

## **HERO MOTHER: Contemporary Art by Post-Communist Women Rethinking Heroism**

**Resisting the Limits of Now**  
Bojana Pejić

*We must begin to think of artists and intellectuals as not only engaged in the public, but as producing a public through the mode of address and the establishment of platforms or counter publics, something that has already existed in both the east and west, clandestinely and underground respectively, but in opposition to the reigning cultural and political hegemony of the specific society.*

Simon Sheikh, "Representation, Contestation and Power: The Artist as Public Intellectual", 2004<sup>1</sup>

The artists participating in the *Hero Mother* exhibition are women who work as artists and live as citizens in an age which is known as the democratic condition. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent removal of the Communist administrations, which had been, with the exception of Romania, dismantled via a number of "peaceful revolutions" of the 1990s, Central/Eastern European countries embarked on becoming parliamentary democracies. Under the given democratic order, we are advised, the forms of social rebellion needed to be changed: "We should stop trying to storm the Bastille; it is time to walk around it".<sup>2</sup> Borrowing the phrase by Samuel Becket for the title of the work, *Try again. Fail again. Fail better* (2011), Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkačová work with an iconic sign – a raised clenched fist – which had historically been used as the symbol standing for social revolt. This sign had/has prime visibility in the Communist countries where it had one sole meaning: it meant Revolution, and it was associated with the rebellion of the working classes; now the sign acquired a different meaning. The artists write: "A raised fist is a universal symbol of protest, used by various (even contradictory) groups throughout history, emblematic for struggle, resistance, anger and the yearning for change. [...] Reminding one of? an object made for mass amusement, it reveals the unfortunate fate

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1 Simon Sheikh, *Representation, Contestation and Power: The Artist as Public Intellectual* (2004), at: [www.republicart.net](http://www.republicart.net)

2 Martin Škabraha, "Revolution", in *Atlas of Transformation*, eds. Zbyněk Baladrán and Vit Havránek (Prague: transit.cz, 2010), p. 554.

of revolutions and their potential to entertain, to sell well, to become an attraction, a free-time activity, a hobby”. ([www.chitka.info](http://www.chitka.info))

The majority of the pieces gathered in the *Hero Mother* show belong to the contextual art practices to which the artist turned in order to “work with” the given cultural, historical and political context of their particular society, inquiring into the hegemonic functioning of the public spheres in their countries, which as often as not, disregard the voices constituting counter-publics. If I am to use the metaphor of the Bastille, then, I dare claim that the artists taking part in our show decided not to “walk around” the sites of power, discovering instead numerous “other Bastilles” that do not always represent the Central Power, but are instead scattered around the social tissue and became comfortably enmeshed in the democratic scenery; there, the functioning of power does not always appear in the form of solid objects, but as *a set of ideas*, which circulate in the public sphere where they are acknowledged as “normal”, and even “natural”. Certainly, the public discourse may (as it often does) induce actual violence against “others”, be they Roma, ethnic minorities, or these days, (war) refugees. These immaterial Bastilles function through a number of cultural phobias: on the one hand, these could be xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and hate speech addressing cultural minorities, and last but not least, homophobia; on the other hand, the public discourse of today generally distrusts any kind of “speculative leftism” (Alain Badiou), often manifesting its tolerance as regards everyday fascism and the galloping “browning of Europe”. Even though these immaterial “Bastilles” do surface in many (if not all) countries of today’s global world, storming them occurs within a particular cartography. At the time of writing, the European states, those located in Central/Eastern Europe in particular, (re)-discovered their hostile Eurocentric nature. Thus, while we are “experiencing an influx of new immigrant cultures, national majority culture were insisting more stringently on their uniqueness, their purity, and all too often, their superiority”. Despite the long history of globalisation, “public spheres have always been conceptualized within the frameworks of nation state.”<sup>3</sup>

### **The Eighth of March or Mother’s Day: Must We Choose?**

The nation state, as is known, exercises its power on many levels that are both real and symbolic. Celebrating public/state holidays is a symbolic act enabling the social cohesion of a respective community or state. The Eighth of March (International Women’s Day, originally International Working Women’s Day) and Mother’s Day are such traditional annual events meant to convey honour to and respect for women, and today both are observed across the globe. The younger women artists taking part in our exhibition, who

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3 “Editors’ Introduction”, in *The Idea of the Public Sphere*, eds. Jostein Gripsrud, et al. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), p. XXV.

