

## Article

# Towards a Weak Avant-Garde, Re-Shaping the Canon

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**Abstract:** Feminist discussions in art history usually focus on the exclusion of women artists and the reification of women's bodies. A growing constellation of queer and feminist theorists today, however, analyse failure and cuteness as aspects of contemporary feminist avant-garde practices, suggesting that alternative currents in art practice and theory are emerging that challenge traditional notions and modes of art production. In my article, I discuss these debates in relation to "weak universalism" and weak messianism in order to reshape our understanding of avant-garde theory and practice from a feminist perspective. I argue that feminist analysis transforms what was previously thematized as conditions of exclusion into an important part of artistic legacy in works made by previously excluded groups. I propose that the concept of a weak avant-garde might help to theorize these shifts.

**Keywords:** feminist art; counterpublics; weak resistance; universalism; Central and East Europe; avant-garde

## Introduction

The question of feminist aesthetics and its distinction from a "feminine" aesthetic entered a new era in the 1990s/2000s with the blossoming of queer art and theory and its efforts to dismantle essentialist use of binaries in gender and identity categories to avoid the exclusion of trans/nonbinary persons and their perspectives (see [Pollock 2003](#); [Halberstam 2010](#); [Leszkowicz 2010](#)). One of the many ways of accessing these feminist debates and practices has been to consider the deconstruction of the figure of the artist understood as a (male-fashioned) "genius" by following Linda Nochlin's critical investigation of women's participation in art which highlighted gender bias in education and institutions ([Nochlin 1988](#)). Another is to discuss the transformations within art theory's discussions of the avant-garde, in which the notion of the artist has shifted from the power-oriented, heroic and brave declarations of such artists as Kasimir Malevich or Andre Breton, via the ironic and distanced "neo-avant-garde" as Hal Foster defined it, to the "powerless", "lighthearted" and "cute" avant-garde discussed by Sianne Ngai ([Malevich \[1918\] 2004](#); [Foster 1994](#); [Ngai 2005](#)). Ewa Płonowska-Ziarek rightly argues that "important feminist work in specific areas of artistic production does not necessarily lead to the formulation of new aesthetic theories: while in literature, film, music, dance, and visual studies, feminist approaches have changed the parameters of these fields, in feminist theory and feminist philosophy, aesthetics occupies a subordinate role compared to feminist political, sociological, or economic studies" ([Płonowska-Ziarek 2014](#), p. 101). The notion of a feminist avant-garde has not been the subject of many international discussions (an exception is [Schor 2016](#)). The effort to fill this gap is one of this article's main preoccupations.

The intersectional opening of the analytics of aesthetics to the divisions produced through class, race and geopolitics has led to new distinctions emerging not only across the North–South world division but also the crossroads between East and West. Looking at these transitions from a Central and Eastern European perspective offers a particular version of the "perspective of the margin", located in what used to be called "second world", when Eastern Europe was still identified as such on geopolitical maps as behind the Iron Curtain ([Kundera 1984](#); [Majewska 2016a](#)). From the perspective of Poland, aesthetics, and



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particularly its avant-garde articulations, are primarily positioned in-between a “second-world” East (Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, Central Europe) and a “First World” West (as in Paris, London, New York). The legitimate critiques of the consequences of dividing the “world” into three, such as Gayatri Spivak’s dismantlement of the petrification resulting from the notion of “Third World”, made perfect sense as she undermined and rejected Western “First World” vocabulary that strengthened the “hegemony of the West as geopolitical subject” (Spivak 1999). However—from the perspective of Poland—geopolitics after 1989 swept away the “Second World”. Dismantling the East–West distinction also comes as an unplanned repercussion of the decolonization of the global South. This “sweeping” away of a “second world” is by no means a necessary implication of decolonial politics and maintaining the struggle to continue discussions regarding the “former East” should not be used to oppose the emancipatory claims from the “global South”. Both debates should proceed simultaneously, with recognition of their differences and in search of possible decolonial alliances.

