

**CONSTRUCTING “POSTNESS”: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF  
THE RHETORIC OF FEMINIST CRITICISM IN VISUAL ARTS IN  
POST-SOCIALIST HUNGARY**

By

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the role of feminist discourse in constructing post-socialist identity in Hungary in the 1990s, with a focus on the field of visual arts. I concentrate on how cultural phenomena recognized as feminist in the given context are turned into a tool to mark post-socialist transition as a rupture. The object of my analysis is a limited body of critical texts that reflect on the position of feminism in Hungary in general, and feminism in visual arts in particular. Looking at this rather marginal discourse, I focus on two tropes that are central to how feminism positions itself: “mental Walls” and “anachronistic Modernism”. These terms are used to describe the Hungarian cultural context perceived as hostile and resistant to a gender-sensitive perspective on (visual) art. I examine the function of these rhetorical devices as gestures by which feminism establishes its own legitimacy. In doing so, I map out the ideological constructions of history and geopolitical location that inform feminist discourse in the Hungarian context conceived in terms of binary oppositions between East/West and socialism/post-socialism. The negative positioning of feminist discourse in the local context as a missing or failed feminism foregrounds a set of internal paradoxes that open up the site for critical reflection on these ideological divisions.

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# Introduction

Looking at the rhetoric of feminist criticism in the field of visual art in Hungary, I concentrate on the debates over the possibilities and nature of feminism and feminist art after the post-socialist transition in 1989 with a focus on the 1990s. More precisely, I am interested in how a predominantly negative – paradoxical – self-positioning of feminism in the Hungarian context (i.e. as a missing or failed feminism) fits into a discourse through which post-socialist identity gets articulated. In my thesis, I make an attempt at mapping out the ideological constructions of history and geopolitical location this paradoxical self-positioning of feminism reveals: I will trace the rhetorical moves by which post-socialist identity is constructed in relation to the East/West and socialist/post-socialist binaries. I will argue that cultural phenomena recognized as feminism/feminist in the Hungarian context are turned into a tool to construct these dichotomous representations of space and time.

Throughout my thesis, I will use a performative understanding of feminism derived from Jacques Derrida's notion of authorial signature (Derrida, 1982). I will not assess claims that are identified or represented as feminist in terms of their truth value. Nor will I try to define what feminism is in the given context. Instead, I will examine feminist discourse in terms of its performative effects: what it does. I will look at feminist claims as retroactive self-legitimizing gestures: figures whose function – at least in part – is to establish the legitimacy of feminism in the given context through the articulation of a stance identified as feminist. I will argue that the central tropes founding the legitimacy of what is recognized as feminist discourse mark the post-socialist transition as a rupture. In doing so, this rather marginal discourse forms part of the construction of post-socialist identity, which sets up

socialism in a paradoxical way both as that which it defines itself against, and from which it derives its own self-understanding.

In the texts I analyze, feminism gets inscribed into the socialism/post-socialism and East/West binaries, underpinned by a moralizing rhetoric that sets up the West as superior, and in relation to which the local context is described as less modernized, backward and underdeveloped: a sort of liminal space. The legitimacy of a feminist stance in these texts, thus, is derived from the moral superiority of what is constructed as the “West”. Although it is not my central argument, I will occasionally point out that the underlying assumptions about European geopolitics palpable in the feminist discourse of the 1990s have a far-reaching history in the intellectual tradition of Hungary. These phenomena point to the persistence of an understanding of (political) identity that originates in modernity; in the discourse of modern nation formation. In this respect, post-socialist identity construction fits into a very modernist discourse and modernist strategies of representation: it reproduces an ideological mapping of the world with the “West” being the center and the standard for development. As far as feminism (seen as the gender-conscious critique of, or counter-discourse to modernity broadly speaking) is caught up within this ideological representation of space and time, it becomes – at least partly – an extension of the discourse of modernity.

This paradox points out to a larger set of problems. In the field of visual art, feminism is often understood as a critical approach that points out the uneven gender relations encoded in our visual culture and systems of visual representation (Owens, 1992). In this sense, feminism forms part of postmodernism, a postmodern critique of representation as conceived in modernity. In the Hungarian context, feminist authors often point out the persistence of an “anachronistic modernism” (András, 1997), a missing feminism and a missing (or belated)

postmodern turn. This belatedness is articulated in an opposition to the “West”, where the postmodern turn – they argue – has already taken place and, by gaining wide institutional support, has become the mainstream in visual art. From a broader perspective, it can be argued that what is being created here is a very modernist narrative of the postmodern. Eurocentrism (or Westcentrism, in this case) is in many respects retained in this moralizing rhetoric, and what seems to emerge is a value-laden understanding of the postmodern: a proper or “true” postmodern.

By highlighting what I see as internal contradictions within the feminist discourse and feminism in visual arts in Hungary, I do not intend to contest the relevance of these claims especially with reference to the cultural context of the 1990s described as resistant or hostile to a gender-sensitive perspective and overly political approaches to art. Instead, I try to point out to further problems to be thought over, questions that emerge, and which are rarely discussed or reflected upon in the literature I analyze. Similarly, I do not wish to suggest that feminism in Hungary takes erroneous directions or that its enquiries lead to a dead end. On the contrary, the very fact that these questions emerge point to how feminist discourse in the local context opens up productive sites to reflect on the problems of power and representation on a global scale as well as strategies of identity formation and othering.

It is important to point out that this discourse by no means homogeneous. In fact, as I will discuss later, very different understandings of feminism are represented often simultaneously. However, there are recurring motifs and rhetorical figures, as these texts are in a dialogue with each other. In this sense, the body of literature I look at displays a relative specificity, even if it is not fully devoid of contradictions.

Looking at the feminist discourse of the 1990s seems productive, because there is an increased anxiety about the use of the term feminism, and it is a site that is debated, uncertain. This comes into light from a contemporary perspective, and there is a critical distance opened up to reflect upon the assumptions that are at work in the feminist discourse of the 90s, although some of these assumptions is still at work, and even in text that look back at this period retain some of the ideological investments that informed feminist texts in the 90s. This generation of authors are in many respects invested in a modernist, evolutionist discourse; a romanticized vision of post-socialist transition. From this perspective, it can be argued that what they perceive as a problem of post-socialist backwardness stems from – or is turned into – disillusionment with political change and the expectations set up about it.

Picking out these texts, singling out the 1990s and concentrating on the Hungarian context raise several questions. First, it seems highly problematic to delineate the 1990s as a closed, coherent period. The question emerges: what marks the 90s as a segment of history that can be delineated as something that displays coherence or specificity? As Ágnes Berecz points out in her analysis of artistic production in the 1990s Hungary, marking out this segment of history seems just as problematic as it is relevant both from a historico-political and art historical point of view (2002). It might seem questionable, for instance, that political change in 1989/1990 marked by the fall of the Berlin wall and the first free democratic parliamentary elections in Hungary among others, have a direct impact on cultural production. However, Berecz highlights that political change also brought about important changes in the institutional background of artistic production, which supports the relevance of the distinction. Moreover, she argues, with the collapse of the totalitarian regime, the distinctions between official and unofficial/underground art, which governed artistic production under socialism especially in the 1970s and 80s, lost their relevance. As far as the end of the 1990s is

concerned, she links it to the three comprehensive regional exhibitions in 2000, which reviewed the artistic production of what is referred to as the former Eastern block (*After the Wall* in Stockholm; *L'Autre moitié de l'Europe* in Paris; *Aspekte Positionen* in Vienna). These comprehensive exhibitions seemingly declared the end of the period of transition and a flourishing period of cultural production in the region.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, these temporal divisions are not so clear-cut, and the attempt at distinguishing them as such is already an interpretive move, part of the way post-socialist identity gets constructed. Therefore, I will not stick rigidly to this distinction, as it in itself has a constitutive force in interpreting history. I will look at texts that reflect on questions that emerged with greater intensity in the 90s, when defining a post-socialist identity became relevant. Some of the texts I look at were already written in the 2000s, but problematize the 1990s, reflect on issues that were present then, or connect to the debates that pertain to the intellectual climate of the period. In this respect, the creation of “the 90s” as the period of transition is rather the object of my analysis than a departure point taken for granted.

Similarly, to presume (and define) a national artistic tradition in the given time period is problematic. Even if one does not use an essentialist understanding of “the national”, it is already an interpretive gesture to presume that artworks created in the local context reflect in some manner on the social/cultural/political processes that form part of the context of artistic creation (Berez, 2002). Of course, institutional practices cannot be ignored from this respect.

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<sup>1</sup> Berez also notes that this date coincides with the rise of the terrorist threat in the West offering a new territory to the rhetoric and politics of Cold War rivalry, the end of which was being declared in Eastern post-soviet block. By doing so, it marked the end of an historical era. This periodization, thus, fits into changing power structures on a global scale.



