), Vladimír Kokolia has worked the longest and has been the head of the Graphics Studio II since 1992.

⁵⁰ “Zakázané umění I,” *Výtvarné umění* 6, no. 3–4, (1995); “Zakázané umění II,” *Výtvarné umění* 7, no. 1–2, (1996); Josef Alan, ed., *Alternativní kultura. Příběh české společnosti 1945–1989* (Prague, 2001).

⁵¹ Jiří Olič, *Výtvarná skupina Tvrdohlaví*, 43.

⁵² The policy included grants of various types and forms—to realize a work of art or to move away from the center, scholarships for emerging artists, travel grants, financial contributions to exhibition projects and the construction of studios, and various forms of financial support for vacations, medical treatment, or the birth or death of a family member. See Alena Binarová, “Svaz výtvarných umělců v českých zemích v letech 1956–1972” (PhD diss., Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2016), 42, online at https://theses.cz/id/ucqq4i/disertace_Binarova.pdf?verze=2017;info=1 (accessed July 1, 2024).

and Jiří Ševčíks. Born in the early 1940s, they belonged to the most important personalities of the 1990s art scene. Working in public institutions—Jiří Ševčík as a curator at the National Gallery and the Prague City Gallery, and later both as academics at the AVU in Prague, where Jiří Ševčík founded the Academic Research Centre in 1997—and at the same time representing the private gallery sector, their positions as curators were defining for the 1980s generation. The story goes back to the mid-1980s, when the Ševčíks visited *Konfrontace* and came into contact with the exhibiting artists. Having translated the texts of the postmodernist architectural theorists Robert Venturi and Charles Jencks since the 1970s, they soon became the main curators and theoreticians of this Prague “circle” of artists. As early as the late 1980s, Ševčíks’ texts and exhibition projects were an attempt to define these artists as a generation. Neither in their programmatic text, *Saying Goodbye to Modernism: Four Reflections on Painting*, published in 1985, nor in any generation-defining exhibition—*Prague Days in Moscow: Painting of the 1980s Generation*, *Description of a Match: Czech Avant-garde of the 1980s*, or *Young Art of the 1980s from Czechoslovakia*—have they ever included a single woman artist.⁵³ This attitude also affected their curatorial practice in the 1990s, when they did not invite women artists of the 1980s generation to participate in the dozens of local or international exhibitions they curated, many of which played an important representative role for Czech art production abroad.⁵⁴ Having cooperated with a fairly narrow circle of artists, their favorite ones came from the “male circle” of Tvrdohlaví, as well as younger artists who emerged in the 1990s. Under their curatorship, the program of the MXM gallery had a very masculine character, with a strong male line-up, even more than was usual at the time.⁵⁵ As the most important curators of the 1990s, they therefore had a significant impact on the careers of individual artists, both symbolically and financially.

Changing Stratification Regimes

Coming back to the question of how and when the generation of the 1980s was constructed and canonized, the first step in the exclusion of women artists from the “story of art” can be traced back to the end of the 1980s. Since the 1980s generation is usually perceived as a generation of postmodernism, the Czech art historian Josef Ledvina asked what criteria art historians used to include individual artists in the generational narrative of the 1980s when their artistic production was as aesthetically diverse as their relationship to postmodern art itself. In this sense, the Ševčíks’ lack of support for women artists of the 1980s generation can be explained by their inspiration from the Italian Transavantgarde and other Neo-expressionist painting movements, in which women artists were also absent. In addition, the visual style of Margita Titlová Ylovsky and Erika Bornová may have been too “feminine” for them, as Ledvina put it.⁵⁶

The re-masculinization of art practices was undoubtedly a common phenomenon that affected both the west and the east in the 1980s, where the recuperation of painting was carried out “exclusively by boys’ clubs” as a reaction to the more pluralistic 1970s, when many women artists appeared on the scene (in the US, but also in Poland, Hungary, and

⁵³ Jana Ševčíková and Jiří Ševčík, “Loučení s modernismem. Čtyři úvahy o malbě,” in Terezie Nekvindová, ed., *Jana Ševčíková—Jiří Ševčík. Texty* (Prague, 2010), 188–200; *Dny Prahy v Moskvě. Malířství generace 80. let* (Art Exhibit, Palace of Youth, Moscow, 1988); *Popis jednoho zápasu. Česká výtvarná avantgarda 80. let* (Art Exhibit, Gallery of Modern Art, Roudnice n. L, 1989); *Junge Kunst der 80er Jahre aus der Tschechoslowakei* (Art Exhibit, Galerie der Künstler, Munich, 1991).

⁵⁴ Kateřina Lahodová, “Galerie MXM” (Master thesis, Charles University, 2017), online at <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/93148> (accessed July 1, 2024).

