IMAGINED COMMUNITY VIII
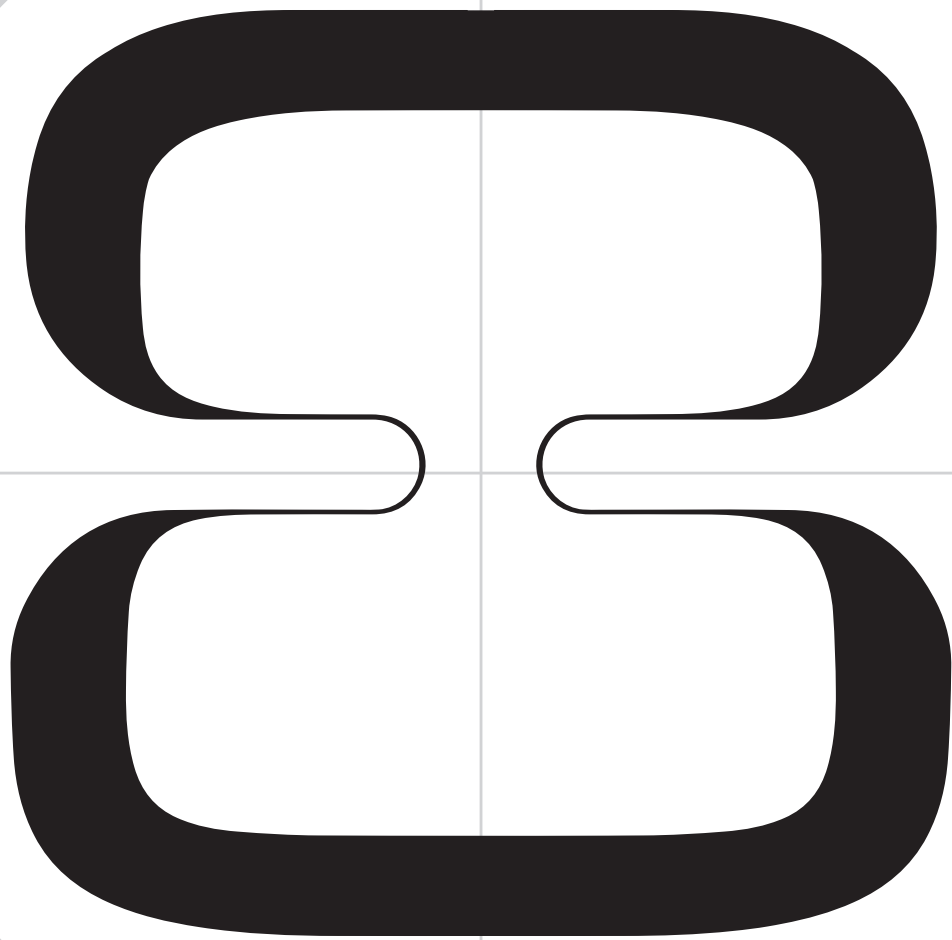
MY SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

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Artistic Strategies of Confronting the Canon

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The exhibition project *My Significant Others* presents women artists who enter into a dialogue with overlooked or fictitious personalities from the cultural field and in this way it touches upon the cultural narratives that frame HerStories and that are worth re-telling. Regardless of the growing influence of feminist and postcolonial movements, even today, the canon of art history is dominated by white, male and bourgeois authors from developed countries, and thus it is determined by the mythologies associated with these authors.[1] Given these uneven and vertical structures, we believe it is important to deconstruct these mythologies, to make it our own and to critically re-narrate it – while at the same to critically examine their immanent relation to power.

Another equally relevant task is a careful and sensitive treatment of repressed or forgotten feminist struggles and traditions conducted in the form of dialogues: it is a task that is closely linked to the agenda of the screening *Imagined Community VIII: My Significant Others*. The presented films by five female artists introduce underrated feminist forerunners as well as inspirative women, their personalities and motives – especially, but not only from the (post)socialist context – who fought to become a part of the art historical canon and the official history of political movements.

