

**THE HISTORY
OF ALL-WOMEN
EXHIBITIONS
IN POLAND**

RESEARCH SUMMARY

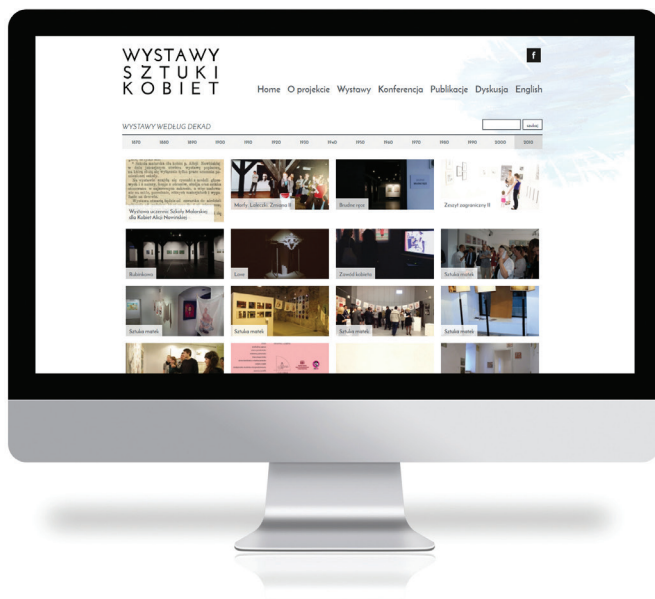
The project was carried out in the years 2014-2017
at the Institute of Art History at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań
by the following team: Prof. Agata Jakubowska (project manager),
Joanna Bojda MA (until February 2015),
Luiza Kempieńska MA (since March 2015),
Karolina Rosiejka MA and Karolina Staszak MA.

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shared their knowledge and materials, and the institution managers
who (in most cases) made these materials available free of charge.

The conclusions contained in this paper are complementary to the materials and analyses that can be found in the following sources:

website: www.wystawykobiet.amu.edu.pl



Sztuka i Dokumentacja 15, 2016, a collective monograph including case studies that is available on-line at http://www.journal.doc.art.pl/pdf15/sid_15_ebook.pdf

A recording of the debate titled *Wystawy sztuki kobiet dziś* (Women's Art Exhibitions Today) with the participation of Agata Jakubowska, Anka Leśniak, Ewa Majewska, Magdalena Ujma, 29 April 2017, lokal_30, Warsaw, available on-line at <http://wystawykobiet.amu.edu.pl/dyskusja.html>

Agata Jakubowska, Luzia Kempieńska, Karolina Rosiejka,
All-Women Exhibitions as Tactics and Strategies in the Field of Art -
- see: <http://wystawykobiet.amu.edu.pl/english.html>

DEFINITION AND SCOPE

All-women exhibitions are understood here as group exhibitions in which all of the participants were women. The project does not cover solo shows; however, we did include exhibitions featuring the works of only two female artists.

The research covers the period since 1877 (when the first exhibition of this kind was organised in Poland) until today (the materials gathered on the website cover events organised until the end of 2015).

Only exhibitions organised in Poland were taken into account. The research recognises the country's changing borders, which means that analyses of the partition period (until 1918) pertain to the geographical scope covering territories of the former Republic of Poland, later the area of the 2nd Republic of Poland (1918-1945) and, finally, the territory established in 1945.

POINT OF DEPARTURE AND OBJECTIVES

When we began the investigation there was only one list of all-women exhibitions organised in Poland before World War II that had been prepared by Ewa Micke-Broniarek from the National Museum in Warsaw and published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Artystki polskie* (*Polish Women Artists*, MNW 1991). There were no lists of post-war or contemporary exhibitions. At the beginning of our investigation on the history of all-women exhibitions we had an initial list with 80 entries (including pre-war ones). Our first task in this project consisted in gathering information about all exhibitions of this kind that had been organised in Poland and to create an inventory that would be as complete as possible.