However, the differentiation remains controversial, as the exchange of ideas between national contexts and artists fluctuating between regions, among others, complicate such easy distinctions. Therefore, I will understand the national – similarly to “the 90s” – as a construct that emerges from the discourse I look at, and will not examine these aspects further.

In the first chapter, I will give a brief overview of the existing literature on feminism in East Central Europe and Hungary, and lay out a theoretical background to a performative understanding of feminism. In the second section, I will concentrate on some of the discursive/rhetorical strategies, central tropes by which “postness” gets created within the feminist discourse in general, and feminism in visual art in particular. I will concentrate on two rhetorical figures: “mental Walls” and “anachronistic modernity” in order to map out how post-socialist identity gets inscribed into larger discursive frameworks.

In my thesis, I limit myself to a relatively small and graspable body of literature. I will not compare it with other countries in the region, although similar tendencies probably occur. By concentrating on feminist art and art criticism that reads them as such, I am analyzing a marginalized discourse with little institutional background that tries to make claims to an authority to construct identity and structure representations in a context where this is already problematic. In order to address this problem, one would have to look at a wider picture of how representations of gender difference are circulated and produced in other fields, and how the reception of feminist discourse unfolds. To consider these further implications would exceed the limits of an MA thesis.

# 1 Performative feminism

In this chapter, I will review some of the ways feminist positioning in Hungary has been talked about in the existing literature. By pointing out to the strengths and shortcomings of these approaches, I will argue that none of them are fully applicable to the problems I wish to concentrate on. Consequently, I will try to build on a different theoretical approach to analyze feminist discourse. I will give a brief overview of Jacques Derrida's concept of signature on the basis of two of his lectures; "Signature, Event, Context" (1982) and "Declarations of Independence" (1986). Then, I will go on to discuss how Derrida's signature can be used to build a performative understanding of feminism, and open up a site to reflect on the self-legitimizing moves of feminist discourse in constructing its context and, simultaneously, its role in constructing post-socialism, a post-socialist identity.

## 1.1 *Missing/traveling discourse*

Texts that reflect on the position and possibilities of feminist discourse in Hungary look at it from a cross-national perspective, comparing feminist discourse in the local context to feminisms as developed in the West. In the field of literary and art criticism in Hungary, feminism often positions itself as a missing or failed feminism facing a homogeneously hostile critical environment. Authors dealing with the possibilities of feminist criticism in the field of art and literature point out that while women's movements and feminisms in the West have provided a framework in which the category of woman becomes intelligible from a theoretical perspective and gender as an analytical tool is acknowledged in the field of cultural studies, such an epistemological background is missing from the Hungarian cultural

context. Feminism and other self-proclaimed political approaches to art and literature, they argue, could not become widely accepted neither under state socialism – due to the violent separation from the West – nor after the post-socialist transition in 1989 (Kádár, 2003). They perceive the overarching resistance to feminism as a specificity of post-socialist Hungary, where any reference to politics – especially in connection with the private sphere, which includes the field of art and literature – still evokes the memories of compulsory orthodox Marxist analysis within the academy (Kádár, 2003; Séllei, 2000), and the memories of political regulation and state censorship imposed on state-supported official art under socialism (András, 1997).

Although these theoretical positions are undoubtedly more nuanced, it is generally agreed that feminism as a theoretically elaborated set of critical positions developed in the West, and has managed to establish itself as legitimate within the mainstream academic discourse there. By contrast – they argue – feminism is practically missing in the Hungarian context from mainstream cultural discourses, and feminist critical texts, which reached Hungary mainly after 1989, could not find their context of reception within the canonized academic disciplines. All this contributed to the still ambiguous position of feminism within the academia (Séllei, 2007, p. 143). Due to the lack of institutional support, feminism seeks legitimacy from “outside” which seems to reinforce the common perception that feminism is foreign to the local context (pp. 140 and 148).

Another body of literature opposes this negative positioning of feminism as missing or failed. Rather than positing a passive reception – or lack thereof – of feminist discourses produced in the West, they emphasize agency and the strategies by which actors negotiate theoretical concepts and employ them productively to create new sites of applicability. This

perspective allows for seeing feminism as a traveling discourse, and sheds light to the ways feminism gets translated, re-negotiated and reinterpreted across local contexts. Susan Gal, for instance, examines social movements and their forms of justification in their given context from a cross-national perspective. She argues that the forms of justification social movements rely on are textual in nature, circulate in textual form and get recontextualised in given political, cultural and linguistic contexts. She concentrates on the sociological and linguistic aspects of cross-cultural translation, which she sees as inseparable and interrelated (Gal, 2003). She looks at feminism as a traveling discourse in East Central Europe from this perspective, with a focus on feminist discourse in Hungary, which she sees as a particularly productive site to analyze the social and linguistic processes involved in the transnational politics of social movements. She writes:

„The current debates about feminism in East Central Europe [...] provide intriguing instances of these phenomena [i.e. the legitimization of political subjectivities through changing textual practices] because it is a historical case of political categories in the making. Texts associated with these debates – as well as people interested in re-establishing woman-centered social movements – have been making their way into and out of the region with renewed energy since the official end of state communism in 1989. [...] it seems to me that these lively debates, accompanied by the presence of cross-regional networks of activists, present a valuable opportunity to theorize the discursive aspects of transnational politics.” (p. 94-95)

Gal sees the increasing cross-national contacts – “contacts between ‘East’ and ‘West’” which are also are textually produced (p. 98) – as sites where ideas circulate, get exchanged and transformed in textual form. She analyzes the circulation of ideas looking at both social and semiotic processes which shape their context of reception. She traces the history of such texts or ideas understood as segments or chunks of discourse in three stages: translation, recontextualisation and further circulation. She relies on the linguistic theory of Bakhtin to describe the three movements: the chunks of discourse that undergo these textual practices

carry both the memory of their previous usage, and the possibility to get infinitely recontextualised in new contexts.

Gal brings as an example the reception of (predominantly American) feminist's writings in Hungary. She refers to a volume comprised of seminal texts in psychoanalytic feminist theory published in 1997<sup>2</sup> as a positive example, which could gain a wider acceptance, she argues, because the translators and editors could build on a far-reaching tradition of psychoanalytic discourse in the local context. In contrast, she points out that the reception of Judith Butler turned out to be more problematic, as it could not build upon such existing theoretical context, and intertextual relations were harder to establish. Thus, rather than positing a homogeneous lack of reception of feminist texts, Gal calls attention to the sociological and political aspects of translation as well as the textual relations in the local context that set out the conditions of reception. Existing texts and social relations shape the choice of texts that get translated, the way they get recontextualized in their new context, and their further circulation (Gal, 2003, pp. 106-108).

Anikó Imre in her article *Lesbian Nationalism* (2008) makes similar observations in connection with both feminist discourse and gay activism in Hungary. She discusses the ways in which Hungarian lesbians negotiate the boundaries of national and lesbian identities primarily in literature and film, and experiment with the discursive limits of representation in each. She concentrates on the ways in which gendered/sexual identities are created through a productive negotiation of theoretical concepts in the given context.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Csabai, M., Erős, F. (Ed.). (1997). Freud titokzatos tárgya: pszichoanalízis és női szexualitás. Budapest: Új mandátum.

Lesbian artists' engagement with Western ideas of feminist and lesbian identities, Imre argues, is characterized by a critical attitude. It has been pointed out that due to the lack of feminist and gay activism and theorizing until 1989, feminist theories that developed in the West in different time periods reached post-Soviet Eastern Europe simultaneously, which, according to Imre, created a theoretical context where “theorists and activists [get to] pick and choose from the entire set of theoretical models produced over decades elsewhere” (Imre, 2008, p. 261) and may follow different trajectories than feminism in the West did.

In the Hungarian context, she argues, the collapse of the Iron Curtain put new emphasis on individuality as opposed to forced collectivism, which resulted in what she calls a “post-Romantic postmodernism” with a threatening crisis of nationalism, masculinity, and shifting gender relations. This context provided different opportunities to contest or subvert constructions of national identity. In the respective period, playful appropriations of nationalism and gendered identities proliferated in literature produced by male authors, which also opened up the space for lesbian authors “to carve out small spaces of representability in national literature and culture” (p. 278). The ways in which Hungarian lesbian artists engage in the production of gender and national identity constructions, Imre points out, foreground performativity understood as the “productive acknowledgement of one’s implication in what one opposes” (p. 260). Thus, rather than positing a homogeneously hostile local context to feminism and gay activism, this understanding highlights how the mainstream discourse, with its own incoherence and contradictions, offers – perhaps different – points of resistance and sites of contestation.

While Imre and Gal highlight performativity in transnational politics and agency in negotiating traveling concepts in the local context, circulation is seen in both cases as a one-

way movement from the West to the non-West, which has two important consequences. First, they tend to underemphasize or completely disregard the extent to which the non-West has influenced the history and development of the West. By adopting the one-way model, it has been argued, Gal “underscores how ideas travel in multiple directions and not simply from so-called core to periphery”, although the implications of her analysis may “invite us to question the widely held assumption that the West is the origin of all feminist theory (or even that there is a clear origin to theories)” (Cerwonka, 2008 p. 826).