⁵⁵ The gallery’s core artists included Jiří David, Stanislav Diviš, Jaroslav Róna, Michal Gabriel, Tomáš Císařovský, Jiří Kovanda, and Jan Merta.

⁵⁶ Josef Ledvina, *Postmoderna v Čechách: Teorie v praxi / Praxe v teorii* (PhD diss., Charles University, 2019), 116, 118.



Figure 5. Nadja Rawa, *K obrazu svému / In Your Own Image*, 1987, mixed media, 680 x 260 cm, © Nadja Rawa

Yugoslavia).⁵⁷ Regardless of the medium, more male, sometimes chauvinistic groups, such as Łódź Kaliska in Poland, began to assert themselves in the east as part of the neo-avant-garde or counterculture of the period.⁵⁸ On the other hand, it certainly did not change the fact that women artists in socialist countries pursued postmodern painting and sculpture. Many of my interviewees also worked with postmodern approaches or aesthetics. Bohuslava Olešová, Marie Birchler Suchánková, and Eva Prokopcová made large-format expressive color objects and drawings. Nadja Rawa mixed styles between painting, photography, and objects. Eva Vejražková focused on “wild” paintings outside the rectangular format that were transformed into installations (Figure 5).

It would also be too simplistic to answer the question as to why the Ševčíks did not include women in their curatorial choices by saying that they simply followed western trends in which female artists were not very prominent or “feminine” art styles were not promoted, as Ledvina suggested. There is no doubt that in addition to these international trends, local conditions also played an important role in the formation of a representative image of the 1980s Czech artist generation. For example, as mentioned earlier, a very important factor

⁵⁷ Bojana Pejić, *Gender Check, A Reader: Art and Theory in Eastern Europe* (Cologne, 2010), 23. For collaborative projects among women artists in Europe in the 1970s, see: Agata Jakubowska, Katy Deepwell, eds., *All-Women Art Spaces in Europe in the Long 1970s* (Liverpool, 2021).

⁵⁸ For the Polish context of the 1980s art scene: Katarzyna Kułakowska, *Błażnice. Kobiety kontrkultury teatralnej w Polsce* (Warsaw, 2017). I am grateful to art historian Wiktoria Szczupacka for this information.

for an art career in the 1980s in Czechoslovakia was the intensive and mostly unofficial networking scene, in which women artists did not participate to the same extent as their male colleagues.

Political transformation in eastern Europe has attracted the attention of many sociologists, who have focused on how political, social, and economic developments after 1989 have affected social stratification.⁵⁹ One of the most important contributions to the research of social change and elite formation after 1989 was made by the team of sociologists, Gil Eyal, Iván Széleányi, and Eleanor Townsley, who argued in their comparative study that communism and post-communism were different stratification regimes in which the dominance of different types of capital (economic, cultural, and social) that an individual had to possess in order to succeed within the political and social structures differed significantly.⁶⁰ During the Stalinist period, they argued, economic resources posed challenges while cultural status held minimal significance and gained relevance only when intertwined with social connections formalized through Communist Party affiliation as a form of political influence. Beginning in the 1960s, both economic prosperity and cultural prestige experienced a resurgence, although political influence remained the primary avenue for advancement. Following 1989, the influence of political connections waned as they were dismantled, and the significance of pre-1989 social networks diminished. These networks proved beneficial only to individuals possessing cultural capital, which emerged as the predominant asset in post-socialist societies.

One of the reasons for the lack of women artists in the generation of the 1980s, in contrast to the generation of the 1960s, is therefore primarily a change in the stratification regimes. The strong generation of women artists of the 1960s emerged from the upheaval of the traditional gender order in the Stalinist period, which was underpinned by the expropriation of private property and the political ideologization of the art world. As a result, many of the women artists who had entered the art academies a decade earlier became visible and “successful” on the Czechoslovak art scene in the 1960s. The emerging careers of women artists of the 1970s generation were interrupted by “normalization” and the loss of contacts with the west. In comparison with the previous generation, they had fewer opportunities to exhibit and to receive information (the magazines *Výtvarné umění* and *Výtvarná práce* on contemporary art were banned in the early 1970s). Nevertheless, they were active in the local art scene, and thanks to state support for artistic production at that time, they had the opportunity to work on their art works on a daily basis.

The generation of women artists of the 1980s was at a comparative disadvantage because they were already in a different situation, in which the importance of de-institutionalized, informal, mostly male-dominated contacts in the art world was growing (and with it the newly introduced all-male exhibitions). As the socialist regime was increasingly losing its legitimacy, women’s emancipation was also called into question, and the return of the traditional gender order was generally welcomed. The second and most important step in their neglect occurred after 1989 when state socialist support for the art production ceased and the importance of social contacts for career success actually increased.

