

OF BOXES AND CEILINGS

Arts and Gender



Pascale Charhon
September 2016

picture: Free Pussy Riot in Berlin by Mentalgassi (source: [Urban Art Core](#))



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About

Gender relates to the most intimate part of the human self – identity. The individual identity is in constant tension with the social self, and the arts bring this tension to light – be it through autobiographical elements or by reflecting the situation of larger communities or society. Arts that stage (in any form) such a sensitive and intimate topic of gender identity resonate deeply with audiences and can lead them to reconsider their vision, their gaze, ultimately their own identity.

This Fresh Perspectives publication deals with a complex and delicate topic whose borders are often blurred. It highlights some crucial points – the definition of genders, gender identity, feminism, gender bias and discrimination – that intertwine in a complex individual and social web. It seeks to clarify some terms while acknowledging that there is no clear consensus, even in the academic field, but only general agreement on them. It focuses on the insoluble tension between the individual and the social and respectfully suggests possible ways to use this tension creatively in order to advance society.

The gender issue is a clear example of obvious binaries that limit our vision of reality – the binary male/female, of gender roles, and their false competition. Art can complicate the story, it can let us think outside the norms, the habits, the obvious binaries that way too often limit our perception of reality but also our imagination. Two outstanding men – Brecht and Mayakovsky – have been attributed with the famous quote ‘Art should not be a mirror to reflect society but a hammer with which to disrupt it’ – but this is also a binary opposition. We prefer to keep in mind the words of author, feminist and social activist bell hooks: ‘Not only will I stare, I want my look to change reality’. Maybe that’s what the arts should do – stare daringly at reality and change it.

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IETM

IETM is a network of over 500 performing arts organisations and individual members working in the contemporary performing arts worldwide: theatre, dance, circus, interdisciplinary live art forms, new media.

IETM advocates for the value of the arts and culture in a changing world and empowers performing arts professionals through access to international connections, knowledge and a dynamic forum for exchange.

PASCALE CHARHON

Pascale Charhon is a Consultant in European Affairs providing consultancy services in the area of European Union policies and fundamental rights through her own consultancy Charhon Consultants since 2012. Prior to launching her consultancy, Pascale held senior management positions in several prominent civil society organisations, and was engaged in advocacy and research led project based activities covering areas such as non-discrimination, diversity management, gender equality and intercultural education. She works with European civil society organisations and trade unions, including from the live performance, media and entertainment sectors.

Gender and social change in their artistic expression are very much related to the recognition and acknowledgement of the engineering of processes of 'in-clusion and ex-clusion' related to sexual identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity and race. The debates on gender and artistic expressions have been closely associated to political, social and economic changes which Western societies have experienced in the 20th century and where some of the legacy of engrained patterns and norms has been gradually questioned. Feminist pioneering work in the US and Europe have over the last decades played a key role in promoting inclusive perspectives and advocating gender equality mainstreaming. The recognition of the presence of women as subjects in art history, the questioning of the normative binary order man/woman, the redefinition of the socially constructed boundaries related to gender, the debates related to sexual orientation and hetero-normativity along with the recognition of LGBTI identities are among the important ingredients of the conversations at hand. Those trends have helped to shape the way in which artists have been reflecting and portraying gender in their artistic practice throughout the latest decades.

01. INTRODUCTION

Unlike sex, which indicates whether a person is biologically male or female, gender refers to people's internal perception and experience of maleness and femaleness, and the social construction that allocates certain behaviours to male and female roles. Gender has, over the last decades, become a topical issue in various forms of contemporary artistic expression and notably in relation to movements or groups in their efforts to become disenfranchised by the mainstream dominant 'male-dominated culture'. It also enjoys the status of a fully-fledged category in the sociology of the arts. The twentieth century feminist movement played an important role in addressing the topic of gender through new lenses that considered the role of women as both creators and subjects of important artworks. Contemporary feminist and LGBTI movements also brought renewed perspectives and debates about the ways gender affects personality, relationships, and is expressed in the various forms of contemporary artistic practices¹.

The understanding and definition of both gender and art have been impacted by the beliefs, practices, social and political norms that characterise a given society at a given time in a given location. Culture is part of the fabric of every society as it shapes the way things are done and our understanding of why it should be so. Gender identities and gender relations are critical aspects of culture because they shape the way daily life is lived in the family surroundings but also in the wider community, in schools and the workplace. Societies and cultures are also not static: they are living entities and they are continually being renewed and reshaped. And so are gender identities and gender relations. Gender influences social relations producing activities, spaces, registers, representations and practices associated with 'masculine' and 'feminine' characteristics (grace and ability to listen, emotionalism, passive seduction, virility, self assertion, etc.).

Another element to acknowledge is that the sociology of arts and gender is still a young subject within the sphere of social sciences and its terminology is also in constant evolution. As regards language, in particular, one should be aware of certain attempts of negative instrumentalisation of the debates on gender identities and expressions by conservative political forces, that have recently denounced 'gender theory' as an 'imported' concept which would be a threat to the traditional family

values in European society². Therefore, our approach is to recognise that the conversation about arts and gender is not static but part of a continuously evolving debate.

The main objective of this publication is to reflect on some of the ways in which contemporary artists explore, or challenge, traditional gender distinctions within the realm of artistic activities and how they can promote social change. The text builds on the contributions of artists in various disciplines - photography, painting and performing arts, as well as the creative industries - to examine how personal experiences of daily life, interpretations of historical events and artists' own commitment to social or political agendas, can encourage society to question some common assumptions about gender identities. The question of social change adds an analytical ground which has led many artists to discuss pressing issues, like diversity/equality, race/ethnicity, inclusion/discrimination, inextricably linked to gender expression.

In the first place, the text aims to clarify the concepts and underlying themes of arts and gender from the perspective of social science theories that influenced the contemporary arts movement in the first part of the 20th century. The publication then explores the main topics related to 'gender' tackled by contemporary arts expressions, as well as by arts history, and explores how contemporary artistic practices address the issues at hand. Finally we address the role of the arts in fostering social change notably by questioning and challenging traditional assumptions about gender expressions. With the hope of clarifying the linguistic difficulties mentioned above, an attached annex includes a glossary of the most commonly used terms related to gender identities and sexual orientations, with the definitions used by leading human rights organisations in Europe and the US.

¹ The terms 'in-clusion' and ex-clusion' come from an interview of the Author with Prof. Buikema (Professor of Art, Culture and Diversity at Utrecht University), January 2016

² For instance, this debate has surfaced during the demonstrations against same sex marriage in France in 2012 and 2013, while in Italy - where a law about same-sex marriage was fiercely debated at the time of writing - conservative parties use the English word 'gender' instead of the Italian equivalent 'genere'.

This publication has sought to explore how the arts intersect gender issues in different – mostly European – countries, knowing that the debates on gender equality and LGBTI issues are been very much impacted by the political environment prevailing at the national level. Differences in the way different countries – and their artistic scenes – tackle the gender issue go beyond the scope of this publication and would need to be addressed more specifically.

02.

GENDER AND THE ARTS: A REVIEW OF CONCEPTS

The ways we behave and express ourselves are shaped by the cultures in which we participate. Since the early twentieth century, philosophers, social scientists and historians have theorised that the roles, characteristics and activities that distinguish men from women are not innate but socially constructed. The concept of **gender identity** saw the light and can be defined as **a cultural and social construction of masculinity and femininity**. According to Professor Marie Buscatto, 'gender is a concept aiming to give an account of the social processes of production, legitimisation, transgression and transformation of hierarchised, sexualised differences between men and women'. Certain principles set by society aim to 'naturalise' such differences and to stigmatise any behaviour going against them¹. So, in Buscatto's view, **gender presentations in art or gendered artistic practices are the outcome of the cultural process of defining sexual and social identity**. At the same time, as we will examine in the following sections, the visual and performing arts, as means of expression through transformation and stylisation, are among the most powerful media to reflect on this cultural process and to create and embody the alternatives.

¹ M. Buscatto, 'Sociologies du genre', Paris, Armand Colin, 2014

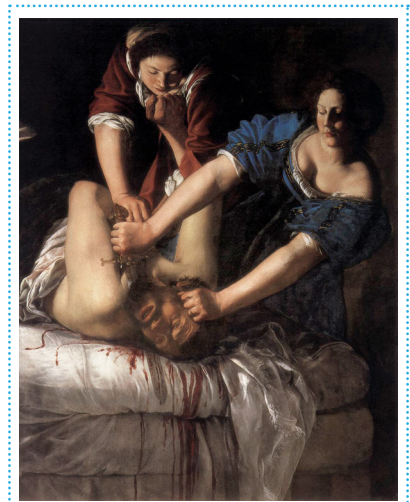
The concept of gender in its modern expression has been closely associated to a movement of women's emancipation and the twentieth-century emergence of feminism, as women have sought to obtain the rights, privileges and unique forms of expression that men have enjoyed historically in patriarchal societies where the roles of class, race and sexuality were defined by the dominant gender. The emergence of feminist art history since the 1960s resulted in a critical reflection of the representation of the woman as a subject, creator and spectator of arts but it also inspired a broader redefinition of the portraying of gender in artistic practices.

Gendered roles and their artistic expression have historically been rooted in assumptions based on the cultural and social norms prevailing in society. For example, the ancient Egyptians and Greeks developed formal methods for representing the ideal human figure in art, with males being presented as strong and athletic, while females appeared demure. Artworks depicting men have historically referred to powerful male bodies or leadership roles. In contrast, women have tended to be shown in artworks either as passive, eroticised subjects who existed solely for the viewer's pleasure, or, alternately, in the role of nurturers in domestic scenarios.

Throughout the Western world and for many centuries women had far fewer opportunities than men to become artists and attend formal artistic education, and when allowed it was not at the same level: for example, women were not allowed to draw from the nude in their art classes until the nineteenth century. In theatre women only made their way to the European stage in the 17th/18th century (female roles being interpreted by men and boys till that date), to play their parts in a repertoire dominated by male playwrights staging male protagonists.

Women artists were rarely given the recognition granted to their male counterparts. It was also believed that 'genius' was a trait exclusively available to men, and language with a gender bias—such as the word 'masterpiece' to describe a great

work — reinforced that belief². Before the 1970s few people even acknowledged that women had largely been excluded from the institutions and systems that produced 'serious' artists. In many cases, successful women had simply been written out of the history of art. The Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi, for example, enjoyed an impressive reputation in the seventeenth century, but her efforts were eventually forgotten, only to be rediscovered in the early twentieth century.



Artemisia Gentileschi, 'Judith Slaying Holofernes' (source: Web Gallery of Art)

² Incidentally, the English language offers plenty of examples of nouns and adjectives whose feminine version took on a negative connotation, as Guardian columnist David Shariatmadari [recently highlighted](#). On the other hand, it offers interesting opportunities to play with words, for instance talking about herstory instead of history

03.

SHIFTING GENDERS

Cross-gender figures emerged in the twentieth century in several artistic domains, mirroring the new presentations on gender roles in society and culture. French Claude Cahun and Mexican Frida Kahlo, affiliated to the Surrealist movement in the 1930s, are two prominent examples: their masculine appearance in self-portraits testifies to a growing effort to legitimise broader gender boundaries while being a statement of an assertive femininity. The female artists mirror or double their own images and stretch the boundaries of gender and sexual representation in order to challenge hetero-normative conceptions of gender identity and to emphasise the fluidity of gender, refusing to adhere to statically masculine or feminine characteristics.