Secondly, Gal’s approach only looks at the context of origin from where the concepts emerge as being constructed through the textual practices of legitimization, yet takes the context of reception as pre-given. For example, she points out that “the impression of ‘foreignness’ – and its negative valence – that is often attached to feminism in East Central Europe is socially created, achieved in part through specific textual practices.” She attributes this invoked sense of foreignness to the effects of the textual practices that create the context of origin: “The broader point is that most discussions of circulation take as self-evident the localities from which the texts supposedly come. Yet, sometimes, these locales are themselves constructed as part of sociopolitical and textual practices” (p 109).

She sees the context of reception, thus, as being constructed by the forms of justification social movements employ. By alluding to the context where theoretical concepts that set out the terms of the discourse originate as “foreign”, a distance between the context of origin and the site of its application is produced. However, Gal does not examine the other dimension of the movement of concepts, the context where they are being applied. Thus, while she points out to the negative valence attached to feminism in the Hungarian context, she does not problematize the negative valence attributed to the context of reception (as

hostile) within feminist discourse, which also forms part of the legitimizing rhetoric and the negotiation of ideas.

More dynamic models of geopolitical location allow for seeing not only how western cultural hegemony informs knowledge production outside the West, but also how the development of western thought is informed by the non-West. Chari's and Verdery's article *Thinking between the Posts*, for instance, calls for a unified analytical framework that does not split the world into three separate spheres. The post-Cold War perspective, they argue, which rejects the three world ideology, allows for comparative insights into how imperialism, socialism and capitalism have mutually shaped, and continue shaping each other. While Post-colonialism and Post-socialist studies address hierarchical power-knowledge relations limited to specific locations (the "Third World" and the "Second World" respectively), this type of division prevents us from seeing more complex power relations. A theoretical framework that rejects the ideological representation of the world in three separate states enables us to ask what an empire is, how imperialism works, how the world is organized into cores and peripheries, and how they relate to each other. It becomes possible to interpret local struggles from the perspective of power dynamics happening on a global scale, and to see how specific historical events produce multiple far-reaching outcomes that well exceed their immediate context.

One of the consequences of such an analytical framework is that it recognizes the interrelatedness of political, economical and social processes on a global scale. It allows for seeing how welfare state in the West is shaped by the socialist experiment in Central and Eastern Europe, and how the collapse of clear-cut borderlines such as decolonization and the fall of the Iron Curtain had consequences on both sides. From this perspective the rigid



formalist tradition in visual art and art criticism in the 1950s and 60s in the US referred to as the Clement Greenberg tradition is seen as a response to Cold War rivalries and a counterpoint to Marxism as the compulsory critical approach on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Similarly, it becomes visible how abstract expressionism gains meaning in relation to the East, as it expresses the freedom of the Western artist not to represent anything as opposed to the Eastern artist (György, 1995). As Hans Belting puts it, “the unity of Western Art, which has become uncertain, gained its common profile from the contrast to that of the Eastern European art” (2003, p 54). He points out that the dissolution of clear-cut ideological divisions produced by the Cold War rhetoric entails as a consequence that “western identity that gradually took shape in the constant dispute over modernism will not remain the same once western culture has lost its image of the ‘enemy’” (p. 58). With the collapse of a well-defined borderline between east and west, identity constructions that emerged from this ideological opposition are called into question, and “it is difficult for the two cultures to keep their former self-reference” (p. 54).

While this may be true for the west, I will argue that it does not necessarily apply to the discourse I am looking at. On the one hand, feminist knowledge production outside the west is seen as something that potentially destabilizes west-centrism within feminism according to this approach. However, the literature I look at does not offer a critical perspective to this debate in itself and does not provide insights into these problems, because very different questions emerge from it.<sup>3</sup> Feminist discourse in Hungary especially in the 1990s is not invested in challenging west-centrism or western identity constructions, but in constructing post-socialist identity. Moreover, the way feminist positions are discussed and

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that both Susan Gal and Anikó Imre work in the US academic context and publish primarily in English for an English speaking audience.

put into service to create a post-socialist identity are very much rooted in modernity, and, as such, build on and reproduce these ideological mappings as self-legitimizing tools or forms of justification. Looking at the body of literature I analyze, dynamic understandings of geopolitical location do not seem to acknowledge the extent to which knowledge production outside the west may be invested in the discourse of modernity and the ideological constructions of the geopolitical representation of the world that has the West at its center. What is seen as something that has the potential to destabilize west-centrism, thus, may in fact reinforce it in many respects. In this sense, the fall of the Iron Curtain, which is seen as something that destabilizes the East/West division and Western identity conceived in relation to this division, does not do so in the local context, as it has much deeper roots in the intellectual history of Hungarian nation formation.

For this reason, I am looking at this discourse from a slightly different perspective. Instead of tracing the circulation of ideas across national contexts, look at feminist discourse as performative, which enables to reflect on the ways a local discourse is embedded in these power structures. In examining how local feminist discourse constructs its own context as a self-legitimation, I will not to perceive this geopolitical mapping as pre-given, but instead, look at the way in which ideological mappings of the world are constructed in the course of the debates that problematize it, and look at how local feminist discourse fits into these debates.

Thus, contrary to how feminism is generally talked about in the literature that deals with the position and possibilities of feminist criticism/feminism in the mainstream cultural discourse, I will not examine the possibilities of the use of feminism in a given context, in this case, post-socialist Hungary. Instead, I will look at how the context is constructed within

feminist discourse. Examining the Hungarian context, I concentrate on the way feminism is used to articulate a post-socialist identity based on the socialist/post-socialist, East/West (or West/non-West) dichotomous spatial and temporal constructions. In order to do so, I will look at how rhetorical devices that recur in the body of texts I analyze perform a function in the construction of this post-socialist identity.

## **1.2 Signatures**

Derrida analyzing signature in his discussion of the Declaration of Independence (Derrida, 1986) sees the signature as a retroactive self-legitimizing figure. He contemplates the paradoxical nature of the signature in the context of the Declaration. He writes:

“The signature invents the signer. This signer can only authorize him- or herself to sign once he or she has come to the end, if one can say this, of his or her own signature, in a sort of fabulous retroactivity” (p. 10)

Signature, in the case of the Declaration, has a performative force. It constructs that which it denotes, which serves as a retroactive basis of self-legitimation. By doing so, signature constructs an identity, in the case of the Declaration, a political identity (i.e. the US citizen). I will look at the feminist discourse on the analogy of this (political) signature: feminism does not exist before its use, but acquires its legitimacy through its use, retroactively establishing its own legitimacy.

This involves a representational strategy, which works through exclusion. The signers of the Declaration stand for the citizens (“we the people”). The exclusionary gesture in the feminist signature (“we the feminists”) enacts a closure, sets up what feminism is, what a feminist political stance is in the given context. Thus, understanding feminism as signature

facilitates the investigation of how policing works within the feminist discourse, how it sets limits to what becomes intelligible as feminist, even if it is a momentary and relative closure.

Derrida in his lecture “Signature, Event, Context” discusses the constraints of a western philosophical tradition in which textuality, or the written sign is understood on the analogy of spoken communication, that is, in which writing is derived from speech. He argues that while speech, which is based on presence (of the speaker, of the addressee, etc.) is understood as the paradigm of communication, the conveying of a certain meaning or content; writing becomes fundamentally problematic, as it always marks an absence (of the author, of the addressee, etc.).

It is in this context that Derrida analyses the performative theory of linguistic utterances as described in Austin’s speech act theory (see Austin, 1962). Austin identifies three types of speech acts, or rather, three functions an utterance can enact: speech act that expresses something (locutionary force), speech act that is employed with a specific intention to exert an influence on the recipient (illocutionary force), and speech act that transforms a situation (perlocutionary force). Derrida in his criticism on Austin’s speech act theory (Derrida 1982: 307-330) acknowledges that Austin’s model, by not perceiving linguistic utterances as mediations of a meaning (as constative) but evaluating them by their capacity to have an effect or perform a function, avoids having to deal with questions of linguistic referentiality and truth value. However, his theory, as Derrida points out, cannot fully avoid connecting utterances to some kind of totality. He reveals that even though speech act theory makes an attempt at eliminating conceptions of absolute truth, the context that culminates in the intention of the speaker works as an element of truth, which has the power to fully

determine the effect and consequences of a speech act. The failure of the performative (infelicity in Austin), thus, becomes a casualty, something to be eliminated.