are born in the countries that used to practice State Socialism, may know – as their older colleagues certainly do – that the Eighth of March used to be a state holiday. Sometimes the posters displayed on the street represented a woman with her fist clenched. This was also true for Titoist Yugoslavia (1945-1991), where several artists showing in this exhibition – Marina Abramović, Maja Bajević, Danica Dakić, Sanja Iveković, Milica Tomić – and myself – were born. On that day, Socialist women and men were not obliged to work, and on that occasion, I remember, public institutions organised festivities with food and drink – usually prepared by the female employees. Having a day off, women, particularly mothers, usually used it at home, cooking, washing and checking the children’s homework, without the stress they experienced at the offices or in the factories. And whereas we, the female subjects living with Communist regulations, were offered red carnations, the “flowers of the proletariat”, in the West, the “Capitalist” women organised rallies, marching in the streets (often with the clenched fist), staging public events pointing to the rights (such as equal pay, longer and paid maternity leave or abortion, for example) they lacked in their democratic states. Alas, such a form of public activism had been unimaginable for us inhabiting the Communist hemisphere, given that any form of public gathering had been prohibited – unless it was choreographed by the State, like for the Day of the Republic or the First of May (Labour Day). In addition, in the Communist countries, the Eighth of March was usually a proper occasion to organise exhibitions of women artists; though this privilege women artists benefited from, some officials assumed, was not really necessary, given that according to the official Socialist ideology of gender egalitarianism, men and women (artists included) enjoyed equal rights in public life, and this was somehow valid for exhibition practice, as well.

The Eighth of March and Mother’s Day are the festivities emerging in the early twentieth century, and both could be aligned to the conventions termed by Eric Hobsbawm the “invented traditions”.<sup>4</sup> What do these two fashions of “honouring women” have in common, and what differentiates them? These two “women’s days” carry on two different

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4 Hobsbawm writes: “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with past. In fact, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable past”. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Invented Traditions”, in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. E. Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [1983] 2012), p. 1. Hobsbawm uses this term for the official (visual) repertoire “invented” by the new European nation states, first established in the mid-19th century, which included new public holidays, national ceremonies and commemorations, monuments, flags and state symbols. Even though he does not mention the Eighth of March, he writes about another type of “invented tradition”, and this is the First of May, the International Workers’ Day, which became promoted by the labour movements and emerged as a public event/rally in the early 1890s.

“suitable pasts”. International Women’s Day, just as the First of May, became “invented” by the labour movements in North America, where the Socialist Party observed IWD first in 1909. In Europe, at the Socialist International meeting held in Copenhagen in 1910, on the initiative of Klara Zetkin, this day (with no fixed date) was established in order to build support for women to get suffrage rights and for their larger participation in the labour force. The following year it was marked in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland with rallies in which both men and women took part. In the wake of the First World War, IWD became a tool for protesting against militarization and the war. In the USSR, Alexandra Kollontai and Lenin promoted IWD as a state holiday, which only in 1965 became there a non-working day. In 1977, the United Nations adopted the resolution proclaiming IWD as the UN Day for Women’s Rights.

Post-Communist “new” democracies born in the early 1990s comfortably nested within the recently established or re-established sovereign nation states; they went on reproducing their “invented traditions”, their official holidays, which without exception honour and commemorate their national pasts and national histories which *preceded* the Communist period. Thus, most of the post-Communist states ceased to observe International Women’s Day as a public holiday; nonetheless, this day remained marked in many of them.<sup>5</sup> Instead, during the 1990s, a number of post-Communist states instituted Mother’s Day as a festive event that should, it seems, mirror “democratic” changes in Central/Eastern Europe. In contrast, during the events constituting the Arab Spring, however, the Eighth of March was a day to celebrate (the birth of) democracy. Alas, in 2011, the Egyptian women who had marched to Cairo’s Tahrir Square – some in headscarves and flowing robes, others in jeans – who came out to stand up for their rights, social justice and against sexual harassment, were watched by the police and military, while crowds of men who attended the event soon outnumbered them and chased them out.<sup>6</sup>

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5 IWD is an official holiday in Afghanistan, Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, China (for women only), Cuba, Georgia, Guinea-Bissau, Eritrea, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Macedonia (for women only), Madagascar (for women only), Moldova, Mongolia, Nepal (for women only), Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Zambia. In some countries, such as Cameroon, Croatia, Romania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Bulgaria and Chile, the day is not a public holiday, but is nevertheless widely observed.

6 See Al-Shalchi, Hadeel (8 March 2011). “Egyptian women’s rights protest marred by hecklers” *The Washington Post*. AP. [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com). Retrieved 28 April 2016.”They said that our role was to stay home and raise presidents, not to run for president,” reported Farida Helmy, a 24-year-old journalist.