The American photographer Diane Arbus (1923–71) was fascinated by subjects that crossed established boundaries, including conventional gender distinctions. She made direct, even confrontational pictures of people outside the mainstream, such as the extremely small and tall people, twins and sword swallows that she met at sideshows, carnivals and circuses. Her photograph 'Hermaphrodite with a Dog' conveys her subject's experience of being both male and female and, at the same time, not conforming to either gender, adds up to a shocking reality. The spectacle of the hermaphrodite's dual nature is highlighted in the visible juxtaposition between the feminine costume, make-up, and clean-shaven right side and the masculine tattoo, wrist-watch, and hairy body on the left.

The change in gender identity and the emergence of cross-gender figures was boosted by creative industries and commercial culture. New fashion designs for women acknowledged elements designating traditional masculine features, and gender-neutral clothing with tailored suits for women has been a particular feature of modern fashion trends, magnified in the last 40 years by designers such as Yves Saint Laurent. Music industries icons such as Annie Lennox or David Bowie were also

known for their famous androgynous looks. A huge number of films deal with different aspects of gender issues – the topic is the background for diverse works ranging from 'Victor Victoria' (1982), 'Yentl' (1983), 'Orlando' (1992) and 'The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert' (1994) to 'Laurence Anyways' (2012) and 'Une nouvelle amie' (2014), just to mention a few well-known examples.

More than for other topics, gender has been explored and exploited by the mainstream and commercial media production, sometimes only as an economically interesting 'trend'. More recently artists started to openly criticise the 'obvious' representation of gender, the stereotypes and 'norms' largely diffused by the mainstream media, and indeed they've often gone much deeper, as we'll see in the following sections.



Claude Cahun (Lucy Schwob), Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe), 'Untitled', 1921-22 (source: [MOMA](https://www.moma.org))



Diane Arbus, 'Hermaphrodite and a dog in a carnival trailer, Maryland' (source: [Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago](https://www.museumofcontemporaryphotography.org) - gift of Larry Deutsch)

04.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE
FEMINIST DEBATE -
AND THE NEXT STEPS

The emergence of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s influenced and challenged gendered artistic expressions. In a 1979 installation titled '[The Dinner Party](#)', the American feminist artist Judy Chicago honours women from the past and present. Her huge triangular dinner table has thirteen place settings on each side. Every setting features a placemat, on which is embroidered the name of a famous historical or mythical woman, and an elaborate plate designed intentionally to resemble the shape of a butterfly or a vagina.

In visual arts since the 1970s, physical appearance and gender distinctions have started to blur. Photographers Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin challenged and transformed stereotyped gender roles while exploring female identity, love, violence, and transgender identities. These and other artists worked to question the common representation of the woman in the arts and the gaze through which the woman is looked at. More recently artists like the Polish Katarzyna Kozyra have explored the link between artistic practices and popular and capitalist imagery and challenged the concept of the nude with that of nakedness.

As the feminist movement gained momentum, artists began to question the traditional roles of women, addressing topics such as women in the domestic and public spheres and the conventional standards of beauty. **Art critics also played a large role in the 1970s feminist art movement**, calling attention to the fact that women artists had been completely omitted from the canon of Western art and seeking to re-write male-established criteria of art criticism and aesthetics. In 1971, *ARTnews* published critic Linda Nochlin's provocative essay '[Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?](#)' that critically examined



Carolyn Carlson (picture: © Ripari Young Group, source: [website of the artist](#))

the category of 'greatness' (as it had largely been defined in male-dominated terms) and initiated the feminist revision of art history that led to the inclusion of more women artists in art history books. In the UK in 1973 art critics Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock founded the Women's Art History Collective to further address the omission of women from the Western art historical canon. More recently, the project [re.act.feminism #2](#) developed 'a mobile archive and workstation with a growing collection of videos, photographs and other documents of feminist, gender-critical and queer performance art'. This transnational project featured works by over 180 artists and artist collectives from the 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s, as well as contemporary work, with a focus on Eastern and Western Europe, the Mediterranean and Middle East, the US and Latin America. The archive contents expanded through research and cooperation with art institutions, academies and universities across Europe and further developed through exhibitions, screenings, performances and discussions.

In the 1970s and 80s the performing arts were deeply marked by a generation of women who introduced a strong female perspective in their work and influenced the aesthetics of dance and theatre. While not necessarily taking overtly feminist positions, choreographers [Lucinda](#)

[Childs](#), [Carolyn Carlson](#), [Pina Bausch](#) and [Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker](#) countered the female sub-ordination on the stage, undermined stereotyped iconography and are considered among the most influential contemporary choreographers. In the theatre field outstanding female directors played a similar role. Creating new theatre languages based on their own scripts, or the re-interpretation of existing repertoire, [Ariane Mnouchkine](#), [Joan Littlewood](#) and [Liz Lecompte](#) had a profound impact both artistically and socially.

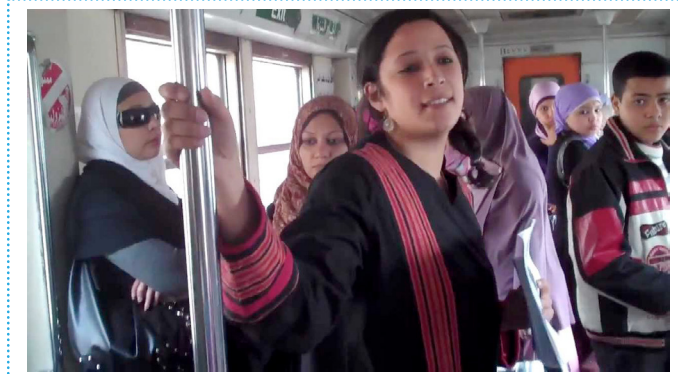
The play that the New York Times [described](#) in 2006 as 'probably the most important piece of political theater of the last decade' is also the work of a woman: Eve Ensler's '[The Vagina Monologues](#)'. First staged in 1996, it continues to meet with international success, translated in over 40 languages and with performances in 120 countries. Tackling a very sensitive issue (if not a taboo), and giving voice (literally) to women's bodies, the play has been received with enthusiasm by audiences. In spite of the censorship – attempted or imposed – in several countries (including [Wisconsin](#), [Florida](#), [Malaysia](#) and [Uganda](#)), it has inspired other plays exploring different aspects of women's (and men's) intimacy and life, from Dutch director Adelheid Roosen's '[Veiled Monologues](#)' to Egypt-based '[Bussy Monologues](#)'.

The success of her 'Vagina Monologues' allowed Ensler to boost her international action against violence on women, starting with V-Day, a global movement to end violence against girls and women (raising awareness and funds through performances of the 'Monologues' organised around the world) and developing several other actions, including campaigns, international advocacy work and the creation of a safe haven for women victims of violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

During the sexual revolution of the 1960/1970s many artists had come out of the closet, representing a colourful and playful element in the (predominantly serious) avant-garde. So when in the 1980s the AIDS crisis hit it had multiple, complex impacts on the arts world. The rapid spread of the disease, which literally 'wiped out a whole generation of artists', was a trigger for many (male) homosexual artists like Paul Taylor and Bill T. Jones to make work explicitly dealing with their sexual orientation, and for many more artists – not necessarily HIV-positive themselves, but struck by the number of friends and colleagues found ill or dying – to tackle new topics in their work and ultimately to engage in awareness-raising and political campaigns. The AIDS crisis actually politicised the work of many artists in all fields and forged a new artistic community, especially in the US where the political and societal response to the crisis was one of bigotry, social stigma and backward-looking moralism¹. Tony Kushner's 'Angels in America' is a landmark piece of work from that period.

It is worth mentioning that the feminist movement followed different paths in communist countries during the Soviet era. According to Bulgarian artist Boryana Rossa, overcoming class inequality was presented as 'the only necessary and sufficient condition to eliminate gender discrimination'; while indeed at the level of society women did obtain rights that improved their social and professional status, the focus on class inequality as 'the only evil'

¹ About the impact of the AIDS crisis in the visual arts and public arts, see for instance Barbara Pollock, 'Document, protest, memorial: AIDS in the arts world' in ArtNews, 5 May 2014



'The Bussy Monologues' performed in the Cairo metro, 2012 (source: Youtube)



Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane (source: Body Against Body blog)

ultimately allowed inequalities and exploitation to be sustained within the family sphere. After the fall of communism, in those societies women – especially younger ones – still suffer today from the joint effect of two propagandas: the one of the 'already realised equality' during the socialist era, and the one 'of the centuries-long patriarchal customs, which are still comfortably inhabiting the family sphere'. The case of Russian feminist punk group Pussy Riots in 2012 showed how the social stigma on women not fulfilling their 'natural' role as mothers and housewives can be a comfortable 'camouflage' for the

actual political motivation of harsh repression of an artistic and activist group with a strong activist component by the State.

Slightly similar in its effect was Apartheid in South Africa. While the Apartheid regime violently suppressed all emancipatory movements, the political revolt against Apartheid subordinated LGBT and feminist activism. The first years after the abolition of Apartheid witnessed a wide panorama of performances dealing not only with the ethnic, but also with gender diversity and equality, while gay and lesbian communities faced continued prejudices and struggle.

While the feminist movement has been crucial to question traditional gender roles and gendered power relations, feminist theories have been criticised for remaining fundamentally aligned with **hetero-normativity**. Gay and lesbian studies, emerging in parallel with the equality struggle led by the LGBTI movement in the US and Europe, contributed to advance the debates on sexual orientation as well as challenging feminism and the hetero-normative models. Judith Butler, one of the landmark voices of the feminist and lesbian movement in the USA, [defines](#) her book 'Gender Trouble' as 'a critique of compulsory heterosexuality within feminism', with feminists as its intended audience.

Lesbian visual art as it has emerged since the 1960s is multifaceted and does not yet represent a cohesive stylistic movement. Artists such as Harmony Hammond have been defining a homosexual iconography and terminology. In 2000, Hammond's pioneering book 'Lesbian Art in America, A Contemporary History' (Rizzoli, 2000) testified to a career-long interest in the problems of lesbian self-representation in a patriarchal society where women's images are still primarily controlled by men and their bodies objectified by male desire. Hammond's book explored what it is to 'see' and represent as a gendered, lesbian subject.

So called 'Queer art' has explored and broken down the conventions of traditional gender and sexual roles, as in [John Kirby's](#) 'Self-Portrait', in which the artist presents himself in feminine underwear without concealing his masculine body.

Queer art – for which it is hard to find a widespread, commonly agreed definition – is particularly visible in Queer festivals organised across Europe (and outside), which often combine arts, theory and activism. In particular in former Soviet countries Queer festivals constitute a privileged showcase for artists, works and debates that are much less easily displayed or conducted outside the festivals' times, in particular in mainstream institutions or venues. One of the most well-known and long-standing initiatives is undoubtedly



Poster from Queer Zagreb festival (source: [Queer Zagreb](#))

[Queer Zagreb Festival](#) (QZF), established in 2003. Within the same region, however, trends and experiments vary to a large extent. According to Bulgarian academic and researcher [Stanimir Payanotov](#), 'in Eastern and Central Europe, most of the LGBT festivals, with the exceptions of Bulgaria and Croatia (...), are sporadic and one-off events that are normally the result of a desire to uncover the often unconscious question within the community of what gay culture is, and what are its effects over the community's development'¹.

