

# The discourse of female art

Writer-in-Residence Ljiljana Maletin Vojvodić (SRB), invited within the Westbalkan-cooperation between BMEIA and Q21, talks about women artists, feminist art, a female style in visual art and the need to think about what that may even be. Questioning various different female artists, her research leads her to a range of answers. The Serbian writer, art journalist and cultural researcher publishes novels, non-fiction literature and art books.

**Ljiljana, your current project is called “Post Nora performance art\_ist?” What’s the project’s aim and how far have you come with your research here in Vienna?**

My project is the study of how female writers relate to female art, artists and the theme of women around them in Vienna. First, I was thinking about researching female performance artists, because it’s a narrower area of research. But when I came here I was faced with so many inspiring facts and events, so I couldn’t stop myself and I expanded my research to female art/artists and themes of women in Vienna. I visited a lot of museums, galleries, bookstores, libraries, and found either artists who were female or

male artists who used women as a theme. The focus of my interest is contemporary art, but here in Vienna I was also faced with Gustav Klimt's and Egon Schiele's works, whose art was inspired by women as well. Then there are a lot of interesting exhibitions in MuseumsQuartier, for instance the Heidi Horten Collection in Leopold Museum or #55 Dates Highlights in the MUMOK, which it would be a pity not to mention. I want to make an art book which will be a kind of research book as well, and I want to spread this idea to other artists or researchers or anybody who is interested in female art.

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**And what's the meaning of the title  
"Post Nora performance art\_ist"?**  
I research Scandinavian culture a lot

and I like Scandinavian writers and artists, I like Karl Uve Knausgaard but Henrik Ibsen and also his play “A Doll’s House”. The main character is Nora and she is a symbol for female emancipation. I was reading about an exhibition which took place in China called the “Post Nora exhibition”, meaning “female art after Nora”. So all female artists who became emancipated. But no matter if we’re living in a contemporary world, the question of emancipation is very tricky. Are we emancipated? I remember for instance Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex*, who was one of the greatest female writers of the 20th century and everybody thinks about her as an independent woman, but once I

read that she said, *the greatest achievement in her life was her relationship with Sartre.*

**So if you go to Sisi Museum for example, or if you look at female art in general, what questions do you address to these art works? What is the interest of your project?**

I'm asking questions, but I'm not giving the answers. I want to bring many voices into conversation and because I'm not an art historian or a scholar but a writer, I want to be creative and somehow combine different voices. So I was thinking: is there any female style? Can we recognize that one piece of art belongs to a female artist? Through these questions I'm asking – is it in

exhibitions, in reading narratives about artists – I try to connect with the artists.

Maybe even on some emotional level, because I don't define myself as a feminist, but the group of artists I focus on are women and I like to read about feminism.

### **You are not a feminist?**

No, no. But I like the concept. Somehow I feel that female art is more interesting to me. I haven't thought about this before, but as I work as an art journalist as well and after publishing a lot of articles I figured out that most of them are about female artists. And then I "realized" that I like female art. And that's why I decided to make this project. But you know, when I said I am



not a feminist I am thinking about feminism connected with women's rights issue. I like the "third or fourth-wave" of feminism, which insists that everybody is individual and different. I like the thought that women are different from men and that women are very different from one another, because why should we be the same?

**So you are a feminist.**

In some way, yes. Maybe not theoretically.

**Maybe there is not a strict definition of what feminism is.**

I don't act as a feminist researcher or theorist, maybe that's a better way to say it.

**Do you think there is something like “female art” or “female literature”?**

**Do you think that if you look at a certain piece of art or literature, you can somehow recognize that it was made by a woman?**

I'm not sure if I would recognize it. Or I am not sure if it is a question of gender or style? Or is it a typical female style cultural construction? That's why I developed a questionnaire and sent it to all kinds of women in the art world. I have already got 47 responses. When I read through the answers and someone explains strictly feminist ideas, how feminism is important, or for example how VALIE EXPORT's performances opened questions regarding female art, I like the idea behind it and I

acknowledge it. At the same time, somebody who filled in my questionnaire wrote that if we talk about female style, it is more a gender statement than an art statement. I like that idea as well. So I'm floating between different answers.

**So this project is also for yourself, to find out for yourself what female art is about?**

Yes, I'm glad you noticed that. Actually all my books are about myself and about discovering myself. At first sight, it looks like I'm writing about Sweden or Norway or Greenland, but all the time I'm trying to find myself – which at that moment I don't realize.