My main argument here is that agency, and thus also the theory and practice of the avant-garde, can no longer be seen as solely Western, nor only masculine, in the traditional sense of the word, connoting only heroic strength, bravery, success and exclusion of affect. Central and East Europe provide multiple cultural, theoretical and historical examples of agency deprived of *machismo*, which may, and I believe should, be seen as an asset in feminist discussions of aesthetics, where “feminist” is distinguished from any essential “feminine” or feminine essence. Interpreting Vaclav Havel’s notion of “power of the powerless” and the Solidarity mobilizations of the 1980s in relation to Ewa Partum’s self-undermining projects such as *Stupid Woman* or *Pirouette*, I have argued that the weak have created their own “weapons” in East Europe, and what came out of them was particularly interesting for the region’s specificity, but it also allowed a different understanding of what a geo-political “in-betweenness” can mean (Majewska 2016b; Scott 1985; Janion 2006).

Many feminist artworks and theoretical explorations from this margin provide counter-narratives to the West’s male-centered notion of the avant-garde, allowing the everyday (as a discussion of what is ordinary), the common (as in the commons and collective practices), as well as the possibility of discussing how a weak avant-garde has emerged. This trajectory follows, but also re-negotiates the concept of neo-avant-garde proposed by Hal Foster (Foster 1994, 2014), as well as the perspective of “weak universalism” opened by Boris Groys (Groys 2010). The geopolitical location of Eastern Europe supplies a new kind of transition to the perception of the avant-garde combined with a geopolitical notion, as well as experience, of the abject “in between-ness” of Socialist/post-Socialist and East/West, thus further dismantling hegemonic concepts of the avant-garde from the past or the West. Here, I would like to offer a more general perspective, embedded not just in the discussions of theories about the avant-garde, but also geopolitical divisions and feminism. Where the axis of gender is no longer binary, we can see a plethora of identities and categories emerge and, here, a similar diversity can and indeed should be observed depending on geopolitical location. Geopolitics plays an important role, because of the First World’s attempts to exclude everything that is not the “subject of the West”, if we use Gayatri Spivak’s conceptual toolbox (Spivak 1999). To be this “subject” is to be always already defined by Western categories and its aims and claims about “Other” non-Western positions as subjugated to it, resulting in an absence of autonomy, which has the effect of making the East, a version of the subaltern.

The highly problematic readiness of Central and Eastern European intellectuals and politicians to unproblematically “join the West” after 1989, without sufficient analysis of what it means to be “in-between” East and West, was followed by several decades of economic stagnation in the region in which Eastern Europe conveniently became a new external market as well as a cheap labour resource for the West. This has contributed to the supposed lack of intellectual impact of Central and Eastern European scholars post-1989 revolution (Offe 2004). Milan Kundera’s definition of Central Europe is particularly problematic, as he used an idealist, hermeneutic notion of culture, grounded in ideas.

Kundera presents Central Europe as some kind of dramatic *femme fatale* torn between the West and the East (including Asia), without presenting any form of its own autonomy or agency (Kundera 1984). This much beloved vision of the dramatic fate, passivity and unreadiness of Central Europe to act only on the side of the East permeates the auto-definition of its inhabitants, accounting for their own neglect of the specific, and—yes! sometimes interesting—ideas and practices within their own history.

The infamous “worlding” model erased a large part of the world from its critical discussions. Immanuel Wallerstein called areas excluded from the First/Third world model of developed/developing countries “semi-peripheries”—and to paraphrase bell hooks—the center saw only the margin in its lively dynamics of what lies “in-between” (Wallerstein 1976; Hooks 2000). Wallerstein emphasized the role of a specific form of “seduction” of the semi-periphery by the core countries—it sounds like “just one more effort, and you will be there”. During the period of the EU-accession, when Poland was suffering the highest unemployment and poverty rates, we would hear from all sides “you will be included, just one more thing and you are in Europe” as if the central point of the continent of Europe was not located in Poland. Wallerstein had already discussed this “dog eats dog” approach predominant between former Eastern European countries aspiring to join the core of the EU as well as how the exclusions and injustices suffered by those countries were connected to the desire to belong, but nothing else (Wallerstein 1976). The approach of semi-peripheral countries to those on the periphery is an application of strict code of distinction, typical of the aspiring classes own differentiation of themselves from the poor (Bourdieu 1987).