Why are we interested in the canon? The canon is considered the standard, it reflects how its supporters view themselves from the artistic and political point of view, and therefore, it can be considered a tool of social regulation of sorts. The art historical canon assumes its effect on the basis of the persisting masculine myth of an artist, and this myth defines the elementary selection mechanisms.[2] Active influencing of the largely westernised art historical canon as a functional memory starts precisely at this point, and the hegemonic narrative is countered on the level of discourse with its counter-narratives.[3] The author and curator Tereza Stejskalová describes the striking forgetfulness of this institutional and group-oriented functional memory as follows: "The history of art will remember only a small number of people who dedicated their life to art and their stars shine only thanks to the darkness in which all those who failed

are hiding."[4] The fact that the canon is determined by gender, class, racist, geopolitical and capitalist points of view means that some persons are (in)visible and further it leads to intersectional discrimination which the artists in this programme can capture, express and reflect (it back) only to a limited extent.

Horizontal and alter-global art historiography challenges the canon by eliminating its chronological narratives, by loosening the dynamics between the centre and the periphery and by developing multiple narratives.[5] A horizontal art history perspective in the sense of Piotr Piotrowski (1952–2015) enables one to regard the artistic practice as constant shifting between historical alterity and situational interpretation. Emerging art historians such as Karolina Majewska-Güde emphasise the performative framing and contingency of art historical interpretation(s) and actively avoid the production of "sequential historical narratives" in favour of focusing on the answering of current questions relating to the work and describing the existing cracks and gaps.[6]

Curatorship is also an important and interesting field of art historiography, since curators have held an authorial position since the 20th century, and this position is often offensively co-exhibited.[7] From this viewpoint, the question whose art is exhibited and in what way is not only an art-historical one, but also political, particularly in connection with feminist curating. Or to put it in another way: Curating and canon cannot be thought of as independent from each other and they have always been (also) political. Feminist curatorship is therefore also a form of intercultural research and practice,[8] its aim is to show how mechanisms of exclusion work and it helps us understand why so many individuals and communities are underrepresented in the canon. Against this backdrop, the exhibition project *Imagined Community VIII: My Significant Others* is concerned with mapping the artistic strategies of confronting the canon, and asks whether the participating artists adapt to it, abandon it, or even recreate it and if so, by what means.

Reflection of (art) historiography, demarginalization of female characters, and primarily exploration of artistic, historical and art historical feminist genealogies are recurring themes in the audiovisual works made by the artists presented within the screening chapter. In some of their works, they focus

1   Cf. Pollock 1999: 39.; also see: Hassler 2017: 189–205.
2   Ibid.
3   Cf. Kobolt 2012: 40–41.

4   Stejskalová 2017: n.p.
5   Cf. Majewska-Güde 2014: 15.
6   Ibid.
7   Using Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and her dOCUMENTA13 as an example, the art historian Felix Vogel refers to her visually documented, curatorial mise-en-scène as "the gravitational centre of the exhibition." See: Vogel 2014: 163.
8   Cf. Dimitrakaki 2012: 19.

on women artists that have been marginalized and show the potential their art has even today. By making their predecessors visible within these works, they not only provide them with a belated recognition, but they also address the forms of multiple exclusion of artistic, activist, and dissonant articulations and practices of women from the art historical canon in order to simultaneously (re-)inscribe the names of these women.

Alchemy and (Self-)Mythization

An unusual beginning of the human history: the film of Lea Petříková *After the Magician* (2020) draws on the unfinished and lost film *Le Magicien* (1947) by the French writer and surrealist artist Alice Rahon (1904–1987), who emigrated to Mexico after the breakout of the Second World War. *Le Magicien* is about a magician who, being the last human on Earth, lives at the bottom of a lake and who, after a nuclear catastrophe, is given a task by God to create a new humankind. After he fails to do so three times, he is seized with desire to have a woman stand by his side and the film closes with an open ending. The film remained unfinished and it is considered lost today.[9] The story about the magician forms the basis of the work by Lea Petříková and it also incorporates her own biography and life story.[10]