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The second task consisted in gathering extensive archival materials that would allow us to analyse all-women exhibitions. We were interested in, among other things, the people and institutions that had come up with the initiative to organise such exhibitions, what their reasons and goals were, who was invited, what kind of art was displayed and what the reception was. The analysis of these aspects was aimed at answering the following question: why were all-women exhibitions organised then and continue to be organised today and how do they relate to the changing position of women in society and of female artists in the world of art?



Polish Women Artists, National Museum, Warsaw 1991, curator:
Agnieszka Morawińska, exhibition designer: Krystyna Zachwatowicz, © MNW

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The project was based on three interrelated assumptions. First, „women’s art” should not be understood essentially but analysed as a historically changing concept. Second, art shows can be treated as a lens focusing on the wide spectrum of historical and artistic issues. Third, these issues are linked with extra-artistic questions such as the status of women as such - and not only with the question of women’s art - in our society.

SOURCES OF MATERIALS

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We used various kinds of sources during the project, particularly the archives of cultural institutions (mainly those of museums and galleries), the library resources of those institutions as well as municipal and regional libraries and the National Library, newspapers and magazines (devoted to art and culture, the so-called women’s magazines and the daily press), artists’ catalogues and the private archives of artists and curators.



Opening of the exhibition of the group of women painters „Ars Feminae” at the Zachęta, Warsaw, 11.02.1933. National Digital Archive. Visible: painter Irena Łuczyńska-Szymanowska (6th from left), painter Pia Górńska (7th from right), President of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts Stanisław Brzeziński (in the middle).

Both the amount and the character of these archives differed depending on the exhibition we were focusing on. In general, the more contemporary the exhibition, the more information and materials could be found. What surprised us though was the huge number of exhibitions, including contemporary ones, that were barely mentioned in any sources apart from succinct article notes. The condition of both old and new exhibition archives results from several factors: 1. the fate of the institution that hosted or organised the exhibition (in many cases the institution ceased to exist and its archives were not preserved or were dispersed); 2. the variable character of the materials accompanying the exhibitions (this mostly refers to publications issued together with the given show); 3. the practices of gathering documentation in a given institution but also the practices applied by artists and curators; 4. the importance of the exhibition, which then affected the interest of the media and the attention that was paid to documenting the show.

GENERAL FINDINGS

All-women exhibitions appeared together with the beginning of professionalisation of women's artistic practice in the second half of the 19th century, and these exhibitions have been organised since then until today practically incessantly, but with varying intensity. These variations result from, among others: 1. the political situation (unrelated with the topic of our investigation) which in some periods was unfavourable for organising exhibitions; 2. the development of a women's emancipatory movement (both social and political, as well as reflections on the status of women) whose every surge resulted in a higher number of all-women shows; 3. the perception of women's issues as important by the authorities (for different reasons and in various scopes).

If we were to indicate the times when more exhibitions were organised – taking into account the relative intensity of the phenomenon in a given period and not absolute numbers – we could mention the interwar period, the first half of the 1950s, the second half of the 1970s and the years after 2010.

Although the exhibitions and the debates related to them are clearly marked by the specificity of Polish reality together with concrete political events, traditions, state regime and gender-related policy, in general their intensity coincides with what was happening in the Western world (nonetheless, this observation is quite general, because – as far as we know – no similar studies were carried out in any other country).

While the initial list of exhibitions contained 80 entries, at the end of the project this number was doubled; only a few pre-war events were added to the list. The most significant discoveries were related to the numerous shows organised later, also in recent years. The catalogue published on the website (www.wystawy kobiet.amu.edu.pl) is not exhaustive. Due to the above-mentioned reasons, many exhibitions were very poorly documented and some of them were barely mentioned, sometimes in unexpected places. The catalogue should thus be considered open and new items should be added to it in the future; the fact that the information is gathered on a website, which is a flexible medium by its very nature, makes this possible.

MORE DETAILED FINDINGS

As was mentioned above, the all-women exhibitions that had been organised before World War II were relatively well known before the start of this project: there was a list of them and they also appeared in publications about female artists (particularly in Joanna Sosnowska's texts). Further queries provided information on other events and more details concerning some of these shows.