In some countries where openly homophobic governments promote laws intended to punish 'non-normative' sexual behaviours (generally based on religious and moral/traditional grounds), civil society organisations react, often using art as a form of activism in the struggle for freedom of expression and to promote tolerant societies.

In some Central Asian countries and notably Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan right-wing governments' efforts to ban the so-called 'homosexual propaganda', have triggered discussions about gender and traditional gender roles in the public opinion. According to artist and activist Georgy Mamedov, gender identity remains a rather marginal issue in Central Asian contemporary arts, including theatre and film production. However various LGBTI and feminist groups actively make use of artistic forms to promote their cause, as in the case of the series of graffiti against homophobia by the LGBTIQA organization [Labrys](#) from Kyrgyzstan². Gender is however at the core of some outstanding artists and artistic collective initiatives. One example is the radical artistic collective [Creoleak Centr](#), a 'transgender, transnational and transdisciplinary transinstitution' run by Ruth Jenrbekova and Maria Vilkovsky in Almaty, Kazakhstan³.

² Interview with the author, December 2015

³ See G. Mamedov, 'An Introduction to Theatre Today in Central Asia – 2015 Edition', IETM 2016

¹ S. Panayotov, 'From tradition to experimentation', introduction to the catalogue of V Sofia LGBT Art Fest, 2009

• **Artistic practices as gendered practices - interview with Marie Buscatto**

Marie Buscatto is Professor of Sociology, specialised in Gender Studies at Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne and researcher at IDHES, Paris 1- CNRS, France. Buscatto's current work focuses on the difficulties of access, progression and promotion of women in the world of art. She is also interested in the ways in which artistic creation is affected by gendered processes.

The following text is based on an interview with the author, November 2015.

Gender organises and informs artistic practice since early childhood. Boys are oriented towards certain practices that are considered as 'masculine', and girls towards 'feminine' practices. And any behaviour going against the dominant gendered order tends to be considered abnormal and is therefore stigmatised. That's the case for children who would head for an art practice that is not in line with what is perceived as the norm for masculinity or femininity (for instance boys practising dance¹ or girls playing the trumpet). The normative binary order man/woman is therefore at the heart of the gendered constructions of artistic practices. The 'masculine' is associated to certain postures (self-assertiveness, virility, autonomy, sense of initiative etc.), while 'feminine' will rather be associated with seduction, caring about others, elegance, passivity, etc. This binary order is present in all the representation systems we're immersed in since early childhood, and it is supported by several socialising structures – parents, schools, artistic spaces, handbooks, novels or comics, toys, advertisement...

The empirical research carried out on these issues in Western countries shows, as the main trend, that although equal access for men and women has become the rule,

men and women are in no way in a position of equality in the professional artistic practice, be it in terms of access, practice, or recognition. The situation remains highly unfavourable for women. There are many reasons for this. Women for instance tend to find themselves confined inside certain postures and roles considered as 'feminine', less valued. On the other hand, managing a professional career and balancing professional and private life is often easier for men than for women. Also, the social networks needed in order to gain recognition are more favourable to men than to women.

A second trend, though, shows a **feminisation of the artistic professions over the last fifty years**, in particular resulting from better access to artistic practices, the democratisation of education and better access of women to training opportunities. That's how certain artistic professions could become strongly feminised. An interesting example is that of orchestra musicians: the equality of opportunity in the access of women and men to conservatoires was made possible by the evolution and improvement of the recruitment/selection processes.

A study carried out in the USA showed that conducting 'blind auditions' (placing the candidate orchestral musicians behind a wall during the audition - thus hiding them from the jury) led to a 30% increase of women musicians selected for big American orchestras². We can notice a parallel feminisation movement in progress in other art fields, such as the visual arts³ or the cinema⁴. Such a feminisation trend was also fostered by collective and social movements taking place since the '70s-'80s, which allowed women to progress in their practice of

visual arts⁵ or literature⁶. Other initiatives like access to funding, patronage and social networks have been means to better value the work of female artists. In literature for example the work of Delphine Naudier showed how the literary trend promoting a 'feminine writing' (écriture féminine) helped the production and promotion of literary works written by women. In the visual arts field, Fabienne Dumont's works highlight the claims of female artists claiming a 'feminine art' or a 'feminist art'; however those forms of expressions are not valued on the art markets. So **while there is a feminisation of the artistic practice, one cannot yet talk about a reversal of the dominant gendered order.** So-called 'canonical' art, the one considered as the universal art, remains 'not feminine'. Men who promote artistic approaches considered as innovative will be better valued than women. On the other hand, women who will claim the 'feminine' or 'feminist' component of their own art will see their own artistic practice undervalued.

Some works aim to 'gender trouble', to use Judith Butler's terms⁷, i.e. to erase the distinction between women and men, between feminine and masculine – let's think about queer, transgender or androgynous works – or to bring down the hetero-normative model celebrating heterosexuality as the natural and fundamental sexuality. This can happen by questioning the sexualised differences and their 'natural' character, as in Marina Abramovic's installations, or to show works playing with the cross-dressing of the person in a picture, as in pioneering photographs by Claude Cahun. However **this subversion of the gendered order remains rare**, and only rarely achieves the fame and the large diffusion among a wider audience that would allow it to make the distinction man/woman, the binary femininity/masculinity

1 It is worthwhile acknowledging complete gender balance women/men among ballet dancers of Paris Opera (J. Laillier, 'La vocation au travail. La 'carrière' des danseurs de l'Opéra de Paris', Paris, thèse pour le doctorat en sociologie, Paris, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, 2012)

2 C. Goldin, C. Rouse, 'Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of 'Blind' Auditions on Female Musicians', in *The American Economic Review*, September 2000

3 A. Quemin, 'Les stars de l'art contemporain. Notoriété et consécration artistiques dans les arts visuels', Editions du CNRS, 2013

4 G. Sellier, 'Films de femmes de la décennie 2000 : Avancées et freins dans le contexte français', in M. Jan-Ré (dir.), 'Créations. Le genre à l'œuvre 2', L'Harmattan, Paris, 2012

5 F. Dumont, 'Les limites d'une évaluation chiffrée au regard de la fabrique des valeurs. Exemple de la reconnaissance des plasticiennes des années 1970 en France', in *Histoire & mesure*, XXIII (2), 2008

6 D. Naudier, 'L'écriture-femme, une innovation esthétique emblématique', in *Sociétés contemporaines* n° 44, 2001

7 J. Butler, 'Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity', Routledge, London, 2006 (1990)

or hetero-normativity obsolete. Most musical, theatre, visual or literary artworks tend to respect gendered norms, even if sometimes they play with the transgression of such norms in a punctual way or as regards certain aspects.

Queer, transgender or androgynous artistic works certainly embody the will to subvert the gendered binary role, but this mode of artistic expression remains secondary comparing to the 'mainstream' trends and artistic practices, or those more known and reputed by art critics. Therefore, the gendered order tends not to be fundamentally transformed by and in artistic practice, even if it is questioned, sometimes transgressed, sometimes even subverted in some artworks.



Picture from a performance of 'You go!' by Eugenia Tzirtzilaki in Athens, 2015 (courtesy of the artist)

05. PERFORMING GENDER: THE BODY AS AN OPEN POSSIBILITY

There are strong philosophical and epistemological links between performance and gender, and they become clear if we focus on the different layers of meanings in the term 'performance' that basically indicates a temporary and active presentation, expression, or act. Indeed gender theory has shown that 'gender identities are realised through the very act of performing and (re)acting, by quoting and repeating norms'¹. The term 'performance' refers to staged art forms like theatre, dance, or music as well as everyday forms of symbolic behaviour: social or cultural practices that involve theatrical, rehearsed or conventional acts like sport events, funerals, political speeches or rituals. 'Performance' refers also to the capacity to communicate through acts or in the construction and performing of an identity.

1 Gender & Performance-Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis - 32, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012

Conversely, it is also possible to act *against* those 'performing acts' that reproduce stereotyped patterns, thus questioning the norms.

Various acts like civil obedience or resistance thus qualify as performance, as well as e.g. citizenship or gender as performance. According to Judith Butler², gender is neither constructed nor a consciously acted role, but rather 'the sediment effect of repetitive acts that literally 'matter the body' (are materialised) through conventions, sanctions and taboos: gender materialises through restrictive norms like discursive regulations or restraints, manifested through the body'³. Furthermore, reacting to the widespread theoretical position claiming that sex is fixed and based in nature while gender is fluid and based on culture, Butler affirms that **sex is not assigned by nature but, like gender, it is a result of performative acts**. In this view **the body** becomes 'an open possibility, a possibility to transcend the norms of sexual difference and gender identity'⁴.

2 J. Butler, 'Bodies that matter', Psychology Press, 1993

3 *ibidem*

4 Gender and performance, *cit.*

In the words of Prof. Buikema⁵, **'the body appears as a medium for social change in artistic practices'**. The human body has been central to how one can understand facets of identity such as gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. People alter their bodies, hair and clothing to align with or rebel against social conventions and to express messages to others around them. In this sense the performing arts have a privileged relation with the gender issues, because more than any other art forms they allow an *embodiment* of gender identities, possibly in contrast with the 'norm'. In 'You go!', for example, Greek director Eugenia Tzirtzilaki invites the audience to randomly choose a piece of paper from some glass jars on the floor and to follow the directions written on it, for example: 'Make a *shhh* sound to make everyone quiet. Notice: if you are a man: Do people look down? If you are woman: Do people look at you?'... As an alternative to the usual discussions on gender, either extremely controversial or heavily intellectual, the piece offers to the audience an individual experience that uncovers the choice – or unconscious acceptance – of gender stereotypes and related power dynamics.

5 Interview with the author, January 2016

- **Gender as Performance - Diane Torr (USA)**

Performance artist [Diane Torr](#) has been experimenting the performance of gender for thirty years—exploring everything from feminist go-go dancing to masculine power play. One of the key pioneers of ‘drag king’ performance, Torr has been celebrated internationally for her *gender transformation workshops*, in which she has taught hundreds of ordinary women how to ‘pass’ as men in the world at large (in the streets, in everyday social interactions...). The workshops appeal to participants for many different reasons: personal confidence-building, sexual frisson, gender subversion, trans-curiosity, or simply the appeal of disguise and role play.

Writing about Torr’s work¹, performance critic Stephen J. Bottoms recalls: ‘The first time I saw Diane Torr perform as a man the experience was a little unnerving. In the context of a lecture-demonstration, she had first appeared as ‘herself’ and presented a slide show documenting the development of her work. She then disappeared offstage, leaving us to watch a video about her ‘Man for a Day’ female-to-male transformation workshops. Eventually she reappeared as Danny King - her middle-aged, middle-class, middle-management character - complete with business suit, slicked-back hair, moustache, stubble, and shiny black shoes. What was disorientating, though, was not the cosmetic transformation but the change in physicality. Danny walked on slowly, planting his feet squarely onto the stage floor as if he owned it, and then stopped, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at us with a look of absolute indifference. He made as if to begin speaking, then thought better of it. He adjusted his posture, looked down at his shoes, back up at us, and stared some more. A moment more, and he began striding casually around the stage as if checking out its dimensions, utterly unconcerned by the presence of observers.