According to this logic of core–periphery dynamics, it is somehow unproblematically assumed that the gender roles must, by necessity, be stronger in the West, when compared to the East of Europe, because the periphery is always seen as backward. It is interesting to reconsider the actual complexity of gender roles, as state communism introduced its version of gender equality, which unfortunately did not liberate women from the affective and reproductive labour, but it gave them nevertheless more extensive legal equality with men. They could work in almost all jobs, had full access to education, economy, culture and state operated systems of health and care, which meant that childcare, as well as the elderly care duties, typically performed by women, were in large part shared by public institutions. Such systemic equality might explain the possibility of such artistic duos, as those of Marina Abramovic and Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen) or Kwiekulik (Zofia Kulik and Przemysław Kwiek), in which the women’s position is even stronger than that of the men.

Feminist art practice and theorizing from Eastern Europe has long been marginalized, even though women artists from this region provide fantastic examples of this weak avant-garde: for example, the works of Ewa Partum and Mariola Przyjemska, as well as Zofia Kulik and Marina Abramovic. This is not the first article to consider how women artists display such avant-garde tropes: Sascha Scott wrote about “subtle resistance” (Scott 2013); Jack Halberstam and Renate Lorenz discuss queer art (of failure) (Halberstam 2010; Lorenz 2012), Kirstin Orav analyzed the visualizations of failure in Estonian art (Orav 2015), and Ewa Majewska wrote about the “feminist art of failure” (Majewska 2016b). The arguments presented are situated as belonging to a specific time and place; however, they search for possibilities of universalization and generalization, just without absolutist claims. It is interesting how powerlessness signifies a switch in the avant-garde theory of Sianne Ngai but it was also a core term to describe the sentiment of the inhabitants of Central Europe in the 1970s (Ngai 2005; Havel 1985). Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges” (Haraway 1988) can be useful in discussing these local examples as representative of more general tendencies constructed on the crossroads of East and West.

For feminist aesthetics, the formulation of a weak avant-garde has two main implications: semi-peripherality leads to a deconstruction of the hegemonic, white, privileged masculinity and thus transforms our understanding not just of agency and resistance, but also of art practice and the artist. Semi-peripherality is not solely Central European; Wallerstein discusses this phenomenon in Asian and South American countries as well; Wielgosz

provides a comparison of Poland and South America in similar vein, and Majewska offers a study of Chicana feminism applied to understand the Polish–Ukrainian borderlands in a comparative study (Wielgosz 2007; Majewska 2011). The artists working here usually claim both geopolitical zones of “second-world East” and “first-world West”—they take inspiration from Malevich and Leger, and some, for example, Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, even worked with both of them.

When Sarah Wilson discusses the artwork of one of the most important Polish feminist artists, Zofia Kulik, she emphasizes the references to “Mother Russia”, to NATO, to the Ukrainian origins of the artist herself (Wilson 2022). I believe this is an important step—to situate Kulik’s work not just in the context of Polish and Western feminisms, but also in the East European and Soviet legacy (which should be distinguished one from another), which Wilson does. She also articulates references in Kulik’s work to a gendered version of weakness, which I find familiar, when she claims: “The Soviet demand for labour and self-sacrifice extends from soldiers, heroes and mothers to the everyday: Lajer-Burchart declares masochism to be at the core of Eastern European subjectivity” (Wilson 2022, p. 9). This statement is in turn very similar to Gilles Deleuze’s take on anti-fascism, because as he emphasized, masochism is a way to oppose totalitarianism (Deleuze 1991). Central Europe as a zone of “in-between-ness” also plays a role here, as we witness a version of masochism embedded in a regional power play.

Women’s situation in Central Europe was a particular mix of autonomy and traditionalism, independence and marginalization, not only in times of state communism, but also before and after. Sometimes—as in Poland and Ukraine—the emancipation of women in 19th and 20th century was intertwined with the fight for state independence or preservation of a specific local culture, among different women intellectuals and artists as diverse as Rosa Luxemburg, Katarzyna Kobro, Lesia Ukrainka or Maria Konopnicka, just to give some examples. I emphasize this point here because a politics of location has its influence on the gender dynamics found in the works of Olga Boznańska, Tamara Lempicki and Katarzyna Kobro, who each embody emancipated femininities and are all recognized today as central artistic figures. As they moved across the borders, they sometimes also claimed with political ambition the legacy of countries that had been erased from the geopolitical maps (as Poland and Ukraine were in 19th century), but only for some of them (Luxemburg and Kobro) did an internationalism become a central part of their legacy and political agenda.