In the earlier period, i.e. the second half of the 19th century, two types of exhibitions were organised, namely shows of "women's work" and exhibitions of works by students of all-female art schools. These kinds of shows were also organised in other countries, where we could observe an ongoing professionalisation of women's activities in the scope of arts and crafts at that time. They were often aimed at presenting the achievements and skills of women, at selling the works and acquiring new commissions. The difference between these two types of shows consisted in the former being rooted in the social and political emancipation movement while the latter operated within the world of art; but these areas were not strictly separated, partially because both stressed the importance of professionalisation, permitting, among others, women to make a living from their artistic practice.

The initiative to organise exhibitions of women's work was undertaken by various women's organisations. They operated outside of art circles, rather as one of the variants of industrial exhibitions presenting the achievements of humanity. They have been included in this project because they provided the opportunity to increase the visibility of creative women, to promote and sell their works, and to transform women's art from something that was mostly private and practised at home into an element of the public domain. There was not much art in such exhibitions, but with time – particularly in the interwar period – more and more art was on display.

The number of shows presenting the works of women was on the rise in the late 19th century and they returned in the interwar period, usually as an element of activities aimed at strengthening the newly recovered Polish state, which added to the feeling of responsibility for the country. This group of exhibitions included two shows within the framework of the Polish General Exhibition (Powszechna Wystawa Krajowa, 1929): Pavilion of Women's Work, Pavilion of Landladies and Countrywomen, that, until now, have interested investigators the most of all the exhibitions of Polish women's art.



Pavilion of Women's Work, Polish General Exhibition, Poznań, 1929,
National Digital Archive

Shows displaying the works of students of schools and courses for women were a natural consequence of the existence of this kind of artistic education addressed solely to women, and they disappeared after co-education was popularised ca. 1915. Most probably these were yearly surveys typical for art schools, as the words „yearly” and „annual” are often used in their descriptions. However, we do not have enough data (reviews, press releases) to confirm that they indeed took place regularly every year. Obviously, such shows presented the works of young and still unknown female artists.

A separate category consists of exhibitions organised by two organisations of female artists, namely the Circle of Polish Women Artists (Koło Artystek Polskich) in Cracow and the Association of Polish Women Artists (Związek Artystek Polskich) in Lviv. This was the first time when this group of women, i.e. artists, started to create associations and to undertake joint initiatives combining artistic and professional aspects (there is a huge disproportion in the number of materials available for these two, in favour of the latter). The activity of *Ars Feminae*, a group that was active in the 1930s, was of a similar character. In all these cases, women artists joined their forces not for their common artistic preferences or worldviews but due to a common interest consisting in strengthening their position in the world of art and in providing more options to display their works, which were quite limited in institutions dominated by men.

In the case of exhibitions organised before World War II and immediately after, the main source of information are press materials. Exhibition catalogues, if any, usually contained only a list of artists and their works that were on display. Texts presenting the concept of the exhibition were very rare, but sometimes they can be found in magazine articles informing about a given show.



Exhibition of the Circle of Polish Women Artists, Salon of Aleksander Krywult, Warsaw, 1899. In: K. D.-S., Exhibition of the „Circle of Polish Artists”, Wędrowiec 38 (1899), p. 756

The reception of these events included critical comments on the quality of the works (of course with the appreciation of good works as well) but also considerations on whether it was appropriate for women to do art at all. Later, after World War II, such objections were no longer expressed.

In the 1930s women's art was on the rise all over Europe, with nation-wide and international exhibitions being organised. The II-me Exposition d'oeuvres de femmes artistes (IPS, Warsaw), organised in 1934, was to date the largest international all-women exhibition in Poland.

World War II and the changes it brought about completely transformed the position of women in society as well as the manner of operation of artistic circles. Some of these changes were universal, e.g. there were no more exhibitions of women's work (exhibitions of crafts would require a study in its own right) and the idea of separate schools became very rare. Other aspects were specific to Poland and the so-called Eastern Bloc, e.g. associations became centralised and there was one organisation devoted to women, namely Liga Kobiet Polskich (Polish Women's League), and one association of visual artists.