The film starts with several shots of mountains, monoliths and a volcano. The sky darkens and black clouds gather in the background. Afterwards, the viewers see a woman with an old-fashioned camera in an ivy maze, and the camera passes in an arc around her, until it becomes clear what she is filming: a black rectangle floating in mid-air. According to Petříková, this woman is supposed to represent Alice Rahon and it is a cameo appearance by the artist. Here, the mythologies of Alice Rahon and Lea Petříková intersect. The camera travels through the black rectangle into a new scenery. The magician, whom Petříková presents as an incarnation of the mountain and whose narrative is accompanied by the music of Ondrej Zajac, speaks about his failed attempts to create a new humanity. A woman draped in black with a rectangular mirror appears in the mountain landscape, through which the camera passes twice, only to reappear again at the starting position. Petříková's film also has an open ending: the female figure walks along the bank and gradually disappears from the viewers' sight. By means of the narrative

and visual intersection of the artistic biographies, Petříková utilizes the strategy of (self-)mythization: 'the woman' who does not appear in spite of magical, masculine powers, the abstract black rectangle and the artist Petříková who identifies as Alice Rahon and is also dressed up as her, reveal a re-mythicizing and alchemistic worldview which stands in direct opposition to the Christian and patriarchal story of creation.

Trickster in Disguise

The audiovisual work *Bent Tiles* (2017) by Alžběta Bačíková is about the Czech artist Jarmila B. who at some point in her life disappeared from the scene and left only several ambiguous projects behind her, these were mainly ceramic works in a spa. The main female character in the film is trying to reconstruct, based on the diaries of Jarmila B., what actually was the artistic vision the artist was striving for. Jarmila B. was active during the period of normalisation (1969–1989), when repressive measures were used to maintain the status quo up until the fall of the socialist regime. Jarmila B. is presented as a real person, but in fact, she is fictitious. The character acts as a stand-in for typical biographies of women artists of that time who were rediscovered only later, such as the authors Anna Zemánková, Milada Marešová, Vlasta Vostřebalová-Fišerová, Ludmila Padrtová and Běla Kolářová.[11] Using the fictitious Jarmila B., creator of applied art, and the topos of a mysterious disappearance, Bačíková intertwines the themes of exclusion from the history of art dominated by the canon, the real and symbolic killing of female authors by their male competitors[12], the weapons of a female trickster[13] and the active departure from the artistic field.

Bent Tiles begins in the spa Kúpele in Trenčianské Teplice and the narrator reads from the diaries of Jarmila B., while the musician Lucie Vítková sonically interacts with the space in a different spa, the Municipal Spa in Brno, using various instruments and partial tones. The different narrators, the musician and changing places are made simultaneously using a split screen.

Bačíková distinguishes between the design and conceptual artistic ideas of Jarmila B. The latter have never been executed in the public space and thus are the hidden side of the work by Jarmila B. which comes to light only based on her notes. The final

9 The Mexican curator Tere Arcq could not find the footage that was left with Rahon's former husband Edward Fitzgerald. Cf. Andrade 1998: 28.

10 Both artists are connected, for example, by the motive of mountains. Lea Petříková has been influenced by the landscape of the Central Bohemian Uplands where she comes from; Alice Rahon grew up in Bretagne and is fascinated by megaliths.

11 Also the American painter and conceptual artist Lee Lozano and the German painter and sculptor Charlotte Posenenske. Both Lozano (1971) and Posenenske (1968) have left the artistic field in order to express their disapproval with it being focused predominantly and capitalistically on male artists. Cf. Hanson 2020.

12 See: WhereisAnaMendieta 2016.

13 See: Lembcke 2019.

disappearance of Jarmila B. is preceded by her last rebellious act directed against the affirmative logic of the art world and the male perspective: a hotel owner commissioned a statue of a woman for a fountain which was supposed to shoot water from its breasts. Jarmila B. created the sculpture, but instead of stone, she used soap, so that the intended use would lead to its dissolving. Afterwards, Jarmila B. disappeared, and no one was able to get a hold of her anymore. This grotesque characterisation and theatricalization of the character of Jarmila B. and her actions is a hyperbolic critique of female artist mythologies and stereotypes that, according to the art historian Marianna Placáková, were associated with the keyword "women's art" up until the 1990s.[14]

The Uprising of Words

In her film *Only Two Words* (2018) Masha Godovannaya also uses a split screen, which she alternates with a full screen, and thus blends together historical footage from the 1970s and 1980s with her own material from 1998 to 2017, which are accompanied by the voice of the narrator (the first poem in English / the second in Russian) and text panels (first in Russian / then in English) which are partly superimposed over the images. The artist bases her work on the film technique of the 1920s Soviet avant-garde called *creative geography* which was developed by Lev Kuleshov and in which shots of various places and/or times are edited in such a way as to create an illusion of connected places in a chronologically continuous time. In this way, she combined her personal perspective with external observations. By juxtaposing the images and staging everyday details in various space-time continuums, Godovannaya has created a third place. Using this method, she has inscribed herself into a space that was foreign to her, and she made the city her own.