Conversely, according to Derrida, the failure of the performative is central to the structure of linguistic utterances. Derrida emphasizes the iterative structure of every speech act, that is, the fact that an utterance can only succeed if it is to be recognized by way of citation. This, however, entails the recognition that the speaker's intention is never fully present in itself. Failure is integral to the utterance, as iterability has always already deprived the utterance of its pure specificity and individuality. It is equally important to see that Derrida does not deny the relative specificity, effect or presence of a speech act.

Signature in the Derridean sense is paradigmatic of his understanding of performativity in language. Signature surpasses the presence/absence dichotomy which lies at the center of western thought: it blurs the distinctions of speech/writing, the inside and the outside of the text. A signature can ensure both a relative specificity to a text in a given context, and its repeatability in any given context. The authorial signature, thus, is neither entirely outside the text nor inside it, but is "the implication of the text's outside within its inside" (Grosz, 1992, p. 20). The author understood as authorial signature is not an infinite presence that ensures the meaning of the text, but rather, it is the effect of the text, the text's other projected from within the text.

If the specificity of the authorial signature is never realized in its entirety, but is always only momentary; never fully present in itself, but context-dependent, then this understanding of the signature shifts the question of identity away from the text and the

speaking subject to the context. Then, we will have to ask what constitutes a context in which a signature becomes – even if momentarily – unique or specific.

It is in this sense that I see the applicability of the Derridean signature on feminist discourse. To understand feminism as a signature is productive in multiple ways. First, it facilitates a theoretical framework in which feminism does not have to be defined and assigned a fixed, specific meaning. Instead, I will use the term feminism to designate what is recognized/ identified as a feminist critical position in the given context. I will concentrate on the way feminism is used.

Secondly, feminism conceived as signature also enables a critical perspective that does not see the context in which feminism is used as pre-given, but as something that is discursively constructed. The way a text points to its own context is not only constative, it does not only describe or identify, but at the same time performative: it constructs that which it describes. Rather than assessing as truth claims or constative statements the positions which are recognized as feminist, this perspective allows for seeing the context as something that comes about, that is set out by the terms used to describe it.

If a text can perform something that can be recognised as a (feminist) political statement by way of the authorial signature only in a given, delimited, specific and determined context, then the question feminism needs to examine is how the context in which a signature becomes sexually/politically (?) specific is determined, and the politics behind the way it is determined. To understand feminism as signature, thus, opens up the site to reflect on its own self-legitimizing strategies.

### **1.3 Feminism as signature**

It is not possible to give a comprehensive definition to what constitutes feminist art, what makes an artwork feminist. In the body of literature I analyze, competing conceptions emerge. One could identify these competing conceptions of feminism with the set of problematics feminist discourse raised in different stages of its history and locate them within a framework that conceptualizes feminist discourse historically in three distinguishable waves of thought or generations of thinkers. However, such a distinction may also seem highly problematic, as very different conceptions of feminist art coexist often in one single author or one single text.

In a collection of essays discussing woman artists in an attempt at conjuring up a history of woman's art in Hungary, János Sturcz highlights the creation of an authentic female art tradition as the main characteristic of women's artworks influenced by feminism. This authentic female art, or authentic feminine voice in visual arts – in his view – accentuates the expression of a female essence by an emphasis on female sexuality, a more organic relation to nature, higher valuation of traditionally female social roles, and the application of traditionally female forms of artistic creation such as embroidery and other handcrafts (Sturcz, 2000, pp. 78-91). Sturcz acknowledges that in recent developments in women's art, the trope that links women to nature is regarded as problematic, as it reinforces women's exclusion from the realm of culture. Nevertheless, he argues that women's artworks especially in the 70s and 80s, which he identifies as the first two generation of women artists in Hungary, are characterized by a conscious and overt identification with nature, with organic motives being an emblematic feature of women's art in the time period he discusses (p. 91).

In the very same volume, Andrea Tarczali provides an elaborated analytical tool to conceptualize feminist art in the context of her analysis of the oeuvre of Orshi Drozdik. In her understanding, the category of feminist art applies to artworks that employ different strategies of subversion to contest dominant modes of the representation of women in mainstream culture. She argues that feminist art subverts the symbolic order of representation organized along the gendered division of active/male/viewer and passive/female/viewed, where men are encoded in visual representation as the beholders of the gaze while women are rendered as the object of the male gaze. She categorizes feminist artworks according to the different strategies they employ to undermine the dominant patriarchal model of the visual representation of women subjected to the desiring gaze of men. Strategies include (1) mimicry, when the woman explicitly poses as a passive object, with an increased self-reflexivity or irony (2) masquerade, when exaggerated characteristics produce a grotesque image (3) fragmentation of the body that disrupts the visual pleasure of consumption and (4) the denial of the visual representation of the female body (iconoclasm), when the (female) body is inscribed in discourses other than images, thus avoiding being turned into a mere spectacle (Tarczali 2000: 93-106). These subversive strategies, she argues, which question the patriarchal order of visual representation often combined with each other constitute a matrix in which woman's art become intelligible from a feminist perspective. She relies on theories of visual pleasure in psychoanalytic feminist film theory based on Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" pointing out that the pleasure of the consumption of visual images is encoded in patriarchal modes of representation. She argues that women's art has to create an alternative language in order to elude these highly codified modes of representation.

I do not intend to evaluate these different concepts of feminist art neither in terms of their relevance nor in terms of their critical potential. I will not examine what may or may not



count as feminist art in a given context, whether it has a subversive potential or whether it reinforces existing power relations etc. I am interested in how the concept of feminism is used to construct the socialist/post-socialist dichotomies, how it is located within an East/west dichotomy, and how it is turned into a tool to construct post-socialist identity. Therefore, I use feminism as authorial signature in the Derridean sense.

Signature in the context of feminism comes up in Elizabeth Grosz's book entitled *Space, Time and Perversion*, in the chapter "Sexual Signatures: Feminism after the Death of the Author" (1995, pp. 10-24). Although she focuses on literature and debates in literary criticism, I find it relevant, as this is the field where textuality and its relationship to the speaking subject get problematized. Therefore, it can be extended to theoretical texts not just literary ones, and even to visual culture, if we see images as textual in nature, which become intelligible to us through language (Broude, Garrand, 1992, p. 2.).

Grosz's article forms part of a larger context that problematizes the relationship between feminism and postmodernism in literary and cultural criticism, that is, the possibilities of a feminist political stance after the radical turning point in critical thinking that was brought about in continental philosophical thought in the 1960s and became highly influential in the American context by the late 1970s-early 1980s. First, I will look at the core theoretical problems Grosz identifies at the intersection of feminism and postmodernism, and the solutions she offers to them. Then, I will go on to examine the implications of Grosz's understanding of feminism and feminist text in a post-modern context, and the new questions that emerge from it. What emerges from Grosz's position, that is, a context-dependent feminist self-understanding, shifts the problem of identity from the speaking subject of feminism to the ways context can be determined as specific and knowable.

Grosz's project fits into a larger theoretical framework, whereby feminist criticism finds itself facing a problematic raised by poststructuralism and deconstruction. The questioning of the belief in universal analytical categories and the self-identical liberal humanist subject in poststructuralist theories entails as a consequence that the subject matter of feminism becomes difficult to grasp. In other words, gender as an analytical tool becomes problematic. This entails, as Grosz points out, that traditional distinctions - such as the sex author of the text, the sex reader, the content and the style of the text - , which enable us to describe a text as feminist/feminine, break down and become insufficient as foundations of a feminist self-positioning (Grosz, 1995, p. 11).

What characterises postmodernism in literary theory in the broadest sense is that the identity of the text is called into question: textuality itself becomes a problem to be considered. When Roland Barthes famously declares the death of the author in his 1977 essay, he problematizes the identity of the text ensured by the identity of the author as subject, as the guarantor of meaning. Barthes substitutes the reader in the subject position the author occupied previously, and derives the meaning of the text from that subject position, which allows for a multiplicity of meanings: "there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader" (Barthes, 1977). Although Barthes' position has its limitations, it gives rise to a new set of questions in literary criticism which, in broader terms, can be understood as the problematization of the relationship between subject and text as well as between text and meaning.

The foregrounding of textuality as a problem in literary theory calls into question the possibilities of a feminist text, the identity of feminist text, and the legitimacy of a feminist

political stance in general. As a consequence, feminism cannot leave textuality unquestioned, and has to respond to the problems raised by what has been labeled postmodernism in literary theory, which is, as Grosz emphasizes, “a vexing problem [...] at the heart of many feminist, literary, and philosophical texts, a problem related to their mode of self-representation and self-understanding” (p. 9). The questions that emerge from this perspective, and the questions that guide Grosz’s essay are the following: “By what criteria can we say that a text is feminist, or feminine? How is a feminist text to distinguished from the patriarchal or phallocentric mainstream within which we locate it and where it finds its context?” (p. 11)

If the distinction that governs the self-understanding of feminism is between feminist and patriarchal text, then this distinction is a political one. It is also necessarily exclusive, and a feminist understanding has to reflect on its own political investment in drawing that distinction. Grosz emphasizes that feminist knowledge production is in itself “a mode of policing, a mode of intellectual self-regulation”. If the central question to feminism has been what gets excluded from patriarchal knowledge production; if feminism reads the history of philosophy as a patriarchal one that is based on the systematic exclusion of women and a female perspective, then, as Grosz argues, “the same sorts of questions [...] can be raised about feminist theory’s own intellectual and political self-representations and policing tactics” (p. 11). The question Grosz poses, thus is “why we want or need a clear-cut distinction between feminist and non-feminist texts, what is invested or at stake in this distinction and who wants the distinction to be drawn”.