¹ D. Torr, S. Bottoms, *Sex, Drag and Male Roles: Investigating Gender as Performance*, University of Michigan Press, 2010. A feature film about Torr’s work, ‘Man for a Day’, by Berlin filmmaker Katarina Peters premiered at Berlinale Film Festival in 2012 and is now on general release and touring.



Diane Torr as a man (photo: by Del La Grace Volcano) and as a woman (photo: E. Innocenti; source: [website of the artist](#))

By the time he finally deigned to speak to us, he was indisputably in command of the stage and his audience and yet he had done almost nothing. Despite his diminutive stature (Diane is five foot four), we had ceded authority to him as a commanding, masculine presence. Indeed, some subconscious part of my brain was telling me that this was, in fact, a man even though my conscious mind knew that Danny was also Diane. The uncanny effect was further underlined as Danny began to explain—in character—the means by which he was creating this impression of ‘innate’ masculine entitlement. My fascination with Diane’s drag performances began there, with the simple fact of her ability to adopt and inhabit varying forms of masculine physicality that men tend to assume are inborn. Her apparent ease in exposing this strange artifice of naturalised masculinity is an unsettling reminder that **the assumptions men have about their own identities are themselves based on performance, even pretence**’ (emphasis added).

Women’s drag is less common than male drag; according to Bottoms, ‘If gay men’s embrace of female drag can be read as an explicit rejection of masculine power status, and a kind of celebratory affirmation of

their ‘feminised’ marginalisation, it makes less obvious sense – conversely – for women to mimic the sex responsible for their relative disempowerment’. However Diane Torr’s workshops are crucial in that they blur the line between ‘art’ and ‘life’ and allow women to experience ‘being’ a man and reversing the dominant gaze: ‘in seeing the world, at least temporarily, from a man’s perspective, and in being responded to as male, women are able to distance themselves critically from their socialised perspectives as females, sometimes with life-changing results. To take a male character created in the studio out onto city streets as a functioning identity is to cross over not only the line between ‘art’ and ‘life’ but the line between female and male experience, thereby challenging all kinds of constructions and assumptions’². Indeed, ‘There is the danger that when those on either side of a binary divide define themselves according to the terms of that division they simply reinforce the very separation that is the root of the problem’ – and indeed women often tend to define themselves exactly in relation to a ‘male’ counterpart, perpetuating the same norms that often lead to their own oppression.

² Torr and Bottoms, *cit.*

- **The sensitive balance between following and challenging systems of covenants, is the key to progression - Israel Aloni / ilDance (Sweden)**

Israel Aloni is an independent choreographer based in Sweden and the artistic director of *ilDance*, an independent contemporary dance company based in Gothenburg, that aims to encourage, support, produce original contemporary dance in Sweden. Gender is an issue that draws a rather significant focus in the work of Aloni, who has dedicated a few creations to research and investigate gender in a particular way, and in parallel has investigated human sexuality and sexual expressions as means for gender definition and expression.

Aloni's work '*Catharses*' (2014) is an original contemporary duet piece that Aloni defines as 'a journey towards a purified state of femininity. A hike through the bumpy road on the way to a revelation of the bare and delicate truth concerning the power and beauty of the female human-being, from the biological, intellectual, emotional and spiritual aspects. The journey aspires to neglect the inhibitions caused by the enforced judgements of a society which continuously perpetuates a playground for frictions between the sexes'. Pushing aside scepticism, criticism, conventions and stereotypes that are grounded in Western societies and lead to a battle between genders, the work celebrates 'the female form in its origin of animalism, intuition and instincts'; it celebrates femininity and its difference from masculinity, overcoming the tendency – spread also in part of the feminist movement – to erase this difference.

'The creation of '*Catharses*' is inspired by the possibility to send out a message which shines light on the female gender from a different angle and by doing that, reminding the public the long forgotten core of the female identity. We hope to expose a raw and genuine state of femininity which is universal and is not thinned out by the social demands of each respected country or culture.'



Pictures from the performance '*Catharses*' by *ilDance* (photo: © *ilDance* 2016 - source: *ilDance*)

In '*Forbidden Fruit*' (2014), a multidisciplinary performance including contemporary dance, original text sung and spoken live, video and film projection and meaningfully dominant costumes and visuals Aloni aspires to unravel the internal meaning of sensuality, lust, passion, desire, attraction and sex. '*Forbidden Fruit*' comes from the need to question the way sex is presented and conceived in contemporary societies – as a sin, as immoral, as a weapon in the case of sex abuses; and the way women who are victims of rape are often accused of having 'provoked' this violence. 'Sex is the most natural way of creation and production. Sex is the purest expression of attraction, passion, lust, pleasure, sensuality, love and desire. Why don't we reconsider the way we introduce sex into the consciousness of the next generations? How can we be surprised that there is so much sexual violence in our current reality, when all we do is preach about the criminal and forbidden aspect of any sexual interaction? Why have we covered the creation of life with a dark blanket of obscenity and filth?'

'The piece aspires to remove the shame and inhibition which suppress the natural urge of sensual exploration. This is not to suggest that the piece is only about encouragement to sexual promiscuity. However, it suggests a sceptical approach to the

mythological stories around sex and to its negative connotation, which can result in the audience re-examining its beliefs and personal views, possibly diminishing the number of sexually orientated crimes and sexual discrimination toward women'. The piece includes 4 international performers (UK, Norway, Spain and Hungary) and an all-rounded creative team of two visual artists, a film and video maker and a light designer. Together they all work on creating an experience for the public which is stimulating and exciting in a similar way to that of a sexual encounter.

In personal and artistic life, Aloni has always been very much focused on the topics of gender and identity. Talking about the personal relationship to the topic of gender, and the impact on the artistic work, Aloni says: 'On both personal and social levels, the most important yet nearly absent attribution of gender identity is its fluidity and originality. Despite the fact that the last centuries have progressed the questioning of the social constructions of men and women, it will take time to change minds. My approach to the performers that I work with and to the cast as a whole, is similar to the approach I have to my own gender identity - fluid and personal. I believe that art is the parallel dimension to life in a society. In my opinion, also fighting for gender

equality is not a matter of marking the similarities between men and women but a broader matter of human rights. Gender equality is thus part of the debates at hand.

'I believe that **art can help to progress discussions to gender in a more sophisticated manner.** As a gender-fluid individual I dream of a world where we do not object to the power of the female form, rather than a world that demands more similarities between female and male. (...) As a 'femalist' I advocate and promote the value of female in our world. The value and importance of female attributions in every existing thing on this planet and beyond. I disagree with the masculinisation of anything that is traditionally powerful such as GOD, world, universe etc. I advocate for the big mother.'

'I respect and enhance characteristics of the artists who create and perform in my work, regardless of their social gender roles. Thus, the individuals take on a role which is independent of their biological and/or physiological gender but rather connected to their subjective, fluid and diverse identity. This approach resonates with the public and offers them an opportunity to examine gender roles in our society through more tolerant and accepting filters, such as those featured in my pieces.'

- **Identity and behaviour are open structures, shifting and changing over time'- OSMOSIS Performing Arts / Euripides Laskaridis (Greece)**

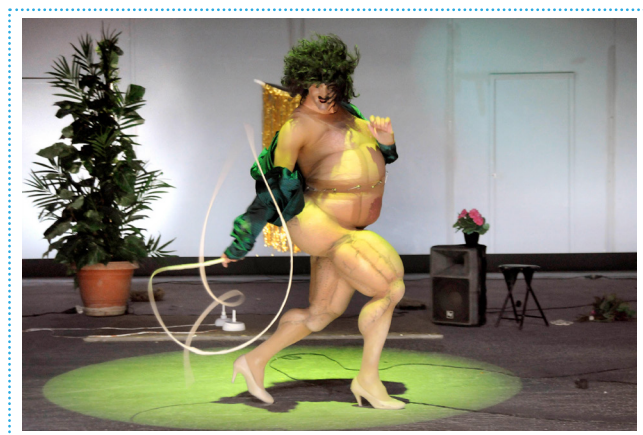
'Venus' is the general, 'mother title' of several projects developed by Euripides Laskaridis, director of the OSMOSIS Performing Arts company in Greece. These are versatile projects oscillating between the performing and visual arts. Laskaridis takes on a variety of personas of differing genders, body shapes and forms to explore the notions of ridicule and transformation as defence mechanisms against the fear of the unknown. 'Venus' is an anthology of characters in morph, a collection of archetypes in constant change and transformation. Through this general and privy title reference is made not only to the ancient goddess, or the prehistoric *Willendorf Venus* but also to an alien space - the distant planet. By embodying awkward or extravagant forms, the artist challenges the audience's boundaries and tests the limits of their acceptance.

Ridicule in this work is looked upon as that humbling moment when you can laugh about and feel empathy for your own misfortunes, and directly refers to the ancient Greek mechanism of catharsis and the artist's cultural heritage. Gender-challenging, awkward and at times almost

alien creatures are embodied by the artist to act as a kind of projection screen for displaying newly-formed Western cultural archetypes.

Talking about gender identity, Laskaridis says: 'it always scares me to label things. The whole problem starts when people have to name and define things. We have this inherent need to understand, and in the process of doing so, especially in Western culture, we tend to categorise. This should always happen in a very delicate way, leaving the door open for people to decide for themselves how they want to structure who they are, what they are, how they behave, and also leave space for others to see that these (identity, behaviour...) are open structures, shifting and changing over time.'

'The idea of a series of works under the general title of 'Venus' came from my own will to see what happens when inhabiting different forms, different shapes, i.e. a female voluptuous body as I do in 'Relic' (read more below) or several different face-types as I did in 'Quirks' - it is, of course, about gender difference but at the end of the day it is also about different body shapes, ages, races etc. It's about diversity and understanding others, it's about using form-shifting, transformation, or transfiguration - call it what you will - as a door to a diverse universe.'



'Relic', performance by Euripides Laskaridis (photo: Evi Fylaktou)

'Relic' is a one-man show that stemmed from the 'Venus' projects. Relic, from the Latin *relinque* (what is left behind), is as much of a story of a person as it is a story of a place - a country or a notion. Relic taps on gender, western consumerism, our relationships, what we think of the others, of sex, of body types, where we come from and where we head to... As Laskaridis puts it, 'I always speak about 'the different' and how the audience deals with it. Something or someone we may not be able to understand because it's definitely not us. There is a lot of talk around open and closed borders lately, around accepting or not the 'alien'. Does this make Relic a political piece all of a sudden? I don't want to think about things that way. This is why I dislike labels... 'Art and gender', 'art and politics', 'art and aesthetics', these are great subjects for discussion but only to remind us that art is not categorical, art is a universal language spoken by people of different nations in order to contemplate life.'