In the film, the biographies of the poet and the artist intersect, as both Masha Godovannaya and Eileen Myles moved to New York: Myles in 1974 from Boston and Godovannaya from Moscow in the 1990s. There she learned about cinema as a medium through which it is possible to address the cracks in reality and reflect different modes of existence. Godovannaya based her work on the poems *Holes* and *Bone* by the American poet Eileen Myles[15] and she conceived it as a dialogue between the two of them. The first poem was read by Eileen Myles in a Russian bookstore in New York. After the first poem, *Holes*, which is characterized by images from different cities, the

narration alternates between the speech of the narrator and the language of the text panels. During the poem *Bone*, which poetizes a separation, shots of nature dominate as well as images of Godovannaya. Drawing on the legacy of experimental film and antihegemonic aesthetics in public space, the artist in her film deals with queer, migrant and post-socialist experiences.

Special meaning is attributed to the two languages and their alternation. The translation of the Myles' English poetry full of lesbian hedonism into Russian, is an act of rebellion for Godovannaya, since it makes queer existence visible in a culture and country where the state is still fighting against it, in particular with a law against homosexual propaganda from 2013. Since even though the government erases any queer traces in the political environment, post-socialist people feel close to democratic and pluralistic ways of living. Godovannaya wants to point out the existence of Russian queer voices which are being supressed and made invisible. She used the Cyrillic alphabet in order to question English as the dominant symbolic language and to reclaim Russian as a unifying language and, perhaps in the future, even a language of decolonisation. At a time when English is a global language, history of art is dominated by Western culture and the colonial history of Russia has still not been addressed, queer poems in Russian are words and symbols of an uprising: against Russia's politics, but also against the neocolonial politics of the art history canon which overlooks local art histories and presumes the use of "International Art English".

Pre-Enactment as a Method

The plot of the work *Commission* (2020) by Ieva Balode begins at an unknown moment in time in Georgia and it shows a mythical, heroic female character: at first as a statue, then as a person who is writing a book, which is eventually delivered to three mighty women leaders by a messenger. The messenger is played by Ieva Balode, the other women are portrayed by curators from the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (LCCA). In this way, Balode comments on the rewriting of the canon by feminist curating and she also tries to make women voices more present.

The cover and content of the delivered book do not match: whereas the external design alludes to the old Georgian epos *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* by the poet Shota Rustaveli (1196–1207), it turns out that it contains alternative, matriarchal history of the world that is set against the male gaze. The first part of the

14   Placáková 2019: n.p.
15   Myles 2015: pp. 82–84 (*Holes*); pp. 258–259 (*Bone*).

Rustaveli's poem is dedicated to Queen Tamar and the cover serves as a reference to female power in the past. The science fiction style and B-movie approach in combination with the sacred gestures of Christian iconography create a stylistic form of women rebellion.

The starting point of Balode's work was her interest in modern architecture and brutalism. She gained further inspiration from the Georgian artist and curator Gvantsa Jishkariani, from whom she learned much about the history of Georgia, especially about Queen Tamar who ensured peace and prosperity in her time. Tamar is worshipped even today, even though Balode believes that the contemporary Georgian culture is very conservative and masculine. The statue of a woman that can be seen at the beginning of the film is the monument *Kartlis Deda* (Mother of Georgia) in Tbilisi. It embodies this city and its epithet. *Kartlis Deda* was built in 1958 for the 1500th anniversary of the foundation of the city and it is a work of the Georgian sculptor Elgudzha Amashukeli. The monument which we see next is the *Chronicle of Georgia* on the Tbilisi sea. It was created in 1985 by Zurab Tsereteli, however, it was never finished. With these significant socialist architectural monuments, Balode references the unsuccessful propaganda of gender equality during the Soviet era. On top of that, she has changed the narrative of these sculptures and lets the "Mother of Georgia" herself drink the wine that she actually offers to her guests and lets her form the "peace" sign with her hand.