In her important essay from 2005, Sianne Ngai returns to Theodor Adorno to give a new perspective on his vision of art opposing commodification. Discussing “cuteness” and other adjectives not often used to discuss avant-garde art, she addresses the asocial moment when art is least connected to society, or any specific cause, and offers this as a reason—by its detachment—to explain how art is most prone to actually having any transformative value (Ngai 2005). This important narrative, which often evokes the adjective “powerless”, sounds particularly familiar to those readers of East European dissident authors, who remember Vaclav Havel’s seminal essay *Power of the Powerless* from 1978, which inspired opposition members not just in Czechoslovakia, but also those in Poland who worked to create the “Solidarność” movement in 1980. Havel argues that resistance in times of totalitarianism, when the organisation of opposition may easily be dismantled and thus any political agency seems futile, can still be performed by small, common, unheroic gestures (Havel 1985). His examples of a grocery sales assistant not going to an official march or refusing to hang a national flag on a state holiday anticipate Michel de Certeau’s appreciation of the everyday as politically potent (de Certeau 1985). James Scott discusses similar gestures in his discussion of the “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985). It is important to notice how failure also plays a role of dismantling the vision of political agency as only heroic and successful (Halberstam 2010). Halberstam discusses how the failure to perform heroic, successful, powerful masculinity becomes a form of resistance to neoliberal productivity, as well as to gender binary divisions, in her analysis of popular culture films and cartoons, as well as performance art, where otherwise marginalized and excluded forms of identity immediately emerge in their diversity and gender non-conformity.



The notion of weak avant-garde, which I offer here, is one of a dialectic nature, regardless of its poststructuralist origins, or perhaps precisely because it has those, and not postmodern sources. In this, it embraces the two aspects separated by Ewa Płonowska-Ziarek in her discussion of feminist aesthetics, namely “contestation” and “melancholy” (Płonowska-Ziarek 2014, p. 106). The notion of supposed “belatedness” of feminist art, rightly criticized by Płonowska-Ziarek as a way of further marginalizing feminist art and theory by always situating it as posterior to the supposedly already existing canon, can be avoided, if instead of thinking of feminist art as reactive, we discuss a weak avant-garde as co-created by feminist artists that gained hegemony at the turn of the century, and thus replaces the neo-avant-garde discussed by Hal Foster.

The art historical canon has been criticized by various feminist and queer studies scholars for its preoccupation with the male gaze, the feminine nude, the dominance of heteronormative masculinity, as well as for the exclusion of women and LGBTQ+ artists and visual motifs (see Pollock 2003; Nead 1992; Jakubowska 2004; Leszkowicz 2010 and others). This criticism cannot, as Griselda Pollock rightly claims, be detached from the classist and racialized bias, which permeate the visual arts (Pollock 2003). The strategic use of the perspective of the weak and the “weapons of the weak”, as James Scott depicts them, in the context of art history, theory and practice, allows the making of a new canon, shaped in line with the above mentioned criticisms (Scott 1985). It also opens to the “art of failure”, as Jack Halberstam depicts it in their book, where art is discussed together with popular culture artefacts, such as cartoons or B-class films (Halberstam 2010). Ewa Partum’s unheroic undermining of her own prestige and position as an artist by foolish, silly gestures, such as the broken mirror dance in *Pirouette* or mimicking the drunk flirtation in *Stupid Woman* performances from early 1980s, strategically applies various versions of weakness, as well as critique of the patriarchal heroic strategies of earlier, male dominated avant-garde art (Majewska 2016b). Such changes of the canon are nevertheless not gender neutral; they are feminist not solely because feminist theorists and artists make them, but mainly because they stand up for what had been a feminist claim long before new avant-gardes emerged; namely, the demand to recognize reproductive labour, affect, weakness, receptiveness, care and other elements undervalued in patriarchal culture can be read as feminist, regardless of the author’s declaration.