'In the encounter with the audience you get to know different layers of your work that can be read and that you were not aware of, so I am happy to remain open. The audience interprets my work at different levels; to some it seems that the work is political - and I agree - but I would never narrow it down to just a 'political work of art' or 'a work that talks about gender'. Nor would I narrow down its political meaning to the Greek crisis just because I am Greek creating work in Athens at this time. As I am very suspicious of labelling people I dislike labelling art as well. Labelling doesn't only come from an academic need to understand, categorise and thus discuss 'effectively' art but also from a westernised marketing-based commitment which I seldom find blocks the audience from truly seeing the artistic value of an art work - not to mention how it may mislead artists to look in other directions from their true artistic needs, just to ensure funding.'

'One critical element of my universe is the attack on the mainstream, a daring attempt to break dominant notions. Not to destroy but to reassess values and beliefs... it's always about breaking this hypnotic way of being. It's about recognising that we

are complex and ever-changing, not heavenly made, nevertheless capable of the impossible.'

- **'Performing Gender': a European dance project on gender and sexual orientation differences**

Performing Gender was a European dance project funded by the EU Culture programme between 2013 and 2015 - and, interestingly, the only project dealing with gender issues to be funded by the Culture Programme 2007-2013 and in the first round of the Creative Europe programme.

The project was initiated by Arcigay Il Cassero - Gender Bender Festival (Italy), leading along with the Dutch Dance Festival (The Netherlands), Paso a 2 Plataforma Coreográfica (Spain) and Domino Association - Queer Zagreb (Croatia). The project aimed to use artistic and cultural tools to open up a civil reflection on gender and sexual orientation differences, seen as sources of values and richness for the whole of European society. The main aim of *Performing Gender* was to create a European laboratory, in which dominant codes and mainstream images in relation to gender and sexual preference



Cecilia Moiso, 'Facets', at Performing Gender International Symposium, Bologna 2015 (photos by Elisa D'Errico, source: Performing Gender website)

could be questioned and reflected upon, bringing this into the wider community through the universal language of the arts, to develop new images and to collect new insights together.

The starting point of this journey was the body of the artist, seen as the ideal cultural medium to research and portray new identities. An international group of 17 choreographers, dancers and visual artists were involved in an artistic research based in four different European cities: workshops, residencies and performances investigated the representations of sexuality and gender, challenging the artists' identities and calling into question stereotypes and bias. At the end of this journey, the artists were asked to produce new works to be staged in established and renowned European museums. These museums opened their institutions and integrated these new works of art and identities as part of their [collections](#).

Throughout the project, the international group of choreographers, dancers and artists participating (including for example [Cecilia Moiso](#), [Poliana Lima](#) and [Giorgia Nardin](#)) explored common themes such as the gendered or sexualised gaze, the forces of nature/nurture in generating identities, visibility, marginality, the draw of the urban metropolis, the problematic of language and labels, the need for self expression

and personal freedom, the intersection of gender and sexual identities with nationality. The project developed a wide array of interactions and network building activities involving museums and cultural centres, citizen networks and LGBTI organisations in various cities across Europe. Through its 30 shows, events, conferences, workshops and parties, the project involved 15 different communities, including trans-sexual people, teenagers, rainbow families, older people, illustrators, lesbian choirs, people with Parkinson's disease and visual arts scholars.

06.

GENDER EQUALITY AND ARTISTIC PRACTICES

The power of the arts to question gender binary and hetero-normativity provides an opportunity to uncover and denounce gender biases and unbalances that exist both in society and in the artistic field. As pointed out by recent debates (for example on the online community of HowlRound, or in the [#Wakingthefeminists](#) case presented further below), indeed the arts are still today suffering from a big problem: women are heavily under-represented in top positions (especially as the heads of big cultural and artistic institutions) and in certain professions (e.g. technicians, stage designers etc.); the image of women is still often conveyed in the good old way (submission, weakness etc.); and the very fact of undertaking specific artistic studies is judged negatively if the choice does not correspond to the (unspoken, and therefore even more dangerous) 'norm'. While statistics have started to appear - making it clear that the problem exists and is so tangible as to being measurable - and some countries have adopted specific legislation that fosters gender equality¹, the issue is far from being solved.

1 R. Polacek, *'Handbook of Good Practices to Combat Gender Stereotypes and Promote Equal Opportunities in Film, Television and Theatre in Europe'*, FIA, Brussels, 2010



Posters by Guerrilla Girls at the exhibition *elles@centrepompidou*, Paris, 2009-2012 (photo: © Guerrilla Girls - source: [Guerrilla Girls website](#))

The French sociologist Marie Buscatto speaks about 'gendered artistic practices': the artistic practice – from the choice to study and practice a certain art up to the one of making a professional career – is indeed influenced by the historical cultural and social construction of sex, the social organisation of gender difference, discrimination based on gender and the performative acts by which we 'embody' gender and express 'femininity and masculinity'.

In 1985, a group of women artists in New York City formed a collective organisation called the [Guerrilla Girls](#) to protest at the unequal treatment of women professional artists in the arts. Their name indicated their willingness to engage in unconventional tactics in their fight for equality. The Guerrilla Girls, who are still active, are known for the gorilla masks the members wear to avoid being recognised by the art world establishment and institutions they might criticise. Their productions took the form of public protests and lectures as well as flyers and posters. One of their principal goals was to oppose the lack of representation of women artists in major museum collections. One of their best-known posters, *'Do Women Have to be Naked to Get into*

the Met. Museum?' includes statistics to highlight the disproportionate representation of women artists (5%) compared to female nudes (85%) in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In the words of Prof. Buikema 'The Guerrilla Girls poster is an excellent example of how the right image combined with the right medium - a poster echoing the engineering of advertisements, thus linking the female body and the market - is able to say it all.'²

Despite encouraging signs of women's improved status and visibility in the art world, major systemic issues still persist. In a recent article the American curator Maura Reilly argues that 'despite decades of antiracist queer and feminist activism the majority continues to be defined as white, Euro-American, heterosexual, privileged, and, above all, male'. As the author remarks, 'Sexism is so insidiously woven into the institutional fabric, language, and logic of the mainstream art world that it often goes undetected. (...) Discrimination against women at the top trickles down into every aspect of the art world—gallery representation, auction price differentials,

2 Interview with the author, January 2016

press coverage, and inclusion in permanent-collection displays and solo-exhibition programs’.

Evidence of the gender bias affecting the art world(s) is backed by more and more data,

often collected by artists and professionals from the field. For instance a survey of special-exhibition and solo shows scheduled at major art institutions in the US, UK, France and Germany (mentioned by Reilly in the same article) reveals that gender parity in the visual arts field is nowhere in sight. Permanent-collection displays at major art institutions are also imbalanced. Granted the opportunity to reinstall collections at museums, many curators are not daring enough to reconfigure the hegemonic narratives in ways that offer new perspectives on old stories. In 2009, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, France took the bold step of organising the nearly two-year exhibition ‘[elles@centrepompidou](#)’ in which the then Head of Contemporary Collections, Camille Morineau, reinstalled the museum’s permanent collection with only women artists. It took her six years to convince the then Director (a man) to organise such an exhibition. During its run, attendance to the permanent collection increased by 25 percent. ‘elles’ was a particularly revolutionary gesture in the context of France, where, Morineau [explains](#), ‘nobody counts the number of men and women in exhibitions. Very few people notice that sometimes there are no women. (...) The show meant the Pompidou had to broaden its holdings of women artists through purchases and donations’. Unfortunately, in the subsequent post-‘elles’ re-hang of the permanent collection, only ten percent of the works on view are by women—exactly the same as it was pre-‘elles’. Moreover, the acquisition funds for women artists almost immediately dried up.

More recently (January 2016) Saatchi Gallery in London opened its first all-women exhibition, ‘[Champagne Life](#)’, gathering the work of 14 emerging artists from around the world. While most of the artists involved do not necessarily classify themselves or their own work as ‘feminist’, they recognise the evident gender unbalance in the art world. As American artist Julia

Wachtel stated in an interview, even if she felt she was never directly discriminated against, ‘I do think in much more insidious ways things would have happened differently in my career if I was a man. Male artists are taken more seriously. While one might say it’s problematic to have a show of just women artists because we don’t have a show advertised as exclusively male, the statistics speak for themselves’.

Statistics do speak for themselves indeed, like the clear figures that recently sparked debate about the ‘old-white-men’ dominance in the [music industry](#), for instance. However in the theatre field, data gathering is in most cases the voluntary occupation of female professionals¹ and the results, however partial they can be, send exactly the same message. In the US an interesting initiative was launched by [the Kilroys](#), a group of Los Angeles-based female-identified playwrights and producers. They started The Kilroys’ List, a gender parity initiative to end the ‘systematic under-representation of female and trans* playwrights’ in the American theatre industry. First released in June 2014, The List is an annual collection of highly-recommended contemporary plays written by female and trans* identified authors, which are read or seen by an industry professional within the last twelve months. While the actual impact of the list is hard to define, the initiative certainly brought a lot of attention to the issue – also thanks to extensive media coverage across the US – and individual writers cited on the list [have reported](#) more interest and requests for their scripts.

But there is still a long way to go, not only in statistical terms but also in terms of narratives and (false) arguments perpetuating gender discrimination in the artistic field. **Arguments and narratives are as important as data in perpetuating, or dismantling, the gender bias.** As regards the visual arts, specialist writer Ashton Cooper [wrote](#), ‘art journalism is in no way immune from conventions that ostensibly champion women artists, but in fact perpetuate problematic narratives about them (...)’

In particular, I’m thinking of the widespread myth of the ‘overlooked’, ‘forgotten’, and/or ‘rediscovered’ female artist’. Cooper maintains that this kind of narrative does not advocate for women artists, but rather belatedly elevates women (or minorities) to the canon, instead of questioning the ‘canon’ itself – a canon that is shaped by (white) men. So instead of repeating (and accepting) ‘the tired story where a masculinist force deigns to *discover, find, or recognize* female artists’, we could try to understand the material realities of these women’s lives (for example the fact that they were often giving birth and raising children while they produced art – which obliged them to live in isolation and ‘obscurity’). ‘It is essential that we complicate these stories’ says Cooper.

And complicated these stories are. Work-life balance is a hot topic of discussion in the performing arts world, where women are paid on average less than men and women with children are paid less than their childless female colleagues, for instance ; an additional ‘complication’ concerns age, since there is also an [employment disadvantage](#) especially and significantly for older women performers due to the restricted number and variety of aged female characters, let alone the more interesting ones.

The fact that the gender bias ‘often goes unnoticed’ is indeed part of the problem, as well as the most commonly used excuse for that – in theatre, it sounds something like ‘We choose the best plays, so probably we didn’t find enough good plays written by women’. The recent example of the Abbey Theatre in Ireland is key to understand how this false argument is used.