To answer the question of who in the Czech society benefited the most from 1989 in terms of social mobility, sociologists Pavel Machonin and Milan Tuček used three models.⁶¹ The first one was the “replacement,” which entailed the substitution of the old political elite

⁵⁹ Ivan Széleányi, Donald J. Treiman and Petr Matějů, “Vývoj sociální stratifikace a rekrutace elit ve východní Evropě po roce 1989: Výzkumný projekt,” *Sociologický časopis* 27, no. 3 (1991): 276–98; Ivan Széleányi and Szonja Széleányi, “Circulation or Reproduction of Elites during the Postcommunist Transformation of Eastern Europe,” *Theory and Society* 24 (1995): 615–38; Petr Matějů and Nelson Lim, “Who Has Gotten Ahead After the Fall of Communism? The Case of Czech Republic,” *Czech Sociological Review* 3, no. 2 (1995): 117–36.

⁶⁰ Eyal, Széleányi and Townsley, *Making Capitalism Without Capitalists*, 17–45.

⁶¹ Pavel Machonin, Milan Tuček, *Zrod a další vývoj nových elit v České republice: Od konce osmdesátých let 20. století do jara 2002* (Prague, 2002).

with a new one. This transition resulted in the interruption of the “careers” of people who enjoyed great political prominence before 1989, a factor perceived as strongly negative by the new political regime. Then there was the “circulation” of elites (the return of people who had been politically suspended after 1968, or newly emerging elites as a result of property restitutions). In the latter case, the “reproduction” of elites meant the adaptation of the state socialist elites to the new post-1989 conditions, and thus the continuity of careers, which mainly affected expert circles (doctors, architects, lawyers, and technicians). In the case of culture and the humanities, Machonin and Tuček saw discontinuity (“replacement”) in careers as a guiding principle because of the greater role played by the political and ideological contexts of professions in these fields.⁶²

The case of the art scene, however, is much more complex than Machonin and Tuček suggested. In contrast to underground musical and literary production of the pre-1989 period, which was widely recognized after 1989 (the rock band *The Plastic People of the Universe*, for example, as a main symbol of the opposition to the state-socialist regime), underground visual artists did not receive this recognition. Rather, they made art during the normalization period without official training, outside the official art structures, and without following the contemporary development of art or contacts with the art world itself.⁶³ Their visual production was not perceived as aesthetically progressive by post-1989 art institutional actors and, unlike music bands such as *The Plastic People of the Universe* or *DG 307*, underground visual artists did not have the strong symbolic capital to turn into “career success.” Aside from influential communists having their careers interrupted after 1989, the Czech art world was also often characterized by a continuity of dominance in the visual arts by a small number of families whose members had been professionally successful across political regimes. The Skálas family can serve as an example: František Skála (1923–2011), who had a career in the 1950s and 1960s, his son František Skála (b. 1956), who made it in the 1980s and 1990s, and his granddaughter Alžběta Skálová (b. 1982), a contemporary Czech artist. At the same time, even if an artist’s career was interrupted after 1989, the generation of his or her children had a better chance of “succeeding” in the art world thanks to the reproduction of social and cultural capital in artistic families.

According to Eyal, Szelényi, and Townsley, the main winners in 1989 were not only former dissident intellectuals who helped overthrow the state socialist regime but also educated, middle-aged men, technocrats and managers who had held institutional senior positions in the 1980s. Uncompromised politically, they also had cultural and social advantages in the form of informal ties. Although this was not a circle of experts, the career of the art theorist Jiří Ševčík could be described in a similar way. From 1966 to 1989, he worked continuously as a researcher at the Department of Theory and Development of Architecture at the ČVUT (Czech Technical University in Prague), which in practice was much less politicized than the humanities-oriented universities. Unlike the more “politically active” professors at the AVU, who lost their prestige in 1989, Jiří Ševčík managed to multiply his authority many times over. His position after 1989 was powerful for several reasons. Not only did he and his wife, Jana Ševčíková, translate western theory and also follow western art practices as much as possible, but they also had international contacts and curated exhibitions in the west already before 1989. In the aftermath of 1989, Ševčík was able to capitalize on these international contacts due to his dominant cultural and social status in the art world.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶³ This was mostly visual production created in underground communities during the normalization period. The Vokno Gallery in West Bohemia, run by Silvestra and Jaroslav Chnápeks, signatories of Charter 77 and former members of the underground community, now exhibits a circle of these artists today. As far as research is concerned, the Czech underground movement before 1989 is studied as a social or political phenomenon, but scholars focus only on music and literature in terms of the artistic production that emerged from it; see Martin Machovec, *Writing Underground: Reflections on Samizdat Literature in Totalitarian Czechoslovakia* (Prague, 2019); Jiří Kostúr and František Stárek, *Baráky. Souostroví svobody* (Prague, 2011).