## Working On and Off the Market

Throughout the 1990s, the Central/Eastern European post-Communist states had experienced a traumatic political “transition” to “democracy”, which implied the shift from the state-run to a free economy: this, of course, has occasioned austerity measures, leading to massive unemployment, which hit the female populace in particular, so that one spoke of the “feminization of poverty”. At the crossroads of Perestroika, many Soviet women could not get any medal for being “Heroine Mothers”, given that in the situation of economic crises it became unimaginable to raise families with many children; at that time they became engaged in “heroic shopping” (Nancy Ries), standing in long queues in front of Soviet half-empty shops. Some other Russian women took over a new profession: foreign-currency prostitution. In the early 1990s, a Russian authoress honours this oldest profession for two reasons: “This was the emancipation from the de-sexualization of life under communism, the recognition of one’s bodily self as an inseparable part of one’s identity... If Western prostitutes belong to ‘the underworld,’ then the Moscow prostitutes form instead a ‘counter culture; - so much has their professional activity been ideologized.” Without a touch of irony, she concludes: “The prostitute, the lone entrepreneur breaking taboos, is the pioneer of the market economy...”<sup>7</sup>

The officially produced amnesia regarding the Eighth of March — initially called International *Working Women’s Day* — could be simply explained: even though this holiday is observed internationally, the nationalist and/or post-Communist ideologues believe that it revives the “spectre of Communism”. This holiday is just one entry appearing on a long list of “Communist spectres”, which are haunting our post-Communist condition: prominent on the list is “Communist” gender equality, women’s emancipation, the right to decide about their pregnancies, or a woman’s option to have two identities: to be a mother and to practice her profession. A romanticised projection of the New (Post-Communist) Woman expressed in 2007 reads: “For the women of Eastern Europe, being at home with their families was not only a practical goal but also a political statement – opposing the regimentation of women into cadres of the Heroes of Socialist Labor”.<sup>8</sup> Such a melodramatic imagination completely neglects at least three aspects. First: the fact is that during the economic transition, it was mainly post-Socialist New Women who lost their jobs. Second, those who managed to keep them, but wanted also to become

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7 Larissa Lissyutkina, “Soviet Women at the Crossroads of Perestroika”, in *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*, eds. Magda Mueller and Nanette Funk (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 284.

8 Charlotta Kotik, “Post-Totalitarian Art: Eastern and Central Europe”, in *Global Feminisms*, exh. cat., eds. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (Merrell Publishers 2007), p. 157.

mothers, had now to follow the new economic measures proposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which called for a radical “restructuring” of state entitlement policies, and this included, e.g., the length of maternal/paternal leave.<sup>9</sup> Third: could a single mother or a divorcee make a “political statement” by staying at home in order to become a full-time mother? Hardly. Those women who want to stay at home, and/or want to be stay-at-home mothers could be either those whose (male) partners are wealthy, or those who benefit from heterosexual marriage. The notion of domesticity, as Nira Yuval-Davis explains, lies in the core of the neoliberal world view: “[O]ne of the paradoxes of the ‘new liberalism’ has been that while formally encouraging ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy,’ in its pursuit of the ‘free market’ and a ‘minimal state’ (in the countries of the former Soviet Union as well as in post-colonial states), it has also promoted traditional familial ideologies which would enable the radical weakening of the welfare state”.<sup>10</sup> Anastasia Vepreva, in her video, *She Has To* (2013), touches upon this ideology, recording a panel broadcast by a Russian TV station, in which younger women are given advice on how to save their marriages. Indeed, the vast majority of Russian politicians and reformers appeared to view the “domestication” of women as a necessary condition for the establishment of a liberal democratic government.<sup>11</sup>

It thus comes as no surprise that instead of the Eighth of March, which, I think, preserves the memories of women’s past social rebellion and reminds us of those “unruly women” who demand their rights and protested against the hegemony of patriarchy, we, in the post-Socialist cultures are now to pay tribute only to those women who are mothers. Mother’s Day, it seems to me, reflects these kinds of current social needs. The “suitable past” to be recalled on Mother’s Day appears to be less revolutionary than that of the Eighth of March. This special day is to be situated in the context of Christianity, with its tradition of Marianism, the veneration of the Virgin Mary. This custom was carried out to the secularised age, in which the chaste woman, disguised as *la Marianne*, became the female icon of the French Revolution; a bit later, in the mid-nineteenth century, with the

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9 In a 1992 report on Hungarian social policy reform, the World Bank evaluated: “Maternity and child care benefits [...] represent a significant and costly item in the State budget. In view of the present budgetary difficulties, this alone provides sufficient reason for an appraisal of the present system. The change to a market economy provides a second reason; the present arrangements are unlikely to be compatible with the development of a large private sector”. Joanna Goven, “New Parliament, Old Discourse? The Parental Leave Debate in Hungary”, in *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics and Everyday Life After Socialism*, eds. Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 291.