¹ See for instance Laura Shamas, ‘Women playwrights: who is keeping count?’ on [HowlRound](#), May 2014

● #WakingTheFeminists

In autumn 2015 the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's national theatre, launched its programme to mark the centenary of the 1916 Rising (leading to Irish independence), titled 'Waking The Nation'. One out of the ten plays in the 2016 programme are written by a woman – three out of ten will be directed by women. In the days that followed the announcement, a discussion evolved on Facebook and Twitter, initiated and led by set designer and project manager Lian Bell, under the hashtag #WakingTheFeminists (#WTF) coined by director Maeve Stone. The Director of the Abbey, Fiach Mc Conaghill, apologised on Twitter saying: 'I'm sorry that I have no female playwrights next season. But I'm not going to produce a play that is not ready and undermine the writer'.

In the weeks following the announcement, there was an outpouring of testimonies from both women and men working in Irish theatre, highlighting the disenfranchisement and chronic under-representation of the work of women artists at the Abbey, and by extension in the Irish arts industry. Following the protest and harsh discussion on the social networks, a public meeting was held at the Abbey Theatre, gathering many of those who became associated with the grassroots movement of #WakingTheFeminists. Following on from that meeting, #WakingTheFeminists has begun to engage with all the major state-funded theatre organisations, starting with the Abbey Theatre and the Gate Theatre, to make gender equality a reality through their policies and programming. #WakingTheFeminists have also begun engaging with the Arts Council to ensure that gender equality is addressed across the sector in a way that will be practical, significant and long-lasting. On August 30th, 2016 #WakingTheFeminists achieved a major success when the Abbey Theatre announced a set of guiding principles to ensure that Gender Equality is both embraced and enshrined at the national theatre.



The Waking the Feminists movement in front of the National Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Ireland (photo: Brenda Fitzsimons/The Irish Times)

In one of the first articles about the Abbey Theatre case, Irish Times columnist Una Muhally stated that the question of gender unbalance in programming was a recurring feature in diverse forms of artistic expressions such as theatre, music or film festivals or literature prizes, and claimed: 'Gender equality in Ireland's artistic institutions is not about tokenism, it is about redressing a historical imbalance, it is about representing the population, it is about showcasing multiple perspectives not just a male ones, it is about reflecting the whole audience and not just a part of it. **If art is about how we see ourselves, then why are we only getting one half of the picture?**'

If the argument often used to justify the gender bias in theatre is that there are not enough 'good' plays written by women, then cultural and political institutions – who by now cannot claim that they're not aware of the problem, at least not in the Western world – should take the responsibility to address the supposed 'lack of good women playwrights', or artists, or professionals at large. The question that needs to be asked is who is deciding women's worth – a question that does not concern only the theatre field, but society at large; it doesn't concern only women, but all the under-represented minority groups in society.

Things are going a bit better in some countries, as highlighted in the Handbook of Good Practices in Combating Gender Stereotypes and Promote Equal Opportunities in Film, Television and Theatre in Europe produced by the International Federation of Actors (FIA) in 2010. However quantitative improvements are not enough. In Poland, for instance, in the last ten years there has been a visible increase of women directors working also in the most prestigious theatres in the country, however, according to researcher and academic Agata Adamiecka-Sitek¹, 'this group of women has simply managed to jump into the old arrangement – they're the ones who have managed to pull it off – but their appearance there hasn't changed anything in the institutional practice of the theatre, or in its ideological framework'. The key to a real revolution, Adamiecka-Sitek suggests, would be to start collaborations with women in many different roles: not only directors, but also stage and light designers, choreographers etc., but this kind of proposal meets with strong resistance in particular inside big institutions.

¹ A. Adamiecka-Sitek, 'How Far Can You Go in an Institution? On the Feminist Turn that Wasn't. Agata Adamiecka-Sitek Talks with Milena Gauer and Weronika Szczawińska', in Didaskalia – Polish Theater Journal 01/2015

• ***The streets of (Polish) cities are becoming one great, social stage – interview with Agata Adamiecka-Sitek***

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, PhD, graduated in cultural studies from the University of Silesia. Author of books, essays and articles published in the journals *Dialog*, *Didaskalia*, *Teatr*, *Notatnik Teatralny* and in essay collections. She's the founder and editor of two publication series – *Inna Scena* and *Nowe Historie* – and editor of numerous books on theatre. Recently Adamiecka-Sitek led the project and was on the editorial board of the first edition of Jerzy Grotowski's 'Teksty zebrane'. She works at the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw, Poland, where she manages academic projects, including a programme of research on Polish theatre from a gender and queer perspective.

The term 'gender' in Poland has recently moved from the field of social sciences and culture studies into the area of direct, brutal political struggle. Its stakes, it would seem, are extremely high. The concept of a conservative, national state is being designed as an alternative to liberal democracy. And such a state needs a clearly defined enemy, so as to strengthen the consolidation process of the community through battling the said enemy. In the joint offensive led in the last three years by the Catholic Church and right-wing politicians gender has been defined as a synonym of corruption – as an ideology aimed at destabilising fundamental categories of social life, as an attack on family and as drastic sexualisation of children.

Although since the mid-90s interdisciplinary gender studies have been developed within Polish universities, and artists practicing critical art have consciously employed gender strategies to expose the regime of the dominating gender and sexuality matrix, the term 'gender' used to be barely recognised beyond narrow academic circles. Today everyone in Poland knows the word, after the Parliament of the previous term established a 'Commission for Countering the Gender Ideology', and Polish Catholic bishops repeatedly warned

the worshippers against this 'dangerous ideology profoundly destructive to human beings'.

Following the victory of the far right in the election in October 2015, the war on gender has entered a new phase. The Minister of Science has officially announced that gender studies projects will not be financed, and scientific journals publishing texts referring to this 'pseudoscience' will lose their funding. The policy of the Ministry of Culture should be understood similarly, since this year it has completely withheld any funding towards expanding national collections of modern art. Furthermore, by announcing a reform of the theatre system, which is to once more subordinate state-funded theatres to central government, it openly speaks about the necessity of restoring respect for the classics and theatre craft, and to liberate the stages from leftist ideology. Given how the right-wing majority currently ruling Poland has paralyzed the Constitutional Tribunal and in view of the successive laws introduced by the Parliament that break civil liberties guaranteed by the Constitution, we should not expect that the 'freedom of artistic expression and scientific research' guaranteed by the Article 73 of the Constitution will remain in force. And it doesn't have to happen by way of direct acts of censorship – as in the case of the new Minister of Culture, who, immediately after he took the office, tried to prevent the premiere of 'Death and the Maiden' based on Elfriede Jelinek and directed by Ewelina Marciniak. The already successfully implemented economic censorship will suffice, along with the self-censorship of artists, curators and heads of institutions, for whom artistic freedom might end up becoming the price of survival in the new regime.

In this context we begin today to look at the Polish theatre of the last 25 years differently. At a certain point gender issues defined its avant-garde face. In the mid-90s productions appeared that focused on problems of identity and on the violence man experiences when he's formatted by hetero-normative cultural matrices. Those mechanisms were studied in the most profound and consistent way by Krzysztof

Warlikowski. Areas of non-normative male sexuality in the context of the bourgeois societal paradigm were also examined by Krystian Lupa, who more and more openly revealed the autobiographical angle of his research. The 'misfit' became the protagonist of Polish turn-of-the-century theatre, dramatically going through his conflict with the world and experiencing sexuality marked by gender binary as a space of permanent lack and suffering. Undoubtedly, the mere presentation of such characters carried political significance in prudish, post-Communist and Catholic Poland. Especially as it was accompanied by a couple of high-profile coming-outs in the theatre community. Theatre with great force supported the LGBT politics of the time, which could be summed up by the slogan of the 2003 social campaign 'Let Them See Us'. However, today it is clear how quickly the real emancipatory potential of such theatre has run out. Its hero was alienated from the Polish social context, focused on his own suffering, which was furthermore spectacularly aestheticized on stage. The critical power of plays underwent petrification, and theatre became a sophisticated cultural product for the emancipated and privileged group of the big-city establishment; a space where they could celebrate their own status and feed their fill on non-hetero-normative spleen. With time it also became evident that the productions by homosexual directors carried in them a deeply negative, frequently misogynistic attitude to female sexuality.

At the beginning of the 21st century female directors fiercely entered the Polish stage, placing at the centre the problem of female emancipation, which has never been fully worked through in Poland. It was constantly postponed in view of the fight for independence, and after the transformation of 1989 it became stifled by the strong alliance of conservative neoliberalism and the all-powerful Catholic Church. However, 'the woman question' in its existential, social and meta-theatrical dimension turned out to be a lot less attractive to the mainstream. The institution of public theatre, in Poland still operating within the rigid rules of repertory theatre, turned out to be irrevocably androcentric. Admittedly, a group of young

female directors managed to penetrate the mainstream, and gender issues for the major part ceased to be transparent also in shows directed by many male directors, but the power and prestige remained in the hands of men. The most important feminist productions were created outside of the state-funded theatre system – such as the ‘Chorus of Women’ – hugely innovative in its form and acclaimed in Europe – by Marta Górnicka – or on Europe’s peripheries, the great dance shows of [Agata Siniarska](#) or [Agata Maszkiewicz](#) and the intellectual, post-Brechtian theatre of [Weronika Szczawińska](#).

In one of Marta Górnicka’s productions entitled ‘Magnificat’ (2011), the Chorus of Women sings a powerful song against the oppression suffered by women in Poland on the part of the Catholic Church. ‘Woman, carry your cross,’ they shout at a point in a derisive but terror-filled citation of the Church’s stance, which demands control over their bodies treated as symbolic property of the national community. Today, five years after its premiere, the significance of that show becomes more and more radical. Poland is a country where due to the war on ‘gender ideology’, any sexual education became blocked, contraception is in no way subsidised by the state, and at the moment of writing there is a total ban on abortion. Thousands of women and men took to the streets to protest against the barbarous law. The streets of cities are becoming one great, social stage. Here begins the most important gender-themed theatrical show in contemporary Poland.

07. IN-CLUSION AND EX-CLUSION: QUESTIONING THE DOMINANT GAZE

If ‘representation (...) is a major realm of power for any system of domination’¹, then it is crucial to understand, and to question, whose gaze is defining what is the norm in a given society, what is art, what is art worth being programmed, and so on. Questioning all this inevitably leads to questioning the dominant narratives, the power structure of the arts world and of society at large. According to [Rosemarie Buikema](#), gender and social change in their artistic expression are very much related to the recognition and acknowledgement of the engineering of processes of ‘inclusion and exclusion’ related to sexual identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity and race.

For art to have an impact on society and to bring about social change, it is crucial that the arts world itself is able to question its own structure, habits and practices; however the persistent inequalities mentioned above are the evidence of a gap between the self-proclaimed ‘open mindedness’ of artists and arts professionals and actual practices. However, when it comes to challenging one’s own stereotypes and prejudices, the task is hard. Artists like Korean-American playwright [Young Jean Lee](#) are questioning the dominance of ‘Straight White Men’ in society; Lee’s play with the same title puts on stage a Christmas family reunion of a father with his three grown-up sons – two rather ‘typical’ straight white men and one working at a community organisation and volunteering for good causes. Lee developed this character following a workshop with university students of diverse races, sexual identities and backgrounds, and attributed to the key character all the characteristics that the classroom said they desired to see in a white, male character on the stage. ‘On paper, he was idyllic. But once he was

brought to life and put in a room with other less utopian males, those same students suddenly found him detestable’ – a ‘loser’, as his family desperately labels him in the play. Lee [states](#): ‘There’s a contradictory expectation these days. One is that (straight white men) be more deferential, be less macho, and take up less space. And the other is that we want them to continue to be typical straight white men because we’re invested in it’.