The solution Grosz offers to the problems she identifies at the merger of feminism and postmodernism in literature is to replace the author understood as the (humanist) speaking subject of feminism (marked by sex) with sexual signature, which she derives from Derrida’s

notion authorial signature. She argues that the authorial signature is sexually specific (sexual signature), which enables us to classify a text as feminist. What characterises a feminist text according to Grosz is that it “must render the patriarchal or phallogentric presumptions governing its contexts and commitments visible”; “problematize the standard masculinist ways in which the author occupies the position of enunciation”, and “facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces” (pp. 22-23). These functions can be performed by the text, as the authorial signature has the potential to grant the text a certain specificity. However, she emphasizes that this specificity is always a relative one. This recognition leads Grosz to the conclusion that “no text can be classified once and for all as wholly feminist or wholly patriarchal” but “these appellations depend on its context, its place within that context, how it is used, by whom and to what effect” (p. 23).

This understanding of feminism opens up the possibility of seeing feminist knowledge production as partial, context-dependent, relatively specific, but also as something that is embedded in power-structures, has its own policing techniques, its own mode of self-legitimization in its specific context. Without necessarily treating feminism in the given context as a homogeneous discourse, it allows us to see how recurring rhetorical devices shape and set limits to knowledge production. It enables to look at feminist knowledge production in the given context as something that displays certain coherence, even if it is a relative and an unstable coherence, and look at it as an authentic discourse with its own policing techniques.

## 2 Tropes of self-legitimation

In this chapter, I will analyze the rhetoric by which feminist discourse in general, and feminism in visual culture in particular establishes its legitimacy in the Hungarian context. I will look through the body of literature concentrating two central tropes: “mental Walls” and “anachronistic modernism”. These tropes describe the local context within the feminist discourse. They describe why feminism faces difficulties in legitimizing itself in the local context in mainstream discourses. I will not contest the relevance of these statements, but try to map out the consequences of such descriptions, how they fit into the construction of post-socialist identity, and trace the broader power relations they inscribe themselves into on a global scale.

### 2.1 “*mental Walls*”: *moral geopolitics*

The exhibition *After the Wall: Art and culture in post-Communist Europe* in 1999/2000 in Stockholm presented visual art in the former Soviet Union and its satellite states in East and Central Europe during the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The exhibition was accompanied by a two-volume publication: a catalogue of the exhibited artworks and a collection of essays on art and political change in the region in the respective time period. In the volume accompanying the exhibition, Edit András published an article entitled “High and low: a painful farewell to modernism, difficulties in the period of transition” (1997). The article begins as follows:

“The fall of the Berlin wall and, somewhat farther to the East, the fall of the Iron Curtain seemed to suddenly connect the Eastern bloc, the part of Europe which until then had been hermetically sealed off, with the West. The euphoria and ecstasy soon wore off, and it gradually became clear that the dismantling of the intellectual and mental Walls is a much more painful and prolonged process than the demolition of physical ones. We still continue to run into remnants of the Iron Curtain which obstruct the way of fast and smooth progress.” (p. 125)

The author of the article sees gender-sensitive thinking and an emerging new generation of women artists fall victim to the perceived “remnants of the Iron Curtain”. She highlights that the lack of sensitivity to gender issues (what she elsewhere calls “the gender problem” András, 1995) in visual arts and a resistance to feminisms as an important aspect of what she perceives as an anachronism in contemporary Hungarian culture:

“[T]here is no better proof for the functioning of the Wall and the Iron Curtain as beneficial filters, and for the general adherence and even addiction to them, than the selective attitude that worked its way into public thought as a kind of surrogate, which refuses to accept change with all its positive and negative consequences, fostering the belief, after the fall of the Wall, that it is possible to choose between what concerns us and what is ‘not our problem, thank you very much’. The rigid rejection of any gender-oriented thinking and its tenets, and of even the mere legitimacy of problems raised by it, was the stance that enjoyed a general consensus regardless of gender, age, or political affiliation.” (p. 127)

Edit András made similar observations in connection with a series of exhibitions that concentrated on gender in art in Hungary as part of the former Eastern block. Water Ordeal was a series of exhibitions organized in two private-owned art galleries in 1995 in Budapest, featuring exclusively women artists, especially from the “young generation”. They exhibited Hungarian artists, and artists from the “West” in order to establish a dialogue between the Hungarian and the international art scene. In the book accompanying the exhibition series, András writes:

While the international art scene has already witnessed the third generation of feminist artists taking over from the second, and parallel with the publication of the first comprehensive art historical evaluation both of the first generation’s work and of their polemics with the second, here in Hungary (to say the least) there is complete

ignorance, misunderstanding and deep fears surrounding the whole issue of feminism and women's art, accompanied by tough and hardly concealed prejudices and stereotypes, the kind which elsewhere would not be tolerated as sexism and misogyny. Thus, the remnants of the intellectual Iron Curtain will immediately be apparent to any foreign visitors, [...]. (András, 1995, p. 25)

What is at stake is not the truth value of these claims, but rather their effect: what perspectives they render possible in terms of a feminist political stance. If feminist discourse seeks legitimacy by defining itself in an opposition to a masculinist public discourse and backward mentality stemming from a socialist past, how does that influence what is to be understood as the politics of feminism. In order to address this question, such claims would have to be read as tropes or rhetorical devices that are not only constative in nature but also have performative force, that is, they do not only describe the geopolitical and critical context they are situated in, but simultaneously construct that context as a tool of self-legitimation to the discourse of feminism in that context.

In this chapter – concentrating on the trope of “mental Walls” – I will examine how feminist discourse in Hungary fits into a larger discursive construction Michał Buchowski terms “neo-orientalism” (Buchowski, 2006). I will use the trope mental Walls for similar constructions of (post)socialist backwardness, backward mindset, etc. I will look at how feminist strategies of self-positioning in Hungary relate to a moralizing political discourse that delineates an ideological mapping of historical and geopolitical location in an evolutionist framework – a teleological view of history – in which the West is figured as a moral guarantor, a point of reference in relation to which the local context, non-Western Europe is seen as backward, less modernized, less developed and morally inferior. In delineating the transition from socialism to capitalism as progress, an anachronism is perceived in the local context.

More precisely, I am interested in how feminist politics works in an ideological framework where the concept of politics appears on a horizon structured by the socialism/post-socialism, totalitarianism/liberal democracy and East/West dichotomies, and how it manifests in visual arts. I will argue that the feminist political stance that emerges from feminist criticism in Hungary in general, and feminism in the field of visual arts in particular, and sets up what Böröcz calls the ideal of Western (European) “goodness” (Böröcz, 2007) or moral superiority as a ground that legitimizes feminist discourse. Still drawing on Böröcz, I will try to point out how this resonates with a long-standing intellectual tradition stemming from modernity, the rhetoric of 19<sup>th</sup> century nation formation in Hungary.

The problem Edit András points out to in the passage cited above is by no means unprecedented in texts that reflect on the situation of feminist discourse in the Hungarian context. A frequently cited article in the field of feminist literary criticism by Judit Kádár comes to very similar conclusions. She investigates the possible causes of the ambiguous position of feminism within literary studies, which, as she sees it, is both present and missing at the same time (again, a recurring rhetoric).

She argues that feminism is continuously understood as a pejorative term in the Hungarian context, ever since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has become even more rejected under socialism, she argues, which declared gender equality and the accomplishment of the aims of feminist movements in the West, by making women to enter into labor force, thus increasing their burdens. The figure of “the militant man-eater” appeared in the 1990s. But what eventually discredited feminist criticism within literary studies, she argues, was its emphasis on the political, which, by pointing out to connections between knowledge production and politics as opposed to scientific objectivity evoked bad memories stemming



from a socialist past. Moreover, she point out, this was the period when the field of literary studies was desperately trying to untie the discipline from politics after decades of forced politicization (Kádár, 2003).

Nóra Séllei in a report, when asked to reflect on the position of feminism in Hungary in the field of literary studies, argues that the politics of feminism continues to be suspicious in the Hungarian context, because it is not acknowledged that the politics of feminism is understood more broadly than that of Marxism, or even Marxist feminism in the 70s, which she terms “vulgar feminism” arguing that few of them surpass the horizon of orthodox or “vulgar Marxism”. She sees the continuing resistance to and limited understanding of the political within literary studies as a result of visceral reflexes originating in a socialist past, when an opposition to the forced political views took the shape of an insistence on and protection of the autonomy of the private (and aesthetic) sphere (Séllei, 2000).

