

THE UNIVERSITY OF ART AND DESIGN CLUJ-NAPOCA

**DOCTORAL THESIS
WOMAN. ART. POLITICS**

SUMMARY

This doctoral thesis presents and analyses one of the most relevant and influential, from a cultural perspective and socio-political imagery, reflections of female identity, as it had been constructed and perceived within the cultural areal of the European civilization. Moreover, this paper wishes to highlight the most relevant changes produced in the definition of this identity during the modern and contemporary epoch, especially through the ideas and actions of feminism, regarded as a paradigm of thought that has its own, specific characteristics. It also tackles the results that these changes of cultural paradigm have led to within the international artistic production in the latter part of the 20th century and early 21st.

The hypothesis from which this paper starts is that female identity has been throughout the centuries in the European civilizational sphere, a pretty constant cultural preoccupation, while its avatars have been very diverse. Both within the pre-modern cultures (a term by which we understand ancient cultures, also the medieval ones) and modernity, the socially constructed identity of the woman was a complex one, supple and often full of paradoxes, tensions and contradictions. On the other hand, the social-political imagery and the cultural imagery of the targeted epochs, as well as their cultural production in its most comprising sense, are privileged places in which one may surprise the manners of perceiving and using this complex identity and diversity of affliction. Therefore, our attention focused on the domains of intellectual and spiritual achievements. A last but essential aspect approached in this paper is the working hypostasis according to which the period of modernity and especially of late or post-modernity (we mean by this syntagm chronologically, the period of the second half of the 19th and 20th century) have brought about essential and spectacular changes in the cultural perceptions of female identity, the latter being significantly reflected in the artistic creation of feminist inspiration and attitude.

The first part of our thesis presents in a relevant selection a series of feminine ‘types’ which marked the pre-modern and modern cultures developed in the European civilizational area. Two categories of feminine patterns are included in this analytical endeavour: on the one hand there are types and roles with a high character of generality, not necessarily individualized (wife, lover, witch); on the other one, our analysis approaches singular and

exceptional 'characters' in the spectacular sense of the term, be they historical or pure cultural creations (Cleopatra, Antigona). Although the pairing of these categories might seem inadequate, we consider that it is justified and useful since both types play an important role in the understanding of the way in which female identity was being articulated/shaped within the social and cultural imagery of the different epochs we referred to, the former from a social and political norm and the latter category determined by its exceptional role.

The second part of our paper regards the profound changes of female identity brought about by the evolution of thought and actions of feminism. More precisely, we intend to present these actions especially by surprising the roles and contemporary status of the woman, as it may be distinguished within the cultural imagery of late modernity alongside with contemporary or post-modern one. Besides, we do not mean to sketch a comprising history of the development of the feminist movement (which has in fact not just once been done before with relevant and provocative results) neither do we intend in this part to achieve an exhaustive exposition of all branches of feminism. What this second chapter aims at, is to offer a general, broad view upon the history of this movement and introduce the issue of female status and feminism in public debate, more exactly, the way it is treated and received by the mass media, considering this sphere as one of extreme importance for the understanding of the mechanisms that govern the contemporary collective mental. We largely pursued the historical ideological track of the feminist movement, starting from the observation that it is marked by paradoxes and tensions and often by strong rejections and very vocal contestations. The term feminism is at general level encountered with a cautious attitude at its best, and at its worst, with emotional reactions ranging from least to utmost virulent, even hostile ones. From the myth of the feminist who hates man to the term *feminazi* which is easily used in chats on almost all online forums, from bizarre online groups such as *Women against Feminism* to conspiracy theories that regard the feminist movement as a prophetic beginning of an end, to those who accuse the movement of preoccupations with trivial matters rather than the 'real problems', feminism is stirring passionate reactions. Even the concept appears to trigger at its very mentioning a state of anxiety, sensed even by the partisans of the feminist movement the moment they have to clearly define its position against a background of paradoxes in the contemporary consumer society as well as the status and social image of the woman (and not only) within it. It happens quite often that it feels easier than assert one's belonging to the feminist movement, therefore to entitle oneself as 'feminist' that a person who wishes first of all to have a reasonable dialogue, to express one's approval

of the general principles of feminism by adopting a cautious-defensive position in the endeavour of avoiding the ridicule and blocking of efficient communication.

This attitude is due to the very understanding of the fact that the label of ‘feminist’ might be followed by other labels which might be used as arguments *ad hominem* (‘fat and always furious activist’, ‘lesbian’ hysterical, are, however ridiculous it may seem, the most common ones) and emotional reactions of the interlocutor not in favour of a reasonable debate focused on a logic of argumentation. Nevertheless, in this situation, a prudent positioning does not indicate in most of the cases the person’s lack of confidence towards the feminist movement or his or her status of belonging to it, it rather points to a general conflicting state embedded in the concept of ‘feminism’ as it is outlined in contemporary times. Paradoxically, the vast majority of those using as an introductory phrase “I’m not a feminist, but...” I totally agree with the principles of the first feminist wave.