At the beginning of our research we were convinced that all-women exhibitions were not organised in post-war Poland because they were not mentioned in the existing narrative of the history of art from that period (neither in general nor in relation to specific female artists), thus it was very surprising to find all-women exhibitions organised in communist Poland by state-operated and -controlled institutions. We can point to two groups of these: the first group were regional exhibitions organised by the ZPAP (the Association of Polish Visual Artists) that, according to the organisers, stemmed from an appreciation for women artists; the second one included exhibitions organised at National Museums in 1975 - UNESCO's International Women's Year.

A new trend in all-women exhibitions appeared in the late 1970s and was in line with similar shows that were organised abroad. These were exhibitions initiated and organised by the women artists themselves, often artists who also worked as gallery managers. They were based on friendships and aimed to make women more visible in the world of art. Sometimes the works displayed during that period focused on a widely understood feminine identity. It is worth mentioning that previously there had been almost no themed exhibitions (with the exception of „Woman in fight for peace”, Pałac Sztuki, Cracow, 1952). There were very few links, if any, between these exhibitions and women studies developing abroad. It is also quite significant that they did not have any links with social activism. Such shows are being organised until today.



Women's Art, Galeria ON, Poznań, 1980, organisation: Izabella Gustowska, Krystyna Piotrowska.
Courtesy of Izabella Gustowska

Since the late 1970s, feminism became a constant topic of debate around such exhibitions also in Poland. It is very rare, yet, to see it evoked as a positive element of identification. Both the critics and the all-women exhibition organisers mentioned it rather in order to oppose it completely or at least to distance themselves from it. As the years passed by, particularly after 1989, the opposite trend started to appear in the critique, namely there was a call for the feminist, understood as political, dimension of all-women exhibitions.



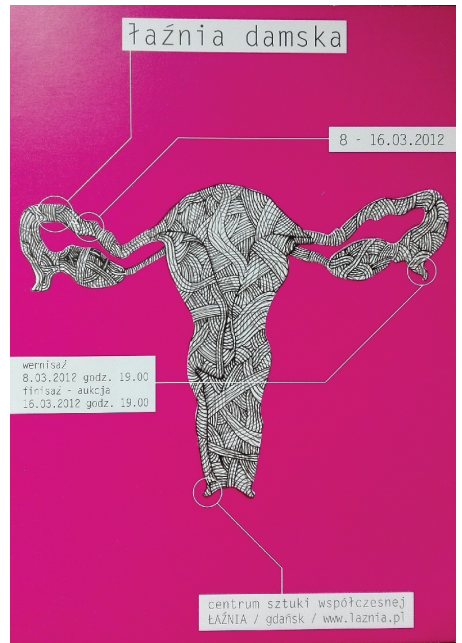
Woman about woman, Galeria Bielska, Bielsko-Biała, 1996, curator: Agata Smalcerz. Subsequent editions of the exhibition *Woman about woman* took place in 2001 and 2007

The transition to democracy came together with a gradual development of theoretical and historical reflections on women's art. One can notice the growing interest of female critics and art historians in the organisation of all-women shows. Moreover, historical exhibitions started to appear, showing not only contemporary female artists but also those who had created in the past. The first exhibition, with an already very ambitious scope, was the show *Artystki polskie (Polish Women Artists, National Museum, Warsaw, 1991)*. The investigations carried out within this project provided no information on any of the other previous historical exhibitions, however small they had been. Similar shows were organised afterwards, but they were not too numerous, which indicates indirectly that the feminist history of art is not a well-developed area of study in Poland.

In post-communist Poland we can notice a gradual increase in the number of all-women exhibitions. In the 1990s, on average, one exhibition of this kind was organised every year, while in the first decade of the 21st century there were already 2-4 such events being organised annually. There was a clear rise ca. 2009 which has continued until today. In the first half of 2017, at least 10 shows of this kind have been opened already.

These exhibitions are extremely diverse as far as their initiators, organisers and venues are concerned. In general, institutions that enjoy nationwide or international importance rarely organise all-women exhibitions; and if they do, the shows are planned rather from a historical perspective. All-women exhibitions are often organised by galleries operating under local authorities that are important in their regions and sometimes also nationwide. This largely defines the size and prestige of the exhibitions, resulting from the resources of the given institution.