10 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), p.122.

11 Cf. Ann Hibner Koblitz, “Women under Perestroika and Doi Moi: A Comparison of Marketization in Russia and Vietnam”, in *Canadian Women’s Studies* 16(1), pp. 54-59.

birth of nation-states, the female figures (usually topping national monuments) surfaced all over Europe: they were imagined or visualised as the Mother of the Nation, or as the Motherland (as in the work by Sasha Pirogova). These female representations help us understand “how the nation’s female body operated to consolidate the heterosexual investments of modern nationalism”.<sup>12</sup> In the Catholic countries, such as Poland, the tradition of the Polish Mother (*Matka Polka*) dates back to Romanticism and the national revival of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Elżbeta Jabłońska’s series *Supermatka* (2002) carries on, but at the same time deconstructs this tradition, representing herself as the (Polish) mother, in a form now consistent with the consumerist desires of our times.

Jabłońska, as well as several other artists in our exhibition, like (Twin) Gabriel, Mariana Vassileva and Anna-Stina Treumund, thematise maternity in their pieces that relay the tenderness and warmth between the mother and child. Similar emotions are expressed in the works dealing with the relationship between mothers and their daughters (as in the works by Danica Dakić and Selma Selman), which always remind me of a phrase by Virginia Woolf: “For we think back through our mothers if we are women”.<sup>14</sup> These works, based on intimate experiences and love, are representations of motherhood, an art historical genre having a long history, which, in passing, was not interrupted during Communist times.<sup>15</sup> Our artists who chose to become mothers made their individual decisions. When these personal women’s decisions and desires are treated as state matters and/or issues promoted by the pro-natalist and conservative political parties sitting in their national parliaments that may be working in Albania or Australia, Poland or Peru, then we are dealing with motherhood as a cultural construct, according to which women are “natural” caregivers whose “duty” is to re-produce the national populace, soothing thus the widespread anxiety about the “dying-out nation”.

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12 Joan B. Landes, *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation, and Revolution in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 22.

13 See Izabela Kowalczyk, “Visualizing the Mythical Polish Mother” (2007), reprinted in *Gender Check: A Reader – Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, exh.cat., ed. Bojana Pejić (Vienna: Erste Foundation and MUMOK, and Cologne: Buchhandlung Walter König, 2010), pp. 213-219.

14 Virginia Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own” (1929), in *Selected Works by Virginia Woolf* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2005), p. 610. In the following sentence, she writes: “It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure”.

15 Cf. *Gender Check – Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe*, exh.cat., ed. Bojana Pejić (Vienna: Erste Foundation and MUMOK, and Cologne: Buchhandlung Walter König, 2009).

The reasons why we are now “forgetting” the Eighth of March and remembering Mother’s Day lie in the societal desires accepted in the post-Communist context.<sup>16</sup> And if the Eighth of March was/is the day that honours the working woman, Mother’s Day is a festivity which (should) remind us that being a mother means having a lifetime occupation which — in different places and different times — depends upon *unpaid* labour.

### **The Family Plot: Mothers and Nations**

In her brilliant account on the nation state, Ann McClintock contends: “Nations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimize people’s access to the resources of the nation-state. But despite many nationalists’ investment in the idea of popular unity, nations have historically amounted to be sanctioned institutionalization of gender difference. No nation in the world grants women and men the same rights and resources in the nation-state”.<sup>17</sup> How does this apply to the post-Communist nation-states? It is indicative that in the early 1990s, already during the very first sessions of the democratically elected Central/Eastern European parliaments, women’s citizenship was discussed exclusively in terms of motherhood. Women’s bodies, sexual and domestic arrangements became constitutional matters. The first thing to be done was the banning of the abortion (which in the Socialist states, except in Romania, was legal). Referring to her private conversation about abortion with a member of the Polish Senate in 1991, Peggy Watson quotes him: “We will nationalize those bellies!” Indeed, the abortion law in Poland was enacted in January 1993. Watson argues that this particular legislation was regarded as something that *could be done*: “[T]he regulation of women was seen as an area which required action but also one where power could be readily exercised, whereas the economy engendered feelings of powerlessness”<sup>18</sup>. Hungarian feminist,

