



Ewa Toniak  
SHE-GIANTS.  
WOMEN  
AND  
SOCIAL  
REALISM

Photo: Ewa Karpf

*She-Giants*, a richly illustrated, engrossing and brilliantly written collection of essays by art critic and historian Ewa Toniak, is devoted to the women of "social realism," the Polish variant of totalitarian art during the 1948-54 period. The author uses tools of feminist criticism to analyse the depiction of women in both male- and female-created art; she covers the painting, press illustrations (including women's magazines), films, news reels, fashions and theoretical and political discussions of the era. She deals with not only the ideological and political aspect of the representation of the female body in Stalinist art, but also cultural gender constructions in art advocating the values of the socialist myth. Toniak shows the hypocrisy of the contemporaneous representations of the body and "femininity": social realism chanted slogans of emancipation and revolution, it declared equal rights, but in fact advocated a patriarchal vision of culture, promoted gender stereotypes and fostered the further "invisibility"

of women's issues, or at best gave women the right to be like men. The author is interested not only in the codification of the male and female bodies in propaganda (i.e. labour foremen), but also ways in which women were made symbolically present in the public space, and the manifestations of female sexuality and female desire (or the essential lack thereof) in the visual culture of the period. She provides contexts not only of Soviet art, but also of the art of the French Revolution and the art of post-romantic modernity, up to post-modern works in which the author has located residua or pastiches of the aesthetic under discussion, or attempts to reshape or reclaim it. Her book features analyses of Katarzyna Kozyra's infamous "Male Bathhouse" (1999) and "Female Bathhouse" (1997) video-installations, as well as works by other "leftist" Polish female artists (Ewa Kulik, Anna Baumgart, Ola Polsiewicz) whose work is often deemed scandalous by the more conservative branch public opinion.

**Ewa Toniak** is an art historian and critic. She writes about modern art from a feminist perspective and the role of women in the history of art.

*Marek Zaleski*

In 1948 the pages of *Moda i Życie Praktyczne* [*Fashion and Everyday Life*] show that there are two types of existence: women whose activities are limited to the home and being objects of male desire, and workers, the Other sort. But much like in Fangor's paintings, in this transition period (at least until the ordinance of social realism in 1949), these two types, traditional and social-realist, would deconstruct each other. Similarly, the world of politics does not directly force itself upon the readers – and this might be the work of the “discourse of exclusion” – but literally between the lines, in passing, in tips on how to iron a veil or make a cap out of tricot. In January 1948 the historical calendar mixes in another hierarchy and type. The same page features the dates of Lenin's death, and that of Ludwik Sol-ski, an outstanding Polish actor.

It seems to me that the new asexual and gender-shorn feminine ideal – the worker woman – also started her bloodless annexation of women's magazines from the margins. Two years later, she felt right at home there. The “jaded models,” as they were called, for example, in an article praising the advantages of the mass production of the Warsaw Clothing Industry Factories (“Mass production can be both lovely and effective”), vanish from the covers and pages of the magazines. There is no room here for fashion understood as the “canon of femininity.” The article/advertisement for the latest products of the WCIF is yet another ideological battlefield. “The fashion dictators,” we read, “don't care how the working woman dresses and what she looks like; the same goes for the ordinary female office worker or peasant woman. Fashion has served only the rich.”

But at the turn of 1948/1949, in a questionnaire addressed to women and entitled *What We Want for the New Year*, there are responses from well-known figures (Professor Eleonora Reicher, and Mieczysława Ćwiklińska, an outstanding artist) and totally anonymous ones (a Warsaw Technical Academy student and a hairdresser) – including a construction worker named Józefa Bąkowa. Amidst the remaining women, posed as if for pre-war photographs, the working woman's face is distinguished by the fact that it does not adopt a pose, it does not transform into an image. A face outside of the canons of

femininity and beauty in its anonymous motionlessness, beyond gender categories. Józefa Bąkowa's greatest dream is for her youngest son to make it into the RTPD [The Friends of Children Workers' Association] Orphanage, where her eldest is (“I'd know that the child was being brought up right”). She is the only one of the women surveyed who works at a construction site “along with the men,” and does “the same work they do.” The magazine does not even correct her rough language. Bąkowa simply “works the site.” “Well, and are you up to the job?” the magazine asks (impossible to tell if it's with disbelief or concern). “I am,” the woman asks in accordance with our expectations, though her later responses reveal that she'd prefer gentler work. The photograph of Józefa Bąkowa, her age hard to pin down (fulfilling the type criteria), her clothing (overalls) not easy to define, a sad look on her face, leads the procession of the new heroines of the women's magazine. Heroines whose bodies are increasingly concealed, whose faces leave no trace on the memory. Their photographs spread across the pages of the magazine with the monotony of an assembly line. The frills and guipures, the investment in the tailored accessories and the physicality all vanish. The aim of this image “modification” in totalitarianism is the “washing away of tension, to bring the Other to a uniform ideological image.” The combined covers only superficially bring women out of the photography studio. Their portraits are taken as bust shots, always from below, their gazes directed upwards, with the regulation trusting smile, illuminated with high-contrast lighting (sun-tanned peasant women, female laborers with monkey-wrenches slung over their shoulders) and students lingering in a timeless Never-Never-Land, they lose their slim waists and slender arms [May 1949], so as to finally [September 1949] appear with their bodies tightly packed in a pair of overalls, their hair combed sleek, with the rebuilt historical sites of Warsaw and the new districts in the background, leaning on their pickaxes like an allegory of work. The de-croticised and Taylorised female body is complemented in this photograph by Soviet fighter pilot L. Witkowska [L. Vitkovskaya]: tangled in parachute straps, in a helmet and overalls, she is the visual equivalent of the helicopters lifting behind her back: a pilot

and machine all in one. This proletariat cult postulate, some twenty years belated, is illustrated by the July cover of the magazine: "When a machine takes over a farmer's work ...". The machine – i.e. the yoke-symbol of collectivisation is the young woman driving the tractor.

*Translated by Soren Gauger*



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