As all three authors point out, due to the insensitivity to these differences within the feminist discourse, the lack of reception and the fact that feminist texts have reached Hungary simultaneously, without a sufficient understanding of the context of their origin and lack of the theoretical background to form their context, feminism is still a curse word.<sup>4</sup> As András puts it, “after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Wall, all these poured into Hungary without any selection or precedents, blurring the boundaries between all kinds of prior and posterior approaches and arguments that showed fundamental differences in mentality and strategies” (1997, p. 127).

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<sup>4</sup> This approach is what Susan Gal criticizes, arguing for agency involved in the reception of circulating theoretical concepts.

Thus, it is very easy to see the prevailing sexism of public and mainstream discourse as the result of a lack of gender-sensitive perspective in a cultural context where feminism – as opposed to the West, they argue – is continuously being discredited (Séllei, 2007, p. 139), and attribute the prevailing resistance towards feminism to a post-socialist backward mindset, visceral reflexes that stem from a socialist past, or, as Edit András calls it, “mental Walls” (András, 1997). Moreover, the insistence on the autonomy of the private sphere, as Adamik argues (1993, p.150), resulted in a complete lack of modernization in the private sphere, which she also refers to as *Balkanian* feudal, patriarchal traditions and ‘modernized’ sexism.

Feminists argue, thus, that in a theoretical framework where the depoliticization of the private is figured as the demarcation line between totalitarianism and liberal democracy, or state socialism and post-socialist-transition Hungary, any claim that seeks to link the political with the private is seen as something that belongs to the former. The relevance of a feminist or gender-sensitive perspective on art is discredited precisely because it is seen as the politicization of the private sphere. They point out that in a cultural context where politics has come to be equated with state power and its manipulations, the feminist slogan “the private is political” becomes fundamentally suspicious and faces resistance, as it resonates with a threat to the immunity of the private sphere as the only retreat from an all-encompassing supervision and paternalistic control of the state, and goes against the rhetoric of the consolidation of the liberal democratic state, which accentuates the de-politicization of the private.

Feminism, in this respect, positions itself in a rather paradoxical way with relation to the critical context it describes as anachronistic, backward and hostile. On the one hand, it problematizes the way in which the politics of feminism is seen to resonate with the politicization of the private sphere, thus invoking the specter of state socialism. Feminists see

themselves being discredited on the grounds that feminist thought is equated with a socialist backward thinking in the collective imagination.

On the other hand, feminism attributes the persistent hostility towards overtly political or ideological approaches in art criticism to an Eastern European post-socialist backward mindset. By doing this, it reinforces the East-West ideological division, and inscribes itself into a (neo)liberal political discourse. This builds on the very same rhetoric as the one above, according to which a perceived antagonism between totalitarianism and liberal democracy imagining the transition from state socialism to a liberal democratic capitalist state order as evolution, as a history of progress. Thus, feminist discourse tries to legitimize itself describing its context by the very same rhetoric it perceives is being used to delegitimize feminist politics.

### **2.1.1 neo-orientalism**

The feminist discourse that urges enlightened thinking and tries to close the mental gap created by Cold War ideological divisions simultaneously (re)constructs the *us* and *them* and re-inscribes it into a hierarchical relation through the rhetoric Buchowski calls neo-orientalism. Buchowski concentrates on internal heterogeneities and processes of othering in the Eastern European context. He applies Said's notion of orientalism understood as a set of discourses of imagining the Other (Said, 1978, as cited in Buchowski, 2006) in a post-socialist context. He uses the term neo-orientalism, to signify the modification he makes by applying it to postmodern, postsocialist and post-industrial social organization. He applies neo-orientalism to the ways imaginary boundaries were created in Cold War Europe, in post-Cold War Europe, and in postsocialist Poland. By a unifying term, he allows to identify similar processes in local and global representations of the world. He argues, for example, that the post-Cold War binaries of West-as-developed and East-as-backward can be identified as a

process of othering within the internal social organization in post-transition Poland: the voices of the poor and powerless, who are generally the losers of the transition, are discredited by the rhetoric of labeling them communists, and blaming them for their situation and for their incapacity to adapt to the new system.

Cold War division between progressive, capitalist, Western *us* and communist, backward, Eastern *them* is thus reproduced within post-socialist Polish society. Talking about the prevalence of the socialist mentality, thus, shifts attention away from the continuities and “structural similarities in modernist projects and historical connections between an artificially divided East and West” (Buchowski, 2006: 470) and imagine the transition from socialism to capitalism as a teleological development. Socialism and Capitalism as a different set of mentalities stand in binary relationship to each other, characterized by cynicism vs. realism, nepotism vs. efficiency, collectivism vs. individualism, impotence toward destiny vs. future orientedness, passivity vs. activity, learned helplessness vs. learned resoluteness, etc. The rhetoric of othering people based on a perceived socialist backwardness inherently linked to them, Buchowski argues, objectifies and essentializes them and denies their capacity to shape their reality. Thus, identifying people with a socialist mindset is not a matter of truth or falsehood, but the “constructive strength [of these images] lies in the fact that they have the power to construct social difference” (p 476). His perspective allows us to see differences as products of a global system of cultural, economic and political domination, inequalities in economic, political and social relations, and ideological representations of space and time.

This strategy of othering manifests itself in a paradoxical way within the feminist discourse. On the one hand, it is identified as that which is used to discredit feminism. The connection between politics and the private is seen as Marxist/socialist remnants. On the other

hand, the very same rhetoric is used to describe the context which is insensitive to the gender perspective and resistant to feminism.

Insofar as feminism uses a rhetoric that imagines the political in a framework that seems to contain the political discourse within an opposition between socialism and liberal democracy, feminist politics appears on the horizon of this limited view of the political. What emerges as a problem from the way feminism positions itself, thus, is that – rather paradoxically – a limited perspective structured by this binary opposition remains persistent in a discourse that seeks to contest universalist claims to political subjectivity, which project an unmarked masculine subject as neutral and relegate gender difference outside the political. As a result, competing conceptions of the political are neutralized within the binary framework of totalitarianism and liberal democracy, or socialism and post-socialism, and other forms of political subjectivation are rendered impossible and unimaginable. What is missing from a feminist discourse that stays within this limited framework is a critical perspective that would allow for addressing structural similarities between the two political systems, and recognize the problematic feminism raises as something that historically stems from modernity and a modernist conception of (political) subjecthood. Any such claim is immediately translated into an overarching ideological mapping structured by an East/West, socialist/post-socialist dichotomy, where the political potential of what is seen as a feminist claim is turned into a tool to construct these oppositions.

### **2.1.2 western “goodness”**

While describing the local context as backward, feminists conjure up a teleological view of history, where the west stands for the standard for development, a sort of moral guarantor. This moralizing political discourse that gains its legitimacy from what József

Böröcz calls “moral geopolitics”, an evolutionist framework where the West (Europe) is equated with “goodness” in relation to which the non-West is evil or insufficiently good, is palpable in liberal political speech in Hungary (Böröcz, 2007). Using the example of an open letter signed by Hungarian left-liberal intellectuals in which they praise the French state for according political asylum to Romany refugees who saw their human rights violated in Hungary, Böröcz demonstrates how intellectuals seek to ally themselves with the West through a rhetoric that condemns their local context as amoral and politically backward. This rhetoric turns the social conflict into a self-legitimizing tool, which, through the “goodness” of the West (western Europe) elevates the intellectuals who sign the letter to a morally higher ground, and simultaneously precludes the possibility of actual inequalities within society to be addressed.

I find his article particularly useful here for several reasons. First, it treats its subject as exemplary of the way liberal intellectuals position themselves, and, as such, allows for a comparison with the rhetoric of feminist discourse in Hungary. Second, it links the self-colonizing perspective of intellectuals in contemporary Hungary to a tendency that has deeper historical roots, thus facilitating a critical perspective that surpasses the binary figuration of the geopolitical context structured by the socialist/post-socialist opposition. The trope left-liberals use to position themselves in this context, as Böröcz points out, is “perhaps the most common of all commonplaces in the modern Hungarian history of political ideas” (Böröcz, 2007:115). The teleological view of history that sets up the West as the model for development, he argues, has been persistent for more than two centuries: the formation of the Hungarian nation-state in the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century used the very same rhetoric, juxtaposing Hungarian backwardness to the “West” – in this case, the revolutionary France of 1789 – figured as a historical model for the formation of the modern democratic

state, simultaneously foreclosing the possibility of a critique of colonialism and imperial domination that underpinned political change in the West. Böröcz, thus, draws attention to a system of representation that locates Hungary within a framework of European moral geopolitics that is based on the “trans-historical ideal of European goodness”, and which fails to provide a theoretical framework that would allow for a critical perspective on how the geopolitical mapping of the world is organized in terms of power relations on a global scale, and how Western European “goodness” emerges from systemic strategies of economic and cultural oppression. From this perspective, it can be argued that what Buchowski calls “neo-orientalism” is perhaps not entirely new, but partly stems from modernity, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century discourse of modern nation formation.