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16 Armenia celebrates the Eighth of March, but has also established “Maternity and Beauty Day” (7 April); the Belarus government introduced Mother’s Day in 1996; in China, Mother’s Day is an unofficial festival for poor mothers; in the interwar Czechoslovakia, Mother’s Day existed since 1923, and was resumed in 1993 (IWD stopped in 1989); Estonia marks Mother’s Day, but it is not a public holiday; Hungary had a Mother’s Day since 1925 and resumed it in the 1990s; Latvia observed Mother’s Day for the first time in 1925 and returned to it in 1992; in Romania, Mother’s Day was incepted in 2010 and is a public holiday, and is also matched by Father’s Day; Slovakia has Mother’s Day and kept the Eighth of March, but neither are state holidays; Ukraine introduced Mother’s Day in 1999.

17 Anne Mc Clintock, ““No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Nationalism, Gender, and Race” (1991), in *Becoming National - A Reader*, eds. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 260.

18 Peggy Watson, “The Rise of Masculinism in Eastern Europe”, in *Mapping the Women’s Movement*, ed. Monica Threlfall (London/New York: Verso, 1996), p. 221.

Judit Kiss remarked in 1991: “It is rather telling that one of the first big discussions of the newly elected [Hungarian] parliament took place about a draft law to ban abortion. It is rather intriguing that in the middle of a deep economic crisis, political chaos and social insecurity, when the very foundations of society are to be reshaped, abortion has become a primary question in almost all post-socialist countries”.<sup>19</sup>

The reunification of Germany was a long process that began in 1990, but it also included talks about “women and wombs”, and the debate about changes to the abortion law became a nearly five-year-long negotiation: according to the notorious article 218 (dating back to nineteenth-century criminal code!), abortion in the former FRG was illegal. During this long period, German press and media created a national scandal, reporting about the alleged “birth strike”: it was uncovered that a “great number” of East German women had decided for sterilization. A team of German women sociologists conducted interviews with some of these women, many of whom already had children, who named different reasons for such a radical act. The team concluded: “The profound social transformation since unification has jeopardized or completely undermined many of the things these women previously took for granted, including the ability to raise a family and have a career, develop professionally, maintain a certain standard of living, and protect the welfare of their children and families. It was a gesture of control, exercised to ameliorate conditions that threatened their livelihood and that they could not manage in any other way. These conditions included deleterious changes in the labor market, social welfare cuts, and rent increase. .... Sterilization can also be understood as a differentially motivated form of individual resistance, although it is not resistance in the usual political or collective sense”.<sup>20</sup>

For some twenty years now, the nationalist or populist parties like to maintain that “Communist emancipation... had turned women against motherhood”.<sup>21</sup> Such rumours are of course historically untrue, if we just remember the paid (and sometimes long) maternity leaves, organised child-care, such as crèches and the kindergarten system, meals for children in school. It must be said, though, that Communist officials had an ambivalent attitude towards women: “Indeed, socialist regimes were often characterized

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19 Anne Mc Clintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Nationalism, Gender, and Race” (1991), in *Becoming National - A Reader*, eds. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 260.

20 Peggy Watson, “The Rise of Masculinism in Eastern Europe”, in *Mapping the Women’s Movement*, ed. Monica Threlfall (London/New York: Verso, 1996), p. 221.

21 Kiss cited in Peggy Watson, “The Rise of Masculinism in Eastern Europe”, *ibid.*

by contradictory goals in their policies toward women: They wanted workers as well as mothers, token leaders as well as quiescent typists”.<sup>22</sup> The Socialist administrations had enabled women’s emancipation *in the public sphere*, i.e., in the field of education and in the domain of labour. Today, many feminist scholars who rethink the Communist setting tend to posit “public patriarchy” (the State) versus “private patriarchy” (the family). In contemporary (feminist) literature, we often encounter the privileging and idealisation of the domestic sphere (the home and the family), since it was claimed to be the only secure zone, which was outside the reach of the State and thus could “resist Socialism”. Yet, a closer inspection of this “secure zone” may prove that the power relations practiced “at home” as often as not implied women’s subjugation and sometimes even domestic violence against both women and children. None of the Socialist states passed laws against these acts, since they were considered to belong to the citizens’ “private” sphere. These days, in democratic countries, the discourse about domestic violence is legally regulated, but nevertheless, it is often suppressed in the public sphere (as in the video spot, Sanja Iveković).