Balode wants to show a world that is ruled by women. While doing so, she is referencing both the past and the fictional realm which gives us the freedom to imagine such a reality. This artistic method is called pre-enactment: pre-enactments are future events that can still go down in history. By connecting history and mythology, Brutalism and sci-fi elements as a reference to the future and by using what stands outside reality, she closes a large parenthesis around a positive matriarchal vision into which she inscribes herself and other women artists (curators as well), in order to emphasise the self-efficacy of their decisions. The women canon of art history lies in the hands of these and other women who are rewriting history.

Affinity in Sisterhood and Art

The audiovisual work *Alliances* (2018) by Alex Martinis Roe explores the heritage of the women's liberation movement. For this purpose, Roe analyses the genealogies of feminism and related practices so that she can establish greater pluralism and a solidarity among anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-racist groups as well as ecological activism, labour unions and the LGBTQIA+ community.

Roe criticises the appropriation of the cultural capital of this movement by the Parisian University on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Parisian May Day in 2018, and the suppression of student protests at that time. She reproaches the university for being hypocritical when they celebrate this special date as a public institution as if it were their heritage and not the heritage of those that follow in the footsteps of this movement. According to Roe, her workshop captured in the film was annoyingly the only feminist event for the 50th anniversary and probably the only opportunity for women of colour to take part in the celebrations. With her event at the Centre Pompidou, her intention was to come up with an anti-representational contribution that undermines the predominant form of this commemoration.

In Roe's view, the historical relation to the decolonial movements in Northern Africa has in particular been forgotten. In order for her to be able to focus on these repressed connections, she interviewed ten women activists and invited them to develop proposals for new alliances. Roe thus created double biographies of these women and their predecessors ("aînées féministes" in French), in order to point out the historical and complex connections between decolonial movements and the French women's movement. She dedicates her attention to two activists in particular: the writer Claire Finch and playwright Karima El Kharazze. Claire Finch is a postgraduate student in Gender Studies at the University of Paris. The feminist predecessor that she thematizes is the French writer Hélène Cixous. Finch recounts that her most important political involvement lies in the realisation that the text form is always connected to politics. She spoke with Hélène Cixous in this context about experimental writing, the embodiment of texts and the generally changeable and transformable physicality. In connection with this, Finch addresses text piracy (plagiarism) as a part of feminist resistance and its reclaiming of spaces.

In her film, Roe wants to uncover a specific line of feminist politics called "psychanalyse et politique". For this purpose, she avoided a purely scientific perspective and opted for a situational and piecemeal approach instead. Roe was interested in the practices which Claire Finch and Karima El Kharazze have learned from their predecessors and how this affected their position within the women's movement. Shots from the conversation with both women are framed with scenes from a public debate in which they shared their individual experience. An impressive example

is the conversation with the playwright Karima El Kharazze who names the theatre director and writer Gerty Dumbury from Guadeloupe as her predecessor. She describes Dambury's conflict when a black man sexually harassed a white woman and Dambury, along with several white women, confronted him. The shared and unshared loyalties of this black feminist clearly show how difficult her position in the French women's movement was. Apart from that, Finch and El Kharazze were also asked about the significance of the Parisian May as the centre of the 1968 movement for them.[16] For both of them, it is a myth that is similar to a reductionist advertising campaign, it overshadows many other important protest movements and it sidelines central continuities with women's and labour movements long before 1968, for example. Through her film, Roe would like to underline the fact that there have always been alliances between different fractions of the women's movement and that the women's movement has always been diverse and multi-layered.

The described artistic strategies of confronting the canon are performative, situational, spatio-temporal and solidarity exercises that destabilise and soften the Western and male-dominated art historical canon.[17] However, it would be too short-sighted to claim that they leave it only at the critical depletion in the supposed gravitational centres; since feminist artists of today are more than ever before focused on "taking care of each other and of themselves"[18]. They form a growing group of significant others, who feel not only connected to the history and present of the decolonial and anti-fascist resistance, but even beholden to it. The fossilized canon cannot do anything to defy this organic, multi-voiced and persistent growth.

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16   See also: Keppler, Koch and Nold 2019.
17   Meaning: "Alchemy and (Self-)Mythization" (Lea Petříková), "Trickster in Disguise" (Alžběta Bačíková), "The Uprising of Words" (Masha Godovannaya), "Pre-enactment as a Method" (Ieva Balode) as well as the lived and the inexperienced "Affinity in Sisterhood and Art" (Alex Martinis Roe).
18   Hedva 2020: 10.

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