In conclusion, the self-orientalizing perspective in the way feminist discourse seeks legitimacy in Hungary precludes politics proper, as it continues to conceive the political within the totalitarian/democratic, socialist/post-socialist, East/West binaries. As a consequence, feminist political claims are neutralized in this concept of the political, and turned into a tool to mark transition as a rupture and to create a geopolitical framework where feminism’s moral legitimacy derives from an imperialist figuration of Western “goodness”. Feminism that tries to legitimize itself by describing its own local context as backward, is caught up within this discourse of post-socialist identity formation, and fails to provide comparative insights on how power works on a global scale. As a result, it also fails to account for the ways in which gender and its cultural figurations are part of the construction of a geopolitical map structured by binary ideological positions, and the ways in which this system of representation is retained in its own rhetoric. Simultaneously, this feminist signature – through an exclusionary gesture, whereby a group of intellectuals establish themselves as representatives of what feminism is in this particular local context (we the

feminists) – enacts a closure that excludes certain forms of investigating the politics of gender difference as represented in visual art, and simultaneously turns its political potential into a tool to construct these dichotomous ideological positions, to construct a post-socialist identity.

## **2.2 “*anachronistic Modernism*”: a modernist narrative of the *postmodern***

In the field of literary and art criticism in Hungary, feminism positions itself as a missing or failed feminism facing a homogeneously hostile critical environment, which is described as anachronistic, and one that propagates a monolithic (modernist) concept of art, where art continues to be judged by universalist ideals of disinterested aesthetic merit. Feminism, in this case, is seen as something that forms part of postmodernism inasmuch as it is a critique of representation, especially as conceived in modernity. Feminism in visual arts points out that the implicit subject (viewer) of representation according to the modernist logic of representation is implicitly male, and women have been relegated to the side of the represented, viewed object. In this chapter, I will concentrate on the trope of “anachronistic Modernism” used in the feminist discourse and try to map out its further implications.

### **2.2.1 Feminism as postmodern**

Feminism is often understood as the critique of modernity, a critique of the modern subject by pointing out that this subject is implicitly male. The recognition that women have been relegated outside the concept of (political) subjecthood has the potential to destabilize or question this implicitly male subject as self-identical. The emergence of this subject, feminism points out, requires exclusion and is dependent upon that which has been excluded in order to acquire its universality. Looking at the field of visual art is productive, because it



foregrounds the notion of representation in very obvious ways, and the way representational structures as tools of power play a central role in the emergence of modern subjectivity (as unmarked male). In this respect, I see feminist criticism in visual art fit into the poststructuralist/postmodern critique of representation as conceived in modernity<sup>5</sup>.

For example, Laura Mulvey's famous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), which has become one of the seminal texts in creating a theoretical framework for feminist art, problematizes the ways in which woman is encoded in mainstream representation (in this case, Hollywood cinema) as the object of the (male) gaze, as the object of male desire, and, as such, is deprived of agency. From this perspective, works of visual art that subvert the dominant form of women's representation are regarded as feminist art.

I do not intend to evaluate the different concepts of feminist art neither in terms of their relevance nor in terms of their critical potential. Instead, I will try to provide a theoretical framework that allows for seeing these different concepts of feminism in the field of visual arts as a critique of modernity, of the order of representation as conceived in modernity, and of the modern subject this order of representation projects. In this chapter I

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<sup>5</sup> I use modernism/modernity the way it is used by Craig Owens in the texts that I refer to. I will not point out to the problematic this term evokes. However, I find paradigmatic of the way postmodern is defined, that the notion of modernist representation is derived in Owens from what Foucault terms "classical representation" (Foucault, 1994). Classical representation in Foucault is marked by the absence of the subject, which in itself only becomes visible to us seen from modernity as the pre-modern. Modernity, by contrast is characterized by the problematization of the subject itself. In this sense, postmodern in Owens is contrasted to an defined in an opposition to classical representation. While the poststructuralist critique of representation seeks to point out to the internal contradictions in the discourse of modernity, postmodern seems to do the exact opposite. By identifying itself in an opposition to modernity, it grants the modernist discourse coherence.

will try to locate feminist art within a larger debate in art history and art theory which delineates the modernism/postmodern paradigm shift with reference to the problem of representation. I will draw on Craig Owens' understanding of feminism in the field of visual arts, which he derives from a poststructuralist critique of representation that acknowledges the interconnectedness of power and systems of representation (Owens, 1983). Poststructuralist theories point out that the modern subject produced through systems of representation is set up as that which is outside representation: a coherent, unified subject, immediately present for itself. Feminism in visual art, from this respect, exposes this coherent, unified, universal subject as a male subject, and problematize the way women are excluded from representation as subjects and confined/relegated to the side of the represented objects.

I find this understanding of feminist art located within a paradigm shift from modern to postmodern particularly productive, because it allows for recognizing how this shift is seen as something that pertains primarily to the West (György, 1995), which is what I will look at later on. It allows for pointing out how postmodernism understood as a critique of representation in modernity retains modernist ideas of western Eurocentrism, which manifests itself in the literature I am looking at, as the West is identified as the authentic context of the emergence of feminist art. In this respect, postmodern can be read as the extension of a modernist discourse rather than its critique.

Craig Owens in his essay "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" (1992, pp. 166-190) looks at the intersection of feminism and postmodernism/poststructuralism in the field of art and art criticism. By introducing feminism and sexual difference he points out to the gender-blindness of the modernism/postmodernism debate. The main argument Owens proposes in this essay is that "women's insistence on difference and

incommensurability may not only be compatible with, but also an instance of postmodern thought” (p. 171). I find this position productive, because it does not only recognize the effect postmodernism had on the feminist discourse as a one-way relation, but emphasizes the way in which feminism may inform poststructuralist thought, a relation that is often underscored in literature that discusses the intersection of feminism and postmodernism.

However, his analysis also has its weak points. Owens’ approach does not recognize the diversity of ideas within the feminist discourse. By reading feminism as an instance of postmodern thought may overlook universalist claims feminism has been accused of making. Moreover, it sees postmodernism as a critique of grand metanarratives and universalist truth claims of modernity, which results in an uncritical understanding of the self-definition of what Lyotard terms “the postmodern condition”. Owens uncritical approach to postmodernism may also derive from a misreading of Lyotard, who himself has a negative, dystopian description of postmodernism.

Owens defines “postmodernism [...] as a crisis of cultural authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions” (p. 166). This position is precisely what Timothy Mitchell criticizes in his essay “The stage of modernity”, claiming that what has been termed by Lyotard “the postmodern condition”, and which identifies itself as moving beyond modernity and claims a new stage of history, has ignored “how history itself is staged” and retains “some very modern ways of understanding the world”, where to become postmodern, just like to be modern, “is to act like the West” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 1). I will leave this argument aside and come back to it later.

Nevertheless, I find this text particularly useful here because it looks at the “crossing of the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation” (p3). He recognizes that the crisis of Western culture and its institutions does not only derive from the recognition of plurality on a global scale, but also from the recognition that what is retrospectively seen as a monolithic culture has never been one. Feminism, in this respect, exposes the internal incoherence of the discourse of modernity.

Owens points out that women’s exteriority to representation exposes the limits of Western representation. He says, “the representational systems of the West admit only one vision – that of the constitutive male subject or, rather they posit the subject of representation as absolutely centered, unitary, masculine” (p. 167). Simultaneously, woman as subject is prohibited from representation, “women have been rendered an absence” (p. 168). It is from this recognition that Owens connects feminism to a postmodern critique of representation. For him, what characterizes the postmodern is that it exposes the internal rules that govern systems of representation, and render them visible. He argues that “it is precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodernist operation is being staged not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting others” (p. 168).

Laura Mulvey, for instance, by looking at the way visual pleasure and sexual desire are encoded in the mainstream visual representation in Hollywood film points out that the internal logic of representation simultaneously constructs the male viewer as the sovereign subject. She says:

The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle”

Mulvey, thus, points out that the sovereign/transcendental subject that emerges from the strategies of representation is male. This recognition, however, is not new. The male/subject/viewer female/object/viewed binaries have been problematized in other fields within feminist thought. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, in *The Second Sex* (1988) argues that women are caught up in the state of immanence according to the existing power relations in our culture, and cannot acquire the position of the transcendental subject, which is implicitly male.