Speaking of the UK, Prof. Buikema notes that artistic practices concerning gender and social change gradually came to include artistic practices of under-represented groups. An example is so-called refugee art and its relationship to the ‘diaspora art’, which underwent a major development in the 1990s because of the increasing number of artists who came to Britain from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. These artistic practices however have experienced the same kind of difficulties as women’s artworks to be integrated in the so-called mainstream artistic canon, and risk to be categorised as a separate chapter in art history. ‘Despite career successes and various levels of visibility, many of these artists (including outstanding names like Yinka Shonibare, Breda Beban, Steve McQueen etc.) remain associated with the countries or regions of the world from which they came, rather than the country to which they migrated and in which they practiced, for lesser or greater periods of time’.

It is also worthwhile acknowledging how refugee artists are redefining diaspora art currently and how cultural and artistic practices may be melting with the so-called host culture. Today, the term ‘refugee’ smoothes over difference within the group it designates at the same time as reifying the boundary that defines its otherness and the notions that constitute that boundary (e.g. artist [Margareta Kern](#)). However, ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ are terms denoting internationally recognised political status, nor are you born a refugee or born an asylum seeker. As Buikema notes, ‘a ‘refugee artist’ or an ‘asylum seeker artist’ becomes someone not defined simply by their political displacement or their ownership of a ‘wrong’ passport (or indeed of none at all); they are socially and culturally defined by notions of displacement and

1 b. hooks, ‘Continued devaluation of Black womanhood’, in S. Jackson, S. Scott, ‘Feminism and sexuality: a reader’, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996 (quoted in [Wikipedia](#))

by other, changing signifiers of the words 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker'. The end of the first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed interesting changes in curatorial policy and has also allowed a shift to occur in the way the viewing public looks at the work of artists from refugee populations. This shift may open up possibilities for cultural transfer to occur from artist/refugee to viewers/members of the public and for viewers to rethink and re-negotiate their understanding not only of the art but also of place or territory as somewhere that is demonstrably shot through with multiple places, multiple histories, multiple imaginations and multiple cultures'.

- **'Chorus of Women' ['hu:r kobj+] - Marta Górnicka, (Poland)**

The 'Chorus' is a women's choral project created by the Zbigniew Raszewski Theater Institute in Warsaw, Poland. Three editions have been staged so far, gaining the Choir an international success: 'This Is the Choir Speaking' (2010), 'Magnificat' (2011) and 'Requiemachine' (2013); here we chose to focus on the first two editions which were based on an all-female cast.

In fact the cast was recruited following an open call 'for all women who wanted to work together, regardless of age, profession, appearance, and vocal abilities', while professional music education was at the bottom of the list of required skills. Ultimately the choir was made of women who were very diverse, but united by the desire to do something new together.

The key elements of the Choir are the voice and the language in their interaction with the body. Both voice and language are used in a very specific way that marks a break compared to 'traditional' choirs. The librettos of 'This Is the Choir Speaking' and 'Magnificat' are a patchwork of texts from religious books and sermons, glossy women's magazines, cooking recipes, repertory theatre and traditional tales. However, beside what is said, how it is said has crucial importance: 'the Chorus hisses, screams, gasps, whispers, sighs, sings operatic arias

and pop standards; it repeats and loops phrases, delivers them quietly or cuts them off unexpectedly (...) The Chorus (...) uses the body/voice to disrupt meanings and estrange words, not only revealing the built-in ideology of language but also influencing the reception of the Chorus, which has a powerful effect on viewers at the sensory level'. The community of women acting on stage impacts the audience with an 'immense corporeal power', their voices and bodies unified, their bodies 'expand so much that their presence becomes physically and sensually overwhelming' – a process possible thanks to the contact with the audience.

The Choir combines two tactics of feminist political action in theatre: 'On the one hand, at the level of the body, the Chorus is reminiscent of *écriture féminine* and the second wave of feminist performance, confronting the public with embodied female subjects who create through their bodies, endowed with the status of a source and tool of a specific female language that exceeds the masculine logos. On the other hand, at the linguistic level the Chorus juggles clichés and stereotypes, practicing a cultural bricolage whose aim is to unmask the performative character of femininity rather than to

discover the 'real' femininity under the shell of social imperatives'.

The Choir has been defined 'a fascinating example of artistic practice that leads to the liberation of the female subject and the female community through discipline, including rigorous physical discipline', with reference to strong elements of contemporary Polish theatre back to the work of Jerzy Grotowski and therefore to a masculine and homo-social tradition.

Interestingly, Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, who contributed to the development of this work, admits that 'The Women's Choir as a whole worked on – and is working on – Marta Górnicka. None of the women singing in the Choir, even the one with the most individuality on the stage, will be remembered individually; any of them can be replaced at any moment. Marta's other collaborators are similarly invisible. In this dimension, this is a project that really hasn't changed the relationships in the theatre of directors'. If the Choir then is not reforming the institution of theatre, however, it certainly holds a specific value for the society it stems from, in opposition to the conservative forces that in Poland exercise an increasing control over women.



'Chorus of Women. Magnificat', directed by Marta Górnicka, Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw, 2011 (Photo: Krzysztof Krzysztofiak - source: Polish Theatre Journal)

- **Challenging Hetero-Normativity and the law in Ecuador: 'Real Versus Fake' - TransGender-TransAction Theatre company (UK-Ecuador)**

'Real versus Fake' by [TransAction Theatre Company](#) (UK) is an art-law collaboration, grass-roots activism and trans-feminist cross-cultural performance project staging the first (trans) 'gay' marriage in Quito, Ecuador. Though Ecuador does not have equal marriage laws, Joey Hateley and Hugo Vera have been able to enter into a legal partnership: as a trans man, Joey's gender is not recognised by the state, which continues to regard him as female, so he and Hugo were able to wed as 'husband and wife' whilst clearly being husband and husband. This marriage [highlights](#) 'the inherent foolishness of both unequal marriage laws and non-recognition of trans peoples' gender identities'.

This marriage project, which arose from marginalised trans-feminist activists in Ecuador ([CasaTrans](#), Quito) in dialogue with gender-queer communities in the UK, questions what is real versus what is fake, what is 'in good faith', whose reality is reflected and who benefits from legal discourse, as well as the colonial economy of marriage and other religious, social, and cultural practices. The project further examines how to make space for cross-cultural allegiance and alternative family values so that communities can be more cross-culturally represented. The project also seeks to impact and progress the policy and legal environment in Ecuador. The project generated high interest and was extensively covered by [national media](#) in Ecuador.

The project challenges the societal stereotypes and narratives prevailing in Ecuador society. It brought into practice the 'alternative use of the law', a concept theorised by lesbian legal activist Elisabeth Vasquez which involves the celebration of a marriage between two men. In order to accomplish what, in principle, would be impossible under Ecuadorian law (which prohibits homosexual marriage), one

party would have to be a 'trans man that is assigned female at birth' who retained a female legal sex on his documents despite a social identity as a man; the other man would have to have been assigned male at birth, with a corresponding male legal sex and male social identity. A gay marriage in these terms would have to be allowed, as the couple would be entering a contract 'outside the imagination of the legislator and his prohibitions'.

Joey Hateley, artistic director of TransAction Theatre, self-defines as 'a Trans-Feminist theatre practitioner who uses mixed-medium processes and performance techniques' to operate in different cross-cultural contexts'. TransAction Theatre Company collaborates with diverse communities, artists and organisations to create a multi-discipline programme of socio-political, cutting edge theatre projects. TransAction runs artistic and participatory cultural exchange projects that explore the ways in which we understand our own identity community and our place in the world. Building on Augusto Boal's Theatre of the oppressed it aims for a 'Theatre of Terrorism': in Hateley's words,

'Could a modern day theatre created by art-activists be seen to create counter propaganda to the dominant discourse of the war on terror?'

'TransAction utilises structural inter-disciplinary methodologies that create a framework from which to understand and raise awareness of how oppression is both individual and social, multiple and interlocking. Developing feminist methodologies that practically help us understand how Hegemonic Power operates creates a space that enables us to learn from, teach and empower each other as individuals and communities. The creative process explores how we depart from the current socio-political climate to work towards a more socially cohesive society, and asks the question, how would we get there and what could that future look like?'



Picture from the video 'Real v Fake. The first (trans)gay marriage, Quito, Ecuador' by TransAction Theatre (photos of Joey Hateley and Hugo Vera by Ana Belen, Santiago Teran, Ana Almeida - Source: [YouTube](#))

- **Coming to Terms with Racial Repression in South Africa: 'Monumental Dresses' - Judith Mason**

Professor Rosemarie Buikema's current research concerns the role of the arts in processes of political transitions, where Buikema combines theories of transitional justice, the politics of aesthetics and theories of sexual difference in order to develop new and multi-layered scenarios for social change and transnational justice. This contribution is an extracted edited summary of two academic papers¹ produced by Professor Buikema whose research on art, gender and social change led to investigate the role played by art in supporting the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission² and giving voices to victims of the apartheid.

The case study below takes us back in time to the late 1990s. We chose to include it because it is exemplary in showing how the arts can help in healing the social wounds left in South African society in the aftermath of the Apartheid era. It also shows that time is needed to appreciate the significance and the potential impact of the arts in the processes of social change.

Phila Portia Ndwandwe was a South African woman and a fighter against the Apartheid regime. Reported missing since 1988, she turned out to have been murdered by the Apartheid regime security police. She was the first victim identified after information was provided by perpetrators appearing before the Amnesty Committee of



Judith Mason, 'The Man Who Sang and the Woman Who Kept Silent', triptych, 1998. Collection: The Constitutional Court, South Africa. © 1998 by Judith Mason - source: [Signs Journal](#))

the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. When her remains were exhumed in 1997 her pelvis was clothed in a plastic bag fashioned into a pair of panties, as in a last attempt to protect her modesty.

A judge of the South African Constitutional Court, Albie Sachs, called on people in 2010 to take seriously the potential of art to add complexity and depth to politics, arguing that it should be granted a proper position in the public debate on the new South Africa. Judge Sachs brought a tribute to Phila Ndwandwe through the installation of artist [Judith Mason](#) dedicated to the murdered activist, which is in the main hall of South Africa's Constitutional Court. The core of the installation consists of a dress made of blue plastic bags. The dress not only symbolically makes up for Phila Ndwandwe's forced nakedness but it also commemorates her struggle. The dress thus both restores Ndwandwe's dignity as a woman and a human rights activist. This dress negotiates between the seen and the unseen, the said and the unsaid, the known and the unknown. The exhumations most literally brought hidden truths to the surface in such a way that this surface will never be the same. In that vein, the dress performs a sense of redemptive truth as well as a sense of restorative justice for both the perpetrators (or those who suffer from identifications with this position) and the victims. In this context, the very materiality of the plastic dress opens up

possibilities to think about the historically raced and gendered space of South Africa in a different way for both the oppressor and the oppressed. The blue plastic shopping bag, which really is omnipresent in South Africa, is paradigmatically related to the blue plastic bag that at least minimally warranted Phila Ndwandwe's dignity.