If motherhood is central to any nation-state, does this mean that all female citizens of this state have the “duty” to reproduce the Nation? The “quality of the nation”, though, relies on exclusions: “The call for women, however, to have more or fewer children is hardly ever uniform to all women, from all class, ability and ethnic groupings.” The request is directed to the women having the “‘right’ ethnic origin [...] while as much as possible preventing poor, disabled and ethnic minority women from having children”.<sup>23</sup> This observation is extremely valid given that nations hardly ever fit to the borders of nation-states, and consequently, a number of ethnic/cultural minorities — locally known as “others” — inhabit the same space, which they must share with the — often hegemonic — Main Nation. According to such a nationalist’s logic, the Turkish women in Bulgaria, the Roma women in Hungary, the Hungarian women constituting the minority in Romania and Slovakia, Russian women in Estonia or in Latvia, Turkish women in Germany, or Kurdish women in Turkey are generally not encouraged to give birth to more children. And this is not specific to the post-Communist context only.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the reproduction of the Nation has become more complicated since same-sex domestic arrangements appear to cause a “demographic” problem, despite the fact that gay and lesbian families may already

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22 Irene Dölling, Daphne Hahn, and Sylka Scholz, “Birth Strike in the New Federal State: Is Sterilization an Act of Resistance?”, in *Reproducing Gender* (See Note 9), p. 144.

23 Joanna Goven, “New Parliament, Old Discourse? The Parental Leave Debate in Hungary”, in *Reproducing Gender* (See Note 9), p. 288.

24 Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, “Introduction”, in *Reproducing Gender*, (see Note 9), pp. 5-6.

have children or may, in some countries, adopt them. Regardless, both politicians and particularly members of the Church like to lament about the “demographic catastrophe”.<sup>25</sup>

### Revisiting the Collective Memory Bank

With the “acceleration of history” that followed 1989, we are at present witnessing a worldwide “upsurge in memory”. (Pierre Nora) This drift of “memorialism” also hit the post-Communist world in general, but the procedures of collective remembering in Central/Eastern Europe comprise a rather complicated endeavour, as historian Tony Judt points out: “Here there is too much memory, too many pasts on which people can draw, usually as a weapon against the past of someone else”.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of the country we look at, the re-writing of national histories appears to have one constant feature: the notion of “suffering together” (Ernst Renan) was and still is built into the foundations of any national narrative. The victimhood is taken to indicate the sense of belonging to a nation or rather nation-state. This is a belief that Our Nation had always been subjugated to “evil history” imposed by the Great Powers, in which “Sovietisation” was just one instance. During the Cold War, the self-perception of victimhood and the things done to “us” by the Third Reich, remained the dominant memory until about 1989. Tony Judt observes: “In this circumstance, the uncomfortably confusing recollection of things done by us to others *during* the war (i.e., under German auspices) got conveniently lost”.<sup>27</sup> After the Cold War, it seems that this conviction did not change. Now is the time for a fresh, “de-ideologised” look at the history of World War II, which was now rewritten as a clash of nations, one in which, such as the Estonian President claims: “Our people were not murdered by Communists and Nazis, but by Germans and Russians”.<sup>28</sup>

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25 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (See Note 10), p. 116.

26 Orna Donath, in her valuable article based on her research in Israel, writes that “the cultural belief systems relating to Jewish women’s reproductive abilities are deeply rooted in the memory of the Holocaust and in the consciousness of conflicts and wars. Within such a social climate, most Jewish women’s reproductive abilities are exploited by the state to advance a nationalist plan. Their wombs are perceived as a ‘national womb,’ to be recruited for the greater Jewish good”. Donath, “Regretting Motherhood: A Sociopolitical Analyses”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2015, vol. 40, no.2, p. 348.

27 In December 2010, Vladimir Putin said, on CNN’s Larry King program: “As for same-sex marriages, they do not produce offspring, as you know... We are fairly tolerant toward sexual minorities; however, we think that the state should promote reproduction, support mothers and children”. Amen.

28 Tony Judt, “The past is another country: myth and memory in post-war Europe”, in Jan-Werner Müller, ed., *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe – Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 172.

Discussing the critical notions of memory and identity, historian John R. Gillis holds that “we are constantly revising our memories to suit our current identities”. This remark is useful as a means to understand why the statues of Lenin and other Great Communist Men disappeared from the public view in post-Communist countries, which since the 1990s try to confirm their new — national — identities. Gillis writes: “We need to be reminded that memories and identities are not fixed things, but representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective phenomena. [...] ‘memory work’ is, like any other kind of physical labor, embedded in complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end”.<sup>29</sup> Let us now imagine that each post-Communist sovereign state has instituted a sort of “collective memory bank”, where it treasures names, images and ideas relating to its national past — either real or imaginary — which, of course, include both memories of “heroic” battles fought for sovereignty (as a rule with the neighbouring nations), and “heroic suffering” under a foreign yoke. This national “bank” tends to establish, or rather impose, “sovereignty over memory” (Timothy Snyder). As usual, sovereignty implies exclusions.