Local communities (the geographical dimension) are also very important. This can be observed not only in the case of young women, i.e. students or graduates of specific art schools, but also in the case of older women that have links with a particular city. It often translates into their presence (or absence) in the awareness of the audience in Poland in general. The events are often cyclical in character, which results probably from the conscious policy of the managers of those institutions or a strong women's community in a given place, translating into their stronger presence in that region. International shows are quite rare, but we might expect that this will change soon for two reasons: 1. more shows of this kind all around the globe will be organised by diverse kinds of institutions; 2. the growing interest in women's art in private, commercial galleries.



A Women's Bath, a cyclical event organised by CSW Łaznia in Gdańsk, featuring exhibitions, performances, concerts and women's art fairs, © CSW Łaznia

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One of the elements marking the difference between individual all-women exhibitions organised in Poland recently is to what extent they tackle social issues and gender theory. Many exhibitions do not address these questions at all, and the issue of gender appears only as a participant criterion, and not as a theme. Others often address topics that are traditionally associated with women, such as maternity, body and housework. Another frequent topic is the position of women in society, including of female artists, and particularly the preconceptions and stereotypes that affect women's lives. From this point of view it is interesting to analyse some words that appear in the titles, e.g. women, girls, heroines, hags, housekeepers, neighbours, replicants.

The kind of documentation made available to the researchers is completely different now. These changes are due to more general matters than all-women exhibitions as such. Most of all, the shows tend to be accompanied by catalogues that contain curatorial texts of varying length explaining the exhibition's concept. They always contain either a shorter or longer explanation of the gender criterion used in the selection of artists. The graphic design of the catalogues, the invitations and posters form an additional message in its own right, referring to the ways in which we conceptualise gender, of course the exhibitions should be studied case by case to see to what extent the ideas of the graphic designers were in line with the vision of the curators. Texts from catalogues and press releases suggest that all-women exhibitions organised in Poland are quite rarely based on some deeper insight into the current debate on gender issues that is going on in the field of humanities, including in the history of art.

PROPOSITION OF A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN'S ART EXHIBITIONS

An important aspect of the project was a reflection on how to analyse the group art exhibitions of women artists when taking into account both their common features and the differences among them that resulted for various reasons. In the text titled *All-Women Exhibitions as Strategies and Tactics in the Field of Art* (see <http://wystawy kobiet.amu.edu.pl/publikacje.html>) it was emphasised that, despite the significant changes that took place in the world of art and in the general situation of all women, one can analyse all of the all-female art exhibitions by using the same perspective. It was hypothesised that by using Pierre Bourdieu's concept they could be viewed, both in their organisation and participation, as tactical/strategic actions aimed at changing the positions of women in the field of art and in the wider field of society. One of the key aspects of this approach is that it allows one to see all of the exhibitions of women's art as, on the one hand, repeating a certain pattern (the distinction of art created by women), and, on the other, of being in various force arrangements in the artistic field which results from the multiple and changing relations to other current/coexisting positions (both in the artistic and social fields).



Women Bustlers,
Gallery of
the Nuremberg
House and public
space of the district of
Kazimierz, Cracow,
2015, curators:
Iwona Demko and
Renata Kopyto,
© Nuremberg House

FURTHER RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

As we mentioned above, the inventory of all-women exhibitions organised in Poland we created is by no means exhaustive and it should be complemented on a continuous basis.

Our study mainly focused on the general character of these shows and their links to the social and political context. It could be further explored in several areas: an analysis of reception, exhibition narratives, visual materials, etc. Such an analysis was carried out in several cases by investigators invited to take part in the project (their results were published in *Sztuka i dokumentacja* magazine, 15/2016) and the materials they gathered demonstrate that further case studies would be interesting.

Moreover, the project revealed the lack of systematic, quantitative and/or qualitative, current and historical research concerning Polish female artists (with the exception of two projects: *Registered* by Anka Leśniak and *Little chance to advance?* commissioned by the Katarzyna Kozyra Foundation - both are valuable but fragmentary). A study of the careers of women artists would complement and provide a crucial background for exhibition analysis, particularly if we were to study the correlation between them and the careers of women.