For Craig Owens, the postmodern is characterized by the foregrounding of these internal power relations encoded in representation. In his essay “Appropriation, representation and Power” written in 1982 contrasts two approaches to art centered on different conceptions of representation. A (humanist) art history „which believes representation to be a disinterested and [...] politically neutral activity” and poststructuralist criticism „which demonstrates that [representation] is an inextricable part of social processes of domination and control” (1992, p. 88) What he perceives as a new artistic trend in the 1980s, the “return to representation” after “the a long night of modernist abstraction” is not a return proper, but rather “a critique of representation, an attempt to use representation against itself to challenge its authority, its claim to possess some truth or epistemological value” (p. 88).

The postscript to the article gives a tentative definition to postmodernism by identifying it as a critique of representation as conceived in modernism. Referring to Frederic Jameson, he distinguishes modern and postmodern art based on their claim to a universal truth or value. The task of the postmodern, he argues, is to “investigate [...] the strategies and

tactics whereby [...] images [that appear to us transparent or documentary in nature] secure their authoritative status in our culture” and expose the transparency (transparent mediums) as a working of power (p. 111).

### **2.2.2 A belated postmodern turn**

In the field of visual art in Hungary, an anachronism is articulated in relation to a paradigm shift from modern to post-modern art, which – in the West – gave rise to trends that connect politics with art through contesting dominant models of representation, and which became the dominant paradigm by the 80s (György, 1995). This paradigm shift came belated, allegedly, in the Hungarian context, as the art world was hermetically sealed off from western artistic and critical trends (András, 1997). The post-modernist critique of grand metanarratives and universal truth claims generated a crisis in the modernist vision of art as autonomous, and art history as a coherent, unified history of artistic movements that is disarticulated from the social context of artistic production, and called for a new art history that acknowledges the interconnectedness of representation and politics (Belting, 1987), and which reads art as the representation of established systems of representation, and a site of struggle, a contestation between different systems of representation (Foucault, 1989, Owens, 1992). This vision of art also acknowledges the performative nature of representation, that is, their power to shape social reality.

By contrast, in the Hungarian context, this paradigm shift is a deferred, or, as Edit András calls, a “deceptive paradigm shift” (András, 1997), and what can be perceived in Hungarian art is a belated, anachronistic Modernism. Before the fall of the Iron Curtain, she argues, an oppositional subculture in the 80s, which positioned itself against “official” state-supported art performed an illusory "walking through Walls" pretending to defy physical and

political reality. As the emancipation from state control took the form of insistence on the autonomy of art, and two tendencies occupied the subcultural artistic scene, one seeking retreat in an apolitical modernist aestheticism, and a "militant avant-garde tradition" with its covert forms of resistance trying to elude state censorship. In this context, as András argues "what could be witnessed, instead of the adaption of the new paradigm and the announced prevalence of the post-modern, was the workings of the last, unrestrained and jubilant, great wave of Modernism" (126). After 1989, the categories of "official" art and resistant forms of art lost their relevance or point of reference, and a disillusionment took over the artistic scene, as "the illusion of a quick and painless artistic integration quickly vanished" (127), and the idiosyncrasy that distinguished art in the Eastern block turned into "deficiency and incompatibility". What feminists problematize in this context is the lack of new theoretical concepts, and point out that art in Hungary continues to be judged by notions and concepts belonging to a prior (modernist) paradigm that still posits the autonomy of the work of art and uses universal categories that stand in the way of political engagement and exhibit a resistance to overtly ideological, political forms of art. What remains is a "rigid rejection of gender-oriented thinking" and strong prejudices, and, as a consequence, women artists whose works could gain meaning in the new paradigm find themselves in an "oppositional situation" (András, 128).

Elsewhere, András argues that even after the fall of the iron curtain that was previously "interrupting the free exchange of information" (1999, p. 27) "the filtering through of feminism was further blocked" because of the persistence of an avantgarde tradition that, originating from the counter cultural movements in the 1970s and 80s established itself within the institutions after the post-socialist transition. As a result, she argues, while avantgarde was becoming anachronistic "everywhere in the world on the other side of the iron curtain" and

postmodern gained grounds, “here in Hungary the word ‘post-modern’ still remained something of a disparagement” (p. 29).

### **2.2.3 Modernist narrative**

However, by imagining the postmodern turn as something that pertains to the West, and which is missing or came belated in the local context, feminism sets up a value-laden understanding of the postmodern, which is seen as superior, or more advanced. In this sense, it gives a very paradoxical understanding of the postmodern, which identifies itself precisely as that which contests such universal truth claims. What emerges as a paradox here, however, is not only a paradox within feminist discourse, but also points to a paradox within the concept “postmodern” itself.

Hans Belting in discussing the possibilities of writing art history in relation to the East/West opposition, sees the same phenomenon from another perspective. He writes:

Compared with the West, art in Eastern Europe in retrospect mostly appears retarded in the general development and at another stage of development which means that it was performing a different social role, two conditions result from this historical lack of contact with Western modernism. Where it did not join the permanent crisis of modernism, art remained in the state of innocence, as it were, especially since it could easily justify itself by its resistance to official state art (Belting, 2003, p. 58).

While he sees what is identified as “retarded” about art in Eastern Europe through the lens of the West as a difference in its role rather than its quality, he points out that “the western art markets’ irresistible pull on the east [...] seemed to confirm the Western self-assessment that the only art worthy of the name came from the West” (p 54).

Similarly to Belting, Piort Piotrowski in “How to write a history of Central-East European Art?” (2006) attacks universalist narratives of art history that sets up the West as “the center where art is originated, and from where it spreads out to the rest of the world”. His



argument is that “art history of Eastern Central Europe should be critical to the Western patterns, and should be written in a different way [...] first of all along with much more pluralistic model.” He seeks to challenge the idea that Eastern art is more homogeneous because of a state-enforced “uniform ideological background”. By looking at art as developed in Eastern Europe, he points out to some of the difficulties of writing art history. One of this is creating a monolithic concept of Eastern art, thus erasing the internal differences of artistic traditions as developed in individual local contexts. He calls attention to the fact that state power worked in different ways across the region and in time and argues that in order to assess these differences a more local perspective is required. In other words, the task is not to incorporate Eastern art into the western canon, but emphasize the tensions between local experiences and the canon and concentrate on pluralistic national discourses. In this sense, he argues, “art history of Eastern Europe would serve both as a critique of the mainstream Western art history, and at the same time as a new model of European art-historical narrative”

The new way of history writing he sets out here provides a critical perspective, which recognizes that “the West [...] needs the East in order to see itself; Western art, and Western art historical narrative, needs the Eastern one in order to learn how to write art history along with different patterns, more critical and more pluralistic”.

However, it seems that this utopian vision of art history in East Central and Eastern Europe, while emphasizes the importance of local experiences, and allegedly resists the homogenizing vision of Eastern/East Central Europe (which Piortowski uses interchangeably) ends up reproducing the same ideological divisions. Setting up Eastern art as that which challenges western identity, from this respect, seems just as west-centric.

What these theories fail to provide, thus, is a critical perspective on the way the world is represented in terms of its geopolitics. While they see the dissolution of clear-cut boundaries between East and West with the fall of the iron curtain as something that potentially destabilizes identity constructions – both in the East and in the West – that have been defined in relation to this ideological representation of the world, they still see the East/West division as pre-given.

The persistence of the way the world is represented in what we now perceive as the postmodern is what Timothy Mitchell calls “the presence of modernity as representation” (p. 20). He argues that what differentiates modernist vision is the principle of representation itself: “the modern is produced as the difference between space and its representation”. In this sense, he points out that it is not enough to reflect on the ways institutions in the west have gained cultural authority through systemic oppressions, but “the questioning of modernity must explore two forms of difference, both the displacements opened up by the different space of the non-West, and the ways in which this space is made to appear different” (p. 27).

## Conclusion

The way feminist criticism of the 1990s positions itself in the Hungarian cultural context, foregrounds a set of internal contradictions. A predominantly negative or paradoxical self-positioning of feminism in Hungary as a missing or failed feminism fits into a larger discursive framework through which post-socialist identity gets articulated. Cultural phenomena recognized as feminism/feminist in the Hungarian context, in this respect, are turned into a tool to mark the post-socialist transition as a rupture, and construct “postness” with reference to this rupture. Simultaneously, a rhetorical move within the feminist discourse that seeks to establish its legitimacy in the local context describes post-socialist Hungary in relation to the West as backward, less modernized and morally inferior. Deriving the legitimacy of feminism from a posited superiority of the West, thus, inscribes the local context into uneven power relations on a global scale.

By mapping out these underlying assumptions I did not wish to contest the analytical relevance of feminist discourse, but tried to point out further problems to be considered: some very modernist ideas of representation and geopolitical location are retained or get reproduced. Thinking through these problems might point to a direction where more productive sites open up. Rather than preserving the status quo, the reconsideration of feminist positions along the lines of these inherent contradictions points to possible new directions to be taken.

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