¹ Contribution based on two articles written by Prof. Buikema: 'The Role of Art in the Becoming Post-Apartheid of South Africa', *Journal of Memory Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2012; and 'Monumental Dresses: Coming to Terms with Racial Repression', unpublished (courtesy of the author, November 2015)

² The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was a court-like restorative justice body assembled in South Africa after the abolition of apartheid. Witnesses who were identified as victims of gross human rights violations during apartheid were invited to give statements about their experiences, and some were selected for public hearings. Perpetrators of violence could also give testimony and request amnesty from both civil and criminal prosecution. The TRC was seen by many as a crucial component of the transition to full and free democracy in South Africa.

08.

CONCLUSIONS

This publication has sought to capture some of the essential elements of the relation between gender identities and artistic practices. It has also provided snapshots of the ways in which artistic representation can contribute to formulate social critique and to challenge stereotypes by encouraging audiences to question their own views, gaze and vision.

Such a publication does not claim to reflect the magnitude and diversity of the debates and situations across Europe (let alone internationally), for which more research would be needed. However we can attempt to formulate some concluding remarks building on some of the most inspiring cases mentioned in the text.

Artistic practices dealing with gender identities remain very much dependent on the binary norms which prevail in society. Art bears the potential to criticise the status quo; however, there is a risk to end up using the old recurring concepts and terms – while these should be questioned in the first place. As long as gender issues are discussed within existing social and political frames, gender identity in all of its fluidity and diversity cannot be addressed in a meaningful way.

It should be noted however that gender fluidity, while getting more recognition in the Western world, is becoming an increasingly cruel battlefield in large parts of the world. Arts as a forerunner in the defence of human rights should and could contribute to the social and religious acceptance of the cause for LGBT rights.

Performing arts, as a live art form that brings in the language of the physical body, is apt to influence our imagery, our subliminal categorisation techniques and to stimulate the social and open discourse on gender issues. While many consider this era a post-feminist one where all the objectives of the feminist movement have been achieved, we see that there is indeed a pressing need to put the debate on gender identities and diversity in art expres-

sions into the limelight. Fifty years after the provocative essay by Linda Nochlin, have we really moved forward in terms of gender equality in the arts? Data from the ground, as well as narratives surrounding the issue, seem to suggest that there is still a long way to go.

Also the question of gender mainstreaming in the access, progression and promotion of women within the arts and cultural environment, is of critical importance. While women are over-represented in the more supportive positions in culture, their under-representation in cultural management positions or as publicly acclaimed artists is obvious. More gender balance is needed in programming in major museums, theatres or cultural centres. More opportunities are needed for women to experiment, fail, and grow, working their way up in the world of art. More responsibility is needed from political and cultural institutions to mainstream gender equality and ensure that women really enjoy the same opportunities as men (access to education, to power positions in the profession and to professional/policy making networks). The deceptive argument that 'there are simply not enough good women artists' simply doesn't meet the bar.

The lack of comparable aggregated numbers giving a clear account of the level of gender disparity across artistic disciplines and EU Member States calls for more research to fill information gaps. Interestingly, the sector is constantly asked to provide figures about its economic impact but never on this specific topic. Still, there is already enough evidence to confirm the existence of gender bias in the arts. Let's learn from the Irish case and the #Waking-TheFeminists movement how the arts can bring the problems into light and collaborate with policy makers to bring about real change. And let's keep in mind that visible positive achievements (like the increase in women directors in Poland) should not cover what remains to be done at a deeper level, at the level of daily institutional practices and relationships.

Audiences and the next generation of visual arts and live performance students or young artists in the making need to be supported and encouraged to be exposed, learn and seek inspiration about – and

work on – gender. Artists openly focusing on social change have contributed to addressing the gendered order, gender fluidity as a narrative or pluralised gender perspectives; however there is a need to create more space, legitimacy and visibility for those debates in the mainstream art environment and discourses. Importantly, women artists cannot be judged only through the feminist lens perspective, nor expected to deal always with gender parity; the same goes for artists issued from 'minorities' (whether in terms of ethnic origin, cultural or religious background or sexual orientation). We need to question the narratives and the power dynamics in society and in the arts world.

Finally, the struggle for gender equality should be considered part of a broader struggle for inclusion, accessibility and democratisation of the arts. The discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation are strictly linked to other issues like ethnicity and economic status, and it is high time that artists and activists working on these different topics join forces to open up theatre (as an institution, a venue and a field) to a broader public in all its complexity.

As we learned from the post-apartheid South African case, art is a mode of expression that can contribute to support social transformation by bringing the complexity of realities to the surface. Performing arts dealing with gender issues can respond to a world rife with conflict and confusion by producing works that inspire us to collaboratively create a society that is more just, more diverse and more alive than often seems possible.

Useful Links and Resources

- Feminist Art, <http://www.theartstory.org/>
- HowlRound, <http://howlround.com/>
- ILGA Europe, <http://www.ilga-europe.org>
- MoMA Learning, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/investigating-identity/constructing-gender
- Waking the Feminists, <http://www.wakingthefeminists.org>
- Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Milena Gauer, Weronika Szczawińska, 'How Far Can You Go in an Institution? On a Feminist Turn That Wasn't: Agata Adamiecka-Sitek Talks with Milena Gauer and Weronika Szczawińska', in *Didaskalia - Polish Theatre Journal*, 1/2015, <http://www.polishtheatrejournal.com/index.php/ptj/article/view/57>
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Annex: Glossary of Terms Related to Gender Identities and Sexual Orientation

Sources: *ILGA Europe* and *Anti-defamation league* (USA)

Anti-LGBTQ bias

Prejudice and/or discrimination against people who are or who are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ)

Art for social change

Art with a vision that has the power to impact people in many ways. It can raise consciousness; alter how we think about ourselves, our society or our culture; create a vision of a more equitable society and/or world; be a tool or strategy for organising and building social movements. It can help to reclaim local and community-based cultural practices as a form of resistance; challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, disability or other forms of discrimination; and question mainstream culture and beliefs. Artistic expression has the power to increase awareness, stimulate dialogue, open new spaces for civic participation and imagine new ways to create equity, fairness and social cohesion.

Biological sex

The biological and physiological characteristics of males and females. These are characteristics people are born with that do not usually change over the course of their lives. Although sex is typically defined as being male or female, in actuality, there are more than two sexes.

Bisexual

A person who is emotionally, physically and/or romantically attracted to some people of more than one gender.

Gay

Man who is sexually and/or emotionally attracted to men. Gay is sometimes also used as a blanket term to cover lesbian women and bisexual people as well as gay

men. However, this usage has been disputed by a large part of the LGBTI community and gay is therefore only used here when referring to men who are emotionally and/or sexually attracted to men.

Gender

Refers to people's internal perception and experience of maleness and femaleness, and the social construction that allocates certain behaviours into male and female roles.

'Gender' refers to the socially defined 'rules' and roles for men and women in a society. The attitudes, customs and values associated with gender are socially constructed; however, individuals develop their gender identities in two primary ways: through an innate sense of their own identity and through their life experiences and interactions with others. Dominant Western society generally defines gender as a binary system—men and women—but many cultures define gender as more fluid and existing along a continuum.

Gender expression

Refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behaviour, clothing, haircut, voice and emphasising, de-emphasising or changing their bodies' characteristics. Gender expression is not an indicator of sexual orientation.

Gender identity

Refers to each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth.

The term refers to how an individual identifies in terms of their gender. Since gender identity is internal, one's gender identity is not necessarily visible to others.

Gender role

The set of roles and behaviours expected of people based on gender assigned at birth.

Hetero-normativity

Refers to cultural and social practices where men and women are led to believe that heterosexuality is the only conceivable sexuality. It implies that heterosexuality is the only way of being 'normal'.

Heterosexism

Attitudes and behaviours based on the belief that heterosexuality is the norm.

Homophobia

Prejudice and/or discrimination against people who are or who are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ). Fear, unreasonable anger, intolerance or/and hatred directed towards homosexuality.

Other related, specific, terms are transphobia and biphobia.

Homosexual

People are classified as homosexual on the basis of their gender and the gender of their sexual partner(s). When the partner's gender is the same as the individual's, then the person is categorised as homosexual. It is recommended to use the terms lesbian and gay men instead of homosexual people. The terms lesbian and gay are being considered neutral and positive, and the focus is on the identity instead of being sexualised or pathologised.

Intersex

A term that relates to a range of physical traits or variations that lie between stereotypical ideals of male and female. Intersex people are born with physical, hormonal or genetic features that are neither wholly female nor wholly male; or a combination of female and male; or neither female nor male. Many forms of intersex exist; it is a spectrum or umbrella term, rather than a single category.

Lesbian

A woman who is sexually and/or emotionally attracted to women.

LGBTI

Acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people.

Queer

Has become an academic term that is inclusive of people who are not heterosexual - includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and trans people. Queer theory is challenging hetero-normative social norms concerning gender and sexuality, and claims that gender roles are social constructions. Traditionally the term 'queer' was an abusive term and therefore for some still has negative connotations. Many LGBTI persons however have reclaimed the term as a symbol of pride.

Sex

Refers to biological makeup such as primary and secondary sexual characteristics, genes, and hormones. The legal sex is usually assigned at birth and has traditionally been understood as consisting of two mutually exclusive groups, namely men and women. However the legal definition of sex should also include intersex people.

Sexual orientation

Refers to each person's capacity for profound affection, emotional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender.

Social justice

Structural change that increases opportunity for those individuals or groups who are suffering from marginalisation and disadvantages - politically, economically and socially. Social justice is grounded in the values and ideals of equity, access, and inclusion for all members of society, particularly for under-privileged communities

and communities structurally are suffering from social inequalities based on gender, race, class and status. Social justice encourages change to come from those that are most affected by social inequity, involving them in working on the problems and decisions; it employs a combination of tactics such as advocacy related to policy, grassroots organizing, litigation, and communications.

Social change

Seeks to uncover the underlying causes of inequity and address systemic change in institutions and policies as well as socially upheld behavioural norms that foster fair treatment for all. Social change refers to action to make change that ensures inclusion, equity, fairness, and justice in society.

Transsexual

Refers to people who identify entirely with the gender role opposite to the sex assigned to at birth and seeks to live permanently in the preferred gender role. This often goes along with strong rejection of their physical primary and secondary sex characteristics and wish to align their body with their preferred gender. Transsexual people might intend to undergo, are undergoing or have undergone gender reassignment treatment (which may or may not involve hormone therapy or surgery).

Trans person / people / man / woman

Inclusive umbrella term referring to those people whose gender identity and/or a gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. It includes, but is not limited to: men and women with transsexual pasts, and people who identify as transsexual, transgender, transvestite/cross-dressing, androgyne, polygender, genderqueer, agender, gender variant or with any other gender identity and/or expression which is not standard male or female and express their gender through their choice of clothes, presentation or body modifications, including undergoing multiple surgical procedures.

Transphobia

Refers to negative cultural and personal beliefs, opinions, attitudes and behaviours based on prejudice, disgust, fear and/or hatred of trans people or against variations of gender identity and gender expression.