Over the past twenty or so years, we could learn that the democratic public sphere is not (and never was) a monolith, nor a unified memory space, but is instead fragmented into many conflicting *memospheres* (Mihnea Mircan). The women artists in our exhibition who decided to perform their “memory work”, or their *devoir de mémoire* (duty to remember), revisit many events and practices that are *absent* in the “collective memory banks” destabilising thus the institutionalised — truly hegemonic — views of the national past. Several works deal with collective amnesia, such as deep-seated anti-Semitism in the Hungarian past, as well as present (Hajnal Németh); with her *Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland*, Yael Bartana invokes the past, but challenges the present; the absence of any memory about the Yugoslav World War II anti-Fascism and Partisans in the post-Yugoslav nation-states (Marina Abramović and Milica Tomić), and they even refer to a particular country (which does not anymore exist), and express a contemporary relation to anti-Fascism, which we have many reasons to rethink today.<sup>30</sup> Sanja Iveković, as a feminist, is usually concerned with the under-representation of women in history, where their

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29 Tony Judt, *Ibid*, p. 163, italics in original.

30 T. H. Ilves, in an interview in Spiegel Online, 26. 6. 2007. Quoted in Alexander Astrov, “The Work of Politics in the Age of Technological Reproducibility”, in Kristina Norman: *After-War, catalogue to the Estonian Pavilion at the Venice Biennial* (Tallinn: Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2007), p. 70. The statement is issued during social and ethnic unrest in Tallinn caused the displacement of the statue of the Bronze Soldier (1949) from the city’s centre to the “Soviet” Defence Forces Cemetery in the suburbs. Kristina Norman’s work is about these events.

heroism, like those of women active in the Solidarność Movement, is commonly obscured. The Estonian “Singing Revolution” is certainly a collective endeavour stored in the national “memory bank”, but in her portraits, Tanja Muravskaja now provides the participants with their due individuality.

Memory is also re-enacted in the pieces that treat the trauma and loss caused by the war in Bosnia (Maja Bajević and Adela Jušić), and these works also specify that the memories of women, even when they are soldiers, differ from those of men. Personal memory is located in works that “write” family histories, which form constitutive parts of our individual identity (Zuzanna Janin and Almagul Menlibayeva). Finally, here are also works that are engaged in re-writing women’s histories, which establish women’s genealogies concerning real (Suzanna Janin) or “elective” mothers, as Ilona Németh does in her interview with Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller, who lived in exile until recently; on her return to her *Heimat*, she, being a Marxist (and a Jew) was publicly exposed to hysterical nationalist critique.

Concerning the artworks focused on memories, it seems appropriate to turn to Kaja Silverman, who points out an important aspect of memory-labour: “The function of recollection [...] is to transform, not to reproduce. [...] To remember perfectly would be forever to inhabit the same cultural order. However, to remember imperfectly is to bring images from the past into an ever new and dynamic relation to those through which we experience the present, and in the process ceaselessly to shift the contours and significance not only of the past, but also of the present”.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Democratic Project and the Limits of Now**

Some ten years ago, artists were quite engaged in the critique of nationalism as the ideology dominating public life in both Western and Eastern countries.<sup>32</sup> At the present moment, when “Fortress Europe” constructs fences on the borders between EU and non-EU states, the radical populist, or rather pro-Fascist parties active, particularly in the post-Communist 25-year-old “new” democracies, such as Hungary or Poland, but also in older democracies, like France, Greece, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria, respond in a quite similar manner. The “new normality” operating across different

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31 John R. Gillis, *Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship*, in *Commemorations – The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 3.

32 For a very useful overview of these tendencies, see *Art and the F Word: Reflections on the Browning of Europe*, eds. Maria Lind and What, How & for Whom/WHW (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014).