Kasimir Malevich built large parts of his manifestos on the traditional vision of artist as a (male) genius—where this individual was opposed to the rest of the society in line with Romanticism, as a heroic defender of the true value of art and opposed to the “nannies of the institutionalized academia”, to those who are not Cezanne or van Gogh and lack the exceptionality, bravery and strength to break off from with the old (Malevich [1918] 2004, p. 66). He announced: “But the strong, the brave, are still standing in the field of art and demonstrate the flag of new ideas at the stakes of piled invectives” (Malevich [1918] 2004, p. 66). His manifestos from 1918, bluntly entitled “I came” or “The Breakthrough”, provide countless confirmations of the masculine, even *macho* character of those who make art and the avant-garde. The art historical tradition did not read between the lines of these and similar manifestos, and identified only with the figure of the artist who was deprived of any caring, tender, maintenance or reproductive agency: this male genius was solely a leader, a hero, a champion and a master of the domain of art. Theories of the avant-garde, built on such ground, obviously promoted male artists and masculine aspects of their art.

The canon of art, undermined and dismantled by various feminist authors as well as artists, has been preoccupied with the elements of avant-garde and classical art expressing male socialization in the idiom typical of the binary economy of gender divisions, whereas Mary Douglas and Pierre Bourdieu have shown that the “woman” is always a supplement added later, after the character of the “man” has already been built or recognized as central (Bourdieu 2004; Douglas 2007). To understand what is “our” human community, what is “ours”, and therefore good and legitimate, there needs to be a complementary counterpart of the “Other” against this figure, and this Otherness—even though this easily translates into the bad and illegitimate. Douglas emphasized the most intuitively accessible dialectics

between the “pure” and “polluted” as an exemplary binary distinction, which forms the divide between an “us” and a “them”. It finds its gendered versions in the “male” and “female” division, as well as what is considered “public” or “private”. The “man” is therefore bright, straight, sunny, rational and accountable, and becomes the illegitimate universal notion for “human”, while the “woman” is a secondary category, built always as the reverse of the dominant masculinity (Adorno and Horkheimer [1945] 2002). Douglas’s arguments continue in the work of Julia Kristeva, who focused on the “abject” as “in-between” subject and object but is (still) that which constitutes the “subject” and what (already) is its “object”, as she called this processual, undefined borderland (Kristeva 1982). This “in-betweenness”, discussed by Kristeva as the moment of the emergence of the subject, is one detectable both in the individual subject formation of a human being, and the emergence of a state or a culture. It is thus also applicable to cultural phenomena, such as gender divisions, and indeed the narrative offered in *Powers of Horror* remains one of the most convincing deductions of the hatred of what is “in-between”, to which trans- and non-binary persons and populations have been subjected. As such, the “in-between” offers a way of re-thinking the divisions between genders in the geopolitical world map, and observe, how in the second-world, semi-peripheries, or Central and (still) Eastern Europe, as well as other regions in similar marginal positions to the West, move between erasure, exclusion and marginalization of its art and artists. This “in-between-ness” can also be seen not just in artworks made by artists from the “Second World”, Poland and Eastern Europe included but also in other semi-peripheries. It can also be grasped in the very nature of what I call here “feminist avant-garde”, as the artists discussed are always already located in a plethora of in-between positions, namely those of East–West, feminine and feminist; canon and opposition, public and counterpublic, avant-garde and rejection of the male dominated culture. The weak avant-garde faces similar multiple states of “in-between-ness”, while at the same time this concept continues artistic traditions and contests them. It invites participation by offering a feminist version of itself but it also rejects the passivity of traditional audiences and responses.