Ševčík's influential position after 1989 was also based on his role as a theorist and curator of the 1980s generation, however, which he helped to shape (it is significant that although Ševčíks worked together on curatorial projects, it was he who received the most important institutional positions after 1989). The exhibition *Popis jednoho zápasu*, organized in December 1989 and featuring twenty-one men in their thirties, could thus be understood not only as a symbolic image of the exclusivity of the Czech art scene in the following years, but also as a strategic statement by the Ševčíks themselves. In the catalog text, they created an exuberant image of a young generation that was free, unburdened by the past, rejecting conservative academic careers, and therefore destined to take a leading role in future development.⁶⁴ In this way, they constructed an image of the nonconformity of this generation, an image that was valued after the political change and of which they themselves became a part.

Although the women artists of the 1980s generation had good education and cultural status, they, unlike many of their male counterparts, lacked the social connections that would allow them to “make it” in the early 1990s. As a result, their stories took different paths. Emigration to the west, usually by getting married, was a common phenomenon (Marie Birchler Suchánková and Magdalena Rajnišová emigrated to Switzerland, Martina Riedlbauchová to Great Britain, Katarzyna Czerpak to the US), and many began working in the public sector—in education and as curators or gallery workers (Bohuslava Olešová, Erika Pfeifferová, Nadja Rawa, Kateřina Štenclová, Eva Vejražková). Of the artists I contacted, Erika Bornová was the only one who made a living as an artist, not only because she had better contacts in the art world through her husband Tomáš Císařovský (with whom she often exhibited), but also because she probably “inherited” art world connections from her father, the well-known illustrator Adolf Born. On the other hand, it is worth noting that almost all of the interviewees continue their artistic activities in various forms and intensities to this day.

As far as the careers of the male artists of this generation are concerned, those who managed to be both “in” and “out” of the official structures in the 1980s fared best. Studying in the art academies, exhibiting in official galleries, and wanting to succeed in their careers in official structures, they also had a history of participating in unofficial exhibitions in order to break away from previous generations. The myth of the nonconformist, rebellious, and anti-establishment artists was then used politically to legitimize them in the post-1989 narrative. Through their curatorial and theoretical activities before and after 1989, the Ševčíks played a significant role in defining the “1980s generation without women artists,” and their acclaimed narrative influenced other actors on the art scene. Art collector Richard Adam, for example, claims to have used MXM gallery's exhibition schedule as a guide to what to buy as he built the largest collection of Czech art of the 1980s generation.⁶⁵

When Adam's collection was exhibited in 2006 and 2010, they were the first projects to historicize the painting of the 1980s generation with the catalog texts written by art historians such as the Ševčíks and Alena Pomajzlová or the Czech sociologist and lawyer Jiří Přibáň, and also with Margita Titlová Ylovsky as the only female artist represented.⁶⁶ These two exhibitions have undoubtedly provided the most comprehensive overview of this generation to date (in 2013, Jiří Přibáň published the book *Pictures of Czech Postmodernism*, based on the selection of artists presented).⁶⁷ Together with the systematic exclusion of women artists from exhibition projects since the 1980s and the lack of innovative research on this topic, these are the main reasons why the contemporary canon of Czech art history published by the Czech Academy of Sciences or the concept of the permanent exhibition at the

⁶⁴ Ševčíková and Ševčík, *Popis jednoho zápasu*.

⁶⁵ Richard Adam, “Slovo sběratele,” in Alena Pomajzlová, ed., *Česká malba 1985–2005. Sbírka Richarda Adama* (Brno, 2010), 9–11.

⁶⁶ *Czech Painting 1985–2005: The Richard Adam Collection* (Brno, 2006); Pomajzlová, *1984–1995*.

⁶⁷ Jiří Přibáň, *Pictures of Czech Postmodernism* (Prague, 2013).

National Gallery in Prague were constructed without the presence of women artists of the 1980s generation.

Several factors are responsible for the fact that the canon of Czech art history fails to include women artists of the 1980s generation. These were the results of structural mechanisms that put women artists who entered the scene in the 1980s at a disadvantage compared to previous generations of women artists, as the importance of institutional structures diminished and informal networking began to play an increasing role in career success. Combined with the re-emergence of macho culture in the 1980s art scene, the persistence of traditional gender roles in the home, and the loss of more substantial state support for artistic production after 1989, there were so many negative factors for this generation of women artists at once that most turned to other careers in the 1990s. The study of this phenomenon has shown how important it is for feminist art history to examine structural mechanisms as a complex intersectional and interdisciplinary problem, because only from this perspective can we see the complex and multilayered processes of gendered exclusion.

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