In order to realize an analysis of the modes in which the feminist paradigm of thought might be and actually is used in contemporary cultural productions, most of which very recent, we directed our attention and analysis on a term considered essential for the perception and understanding of the contemporary avatars of feminine identity, namely that of post-feminism, a term that has the advantage of explaining and conceptually solving at the same time the very paradoxes and tensions before mentioned. The chapter follows the main directions of understanding and defining the concept of post-feminism, questioning its contradictory and pluralist character. Aiming at a coherent radiography of the feminine status in the contemporary western society, we introduced the principles of post-feminism in parallel with the defining notions of the third feminist wave.

The third part of the paper is centered on the presentation and analysis of some of the most significant manifestations of feminist ideas in contemporary art within the American and European cultural areal. Thus, in this final section we are concerned with the illustration of the manner in which the changes within the social-political field as well as the cultural imagery of late modernity and European and American post-modernity have actually influenced the artistic creation, one of major importance in our own cultural practice and production. On covering a somehow reverse road, after we have presented how the ideas about feminine identity may be inferred and understood often starting from a cultural and intellectual production of a certain epoch. Furthermore in this final chapter we tried a review of the modalities in which the latter concretely and poignantly inform about the way in which art, with reference here to contemporary art, is in its turn produced, presented and received. Some of the most remarkable artists of feminist orientation are targeted here, such as Judy

Chicago, Valie Export or Marina Abramovici (with regards to the feminist character of their artistic creation and no less relevant to debated themes). The challenge that otherwise any female artist had to face in her preoccupation with an authentic self-expression in the 'heroic' cultural beginnings of the 1960s and 1970s, which coincided with a period of shaping the system of contemporary art without taking into account the aesthetics of those times, one less neutral and side-taking, was to confer a political touch to her artistic production, to integrate in this awareness about her female social-political condition to practice art as a woman and not as expected from a woman (or from an artist irrespective of his/her gender identity).

Many of the female artists in the described situation have found in the feminist thought the conceptual resources necessary to achieve this process of social and political self-knowledge and to try and produce an art which expresses, including in a militant, activist manner, their identity as women formed in a society dominated by the masculine patriarchy. A special attention is granted to the placement of feminist art within the larger context of the contemporary world and its cultural globalization, but also to the way in which the feminist paradigm may be used in the analysis of art produced by a number of female artists of the former socialist block.

Throughout the paper, from a methodological aspect, we have used both instruments of analysis and presentation specific to certain fields such as the history of art, the history of mentalities but also some that are peculiar to certain branches of humanities of a more recent type and sometimes more inciting of cultural or visual studies.

By covering these stages and themes of analysis, as well as the before mentioned methodology, we were able to confirm the working hypothesis according to which the period of modernity and especially that of late modernity, has brought about essential changes in the definition of feminine identity and role within the context of western civilization, significantly reflected in the cultural production of the considered epoch. The changes produced in this period are not only of degree but also of substance and this changed feminine identity and image has led to a significant differentiation of present perceptions. Alternatively, the difference between the modern, contemporary perspective on women and femininity and any of those offered by comparison with anterior epochs the ancient, medieval or incipiently modern societies, is much greater and more relevant than any of the differences, by no means negligible and, as we may have found out, arisen at the level of collective imagery among the latter ones, of patterns of femininity generated by these societies.

This latter aspect is eloquently revealed by the cultural and artistic creation of the contemporary epoch, whose presentation, by no means exhaustive, or excluding other

modalities of taking them into consideration, leads us to the conclusion that there is a new radicalization in the definition of the woman's role in the art of feminist influence and hidden motive. Moreover and including this type of artistic production, the social and cultural perception of feminine identity has been substantially changed, the revolution of the European cultural imagery from this perspective being the outcome of a mixed intellectual artistic production as well as socio-economic conditions. They appear nowadays as conceptual and paradigmatic instruments by means of which one may realize the identity and contemporary status of the woman, terms that used to be unimaginable less than a century ago, as for instance that of post-feminism nothing else than a symptom of the radicalization of the established change, of a distance rapidly covered by the Euro-American civilization during the last decades in the direction of a reevaluation and redefinition of the feminine.

We have related all these phenomena of the imaginary elements of cultural and artistic production with other phenomena that outline in a fundamental way the world in which we live, alongside with the specific manifestations of experiencing them within the social-political and cultural areal to which they belong. In this way we have been able to point out that phenomena like feminism, the recent revolutionizing of the feminine status or globalization, have certain characteristics that consistently influence the art produced within this area.

The ideas and arguments we have presented throughout this thesis were supplementary outlined supported by the. Therefore the illustrations that we used are more (or less) than a rigorous illustration of the textual information. We have sooner used them as quasi – autonomous instruments, like a visual essay in support of the development of ideas - diffusely, obliquely and at the same time poignantly contained in the text.