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**You started your project in Vienna.  
Why do you think Vienna is the best  
place for researching these kind of**

**questions?**

I think that Vienna is maybe not the best place, but a very good place – maybe London or Paris would be similar. But for this project I prefer this kind of city with a great variety of contemporary art. There are a lot of exhibitions, venues, etc. I've been here for 22 days and every day I have visited either a museum, a bookstore or an art gallery, and at the end of the day, I write down what I have seen. I have already written 50 pages just with remarks. So I think it's really a good city for researching.

**You were talking about the fact that your project is about contemporary feminist art. But you told me you've already visited the Sisi Museum to**

**learn more about the Sisi myth. So how is there a link between those two things: contemporary art and Sisi?**

Yes, I am researching about contemporary artists exhibiting, living or working in Vienna, Yoko Ono, Martha Wilson, VALIE EXPORT, Marina Abramović, Elina Brotherus etc., but Sisi too. I was thinking about Sisi when I visited Vienna some time ago and I felt a little bit strange being interested in this myth, because it's so touristic and old. But I like it because even though she was royal, she needed to escape from her life, she liked to travel, she wrote poetry, she liked Heinrich Heine's lyrics. I read somewhere that she said,  
*"Destinations are only desirable because a journey lies in between. If I*

*arrived somewhere and knew that I would never leave again, even a sojourn in paradise would turn into hell for me”.*

And sometimes I feel the same.

**Do you think there's a link between feminism and the need to escape?**

I'm not sure. Is there? I feel that way.

And I think that art is some kind of exile.

No matter if you live in your own country or abroad, you are in some kind of mental exile. For me, it's so important to travel and to be an Artist-in-Residence as well, because then I'm the most productive.

**So you have to escape from your home country to be creative?**

Yes. And to be closer to myself.

Because then I'm not connected with



daily routines, with my work, with everything I'm used to. I really work hard when I have a residency somewhere, everyday a couple of hours. I like that.

**What advice would you give a young woman who would like to become a writer, tell stories? Do you think there is a certain approach to literature? Is there something you can pass on to an aspiring writer? What are the difficulties in becoming a writer – especially a female writer?**

I don't know, I can only speak about myself. When I feel difficulties, I immediately think it's my fault that I put boundaries on myself. So I would say everybody should express themselves

and just be a writer. Maybe a lot of writers don't agree with me, but I think the fact that I finished literature studies, didn't help me with writing. I think it's better not to study literature to not be obsessed with analyses. When I finished literature studies, I never thought I would become a writer. And when I started travelling, I found so many interesting things that I needed to share them with others, so I think that people who want to be creative need to experience travel and different types of art. For me as an artist, visual art is very important. In my country especially, artists are so divided. If somebody is into music, they are not interested in movies. Or if somebody is a visual artist, they don't go to the theatre. Art is my

life, and that's probably the reason I'm staying in Serbia – no matter if I travel a lot – because I'm so attached to my language. And I can experience art through my language, theatre, etc.

**So would you say your writing is inspired more by the visual arts than by other writers?**

Maybe at this stage in my career. First, by different cultures and then by visual arts. But I can only repeat: everything is about myself. When you are travelling and you escape from your daily routines, you can somehow better define yourself.

**Do you think there are special difficulties for female artists? Is there a difference, for example, between**

## **being a male writer and a female writer?**

I don't think so. But there are a lot of prejudices, even in the contemporary world. In Serbia, we have so-called "canonical, serious, real literature" and "chick-lit" (bad literature, women's fiction). It is more question of literary genre and style than gender, but the title is so discriminatory.

The most important Serbian female writer, Isidora Sekulić, faced difficulties with her first books. She died in 1958, she was born in Vojvodina like I was, she travelled to Scandinavia – we have that connection in common. When she returned she published a book about Norway – "Letters from Norway" – and

the most influential critique labelled her writing "women's literature", un-national, too cosmopolitan.

Now I think I don't have any difficulties, but of course there are. I don't want to be in some community, circles, national canons, either male or female, I want to be individual. That is always a problem. But Artist-in-Residence programmes and projects abroad give me the strength to be independent.

Interview: Julia Stattin

Fotos: Eva Puella

The artist was invited by BMEIA



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