Ewa Partum worked hard to situate herself and her work in the art historical canon, in Poland and then also internationally. Between 1969 and 1980, we mainly observe her efforts to become a recognized artist regardless of her gender as well as her artistic strategies, often weak and “everyday”, like her use of lipstick traces, or becoming older, simple political slogans and gestures, which are aimed to introduce femininity as well, as woman as artist, to the canon (Majewska 2016b). However, around 1982, under the Marshall State law that was introduced in Poland to erase “Solidarność” and the opposition, Partum began a series of artistic experiments undermining her just acquired serious position in art. In such projects as the performance *Stupid woman*, performed in 1983 and 1984, she acted as a drunk, irresponsible, silly person for some 45 min, flirting and dancing with the gallery in the audience, and then would suddenly stop doing it. In *Pirouette*, in which she would make the *Pirouette*, she made ice skating turns, wearing appropriate ice skating shoes and nothing else on the mirror placed on the floor. Not only was she unable to really make the pirouette, but she also conjured her own success in the future by performing an act of destroying the mirror: an act, believed to bring misfortune, not luck, to those who do it. These actions in performance are the best examples of such undermining. They can be seen as ironic, reflexive or even “cute”; however, what they do is also to replace heroism and bravery with weakness in avant-garde art practice. Mariola Przyjemska—a Polish artist of a slightly younger generation—has been for many years neglected by the art-critics. Izabela Kowalczyk, one of the most prominent feminist curators and art theorists, confesses in her text published recently by Zachęta, National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, that Przyjemska was for her not serious enough, as she sometimes would perform self-undermining gestures, such as going skiing rather than to her own exhibition’s opening, or being drunk in official discussions (Kowalczyk 2022). Now Kowalczyk sees this lack of seriousness as strategic, and the lack of didactic approach to the audience as healthy, which is also emphasized by Ewa Majewska in her book on Przyjemska, expressing the “emancipation

of spectators”, which Rancière positions as necessary in today’s societies of knowledge production, where artists direct attention to common practices instead of preaching the obvious (Majewska 2022; Rancière 2010). It is important to note that Przyjemska, who uses the pop-cultural references just as often as constructivist and abstractionist ones, also hides the subverting, de-commodifying aspects of her artwork behind a solid layer of “cute-ness”, as in bright colors, portraying the shiny objects of consumerist desires, such as lipsticks, perfume bottles or clothing labels. According to Majewska, it was some eight years before Naomi Klein’s seminal book *No Logo*, where the branding and marketing strategies of contemporary corporations are discussed as prominent examples of capitalism’s transition, in which the core of commodification and value production moves from the actual objects to their logotypes, advertisements and life-styles they supposedly generate (Klein 2000; Majewska 2022). Mariola Przyjemska began to enlarge clothing labels as early as in 1992, first on the painting *Phuket*, and later in the large size color photographs of the *Labels* series, exhibited as prints in art galleries, but also as a billboard (2003) and as images in the artist’s catalogue *D’arcy Art* (2001). Such preoccupation with the shiny colors, advertisement and commodification strategies was quite new in 1990s Poland, and thus Przyjemska’s artwork was either read as a statement of subversion of capitalist consumption, or as a proof of the artist’s seduction by the consumerist strategies. Such doubts are expressed by Kowalczyk, who, in her seminal book *Ciało i władza* (*The Body and Power*), expresses the need to discuss the artists using strategies embedded in popular culture and advertisement in another book (Kowalczyk 2002). This reluctance to situate herself outside of the spectacular society makes Przyjemska another case of a weak-avant-garde artist, as she risks being diagnosed as a willing servant of capitalist reification, yet what she nevertheless manages to achieve, as announced by several critics, is a subversion of the *status quo*, as well as building a community of city *flâneurs*, critically undermining the most subtle dimensions of commodity economy, gentrification and alienation (see Fudala 2021; Majewska 2022; Kowalczyk 2022). Przyjemska’s play with the cuteness of color, scale, cartoonish simplifications, sentimentality and soft, non-aggressive humor, marks her artwork since the late 1980s, making her an atypical critical artist, long forgotten and hidden in the shadow of her much more famous husband, the artist Zbigniew Libera, the author of *Lego Concentration Camp* (1996). The recent return of Przyjemska to the center of the Polish art world is in itself a weak solidarity performance, orchestrated by several feminist and queer curators and critics, trying to recognize her work as critical and avant-garde, while at the same time dismantling the existing definitions of critical art with such tools as the notions of cuteness, weakness and the everyday (see Majewska and Opalka 2022). The deconstruction of the heroic notion of avant-garde has a longer history.

In his discussion of the “neo-avant-garde” from the 1990s, Hal Foster critically addresses the past, early 20th century artists, and the account of the “classical” avant-garde, offered by Peter Burger, claiming: “The Burger narrative of direct cause and effect, of lapsarian before and after, of heroic origin and farcical repetition, which many of us recite with unconscious condescension toward the very possibility of contemporary art, this narrative will no longer do” (Foster 1994, p. 8). In such an account, the avant-