European contexts looks rather similar: “The radical parties respond to contemporary conditions and challenges such as increased migration, a changing ethno-cultural landscape, economic crisis and international terrorism, through a politics of polarization and fear that seeds cultural racism and intolerance. Figures such as the migrant, the Muslim, the gypsy or the Jew are portrayed as the defining Other”.<sup>33</sup>

The logic of globalisation is central to *Immigration Movement International*, Tania Bruguera, and a group of public intellectuals launched in 2011, which calls for the politics of mobility and people’s — human — rights to move freely across national borders in order to find work in foreign countries. The first sentence in their *Manifesto* reads: “We have been called many names. Illegals. Aliens. Guest Workers. Border crossers. Undesirables. Exiles. Criminals. Non-citizens. Terrorists. Thieves. Foreigners. Invaders. Undocumented”. The last sentence is clear, but utopian: “Dignity has no nationality”. In the contest of the current “refugee crisis” in Europe, and particularly in light of the attitude post-Communist nation-states have chosen to take as regards “the Islamicisation” of Europe, I am left wondering who is willing to hear these ideas. Someone in Hungary, or Poland? In the Polish nationalist imagination, e.g., the figure of the enemy is constructed as having two origins, since for several years now, “fears were also expressed about the threat of ‘hordes of immigrants’ — presumably Muslim — that would enter Poland via the EU. Interestingly, the idea was raised that Poland could become not only ‘bulwark of Christendom’ against the East, but also to the West—due to lax immigration policies of the European Union”.<sup>34</sup>

As citizens of post-Communist states, our artists can practice their basic civil rights, have the right to vote in their countries of origin, and are free to opt for a political party of their preference, and they can also take part in public rallies protesting against many social injustices, which otherwise characterise the functioning of any democratic setting. This setting, however, is pregnant with paradoxes: whereas the citizens could practice their basic democratic rights regardless of their heterosexual or LGBT sexual identity, democratic legislation functions according to the hetero-normative canon, and therefore

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33 Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 189.

34 See *Contemporary Art and Nationalism – Critical Reader*, eds. Minna Henriksson and Sezgin Boynik (Prishtina: Institute for Contemporary Art EXIT and Center for Humanistic Studies Gani Bobi, 2007); *Let’s Talk About Nationalism – Between Ideology and Identity*, curated by Rael Artel, exh. cat. (Tallinn: KUMU 2010); see also: Airi Triisberg, “Between Nation and People: On Concepts of (Un)Belonging”, in Kristina Norman: *After-War, exh. cat., Estonian Pavilion at the 53. Venice Biennial* (Tallinn: Center for Contemporary Arts, Estonia, 2009), pp. 88-108. The most recent project is *Private Nationalism*, which included the exhibition, *Imagined Communities, Personal Imaginations*, curated by Edit András, held in Museum Kiscell – Municipal Gallery in Budapest (27.10 – 13.12. 2015).

excludes same-sex marriages. The right of non-heterosexual citizens and actions against discrimination are part of the public sphere of many countries, but these actions are still understood as acts of dissent.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, they are interpreted as an “import” imposed by the “West”. The first Central/Eastern European state to acknowledge same-sex partnership was Hungary, but this regulation, introduced in 2009, was soon prohibited by the new Hungarian Constitution passed in 2011. As far as public demonstrations are concerned, they are of course allowed in our “democracies”, unless they manifest revolt against the post-Communist heads of State (as in the installation by Gluklya), whose attitudes reminds many of us of the rulers we used to know in the bygone Communist times. The other, this time women’s fashion of disobedience is the international activity of FEMEN, a grouping originating in Ukraine, with fluid and transnational membership, whose provocative gestures performed in public space, could be perhaps best described in this way: “We want to begin as women seriously addressing ourselves, not solely in relation to men, but in relation to an entire structure of domination of which patriarchy is one part”.<sup>36</sup>

Well, the list of the “Bastilles” to be stormed seems to be endless. Women artists taking part in the *Hero Mother* exhibition manifest their dissent and dissatisfaction and sometimes even anger, as Maja Bajević does in her video, *How Do You Want To Be Governed?* They are resisting and challenging the “limits of now”. Referring to these limits, Peter Bürger, German philosopher and public intellectual, wrote in 1996: “In the shadow of a society which is on the verge of putting the neoliberal market economy into effect without any ifs, ands, or buts, it is not a small accomplishment to preserve at least the thought of the possibility of a different life”.<sup>37</sup>

### **Bojana Pejić**

Berlin, May 2016

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35 See *Love and Democracy*, exh.cat., ed. Paweł Leszkowitz (Gdansk: “Laznia” Center for Contemporary Art, 2006).

36 Cathrine Thorleifsson, “Europe’s thriving xenophobia” (2015) at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/.../europe-s-thriving-xenophobia>. (Retrieved 15.03.2016)

37 Andrew Kier Wise, “The European Union and the ‘Oriental Other’ in Polish Nationalist Discourse”, in *Beyond Imagined Uniqueness: Nationalism in Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Joan Burbick and William Glass (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 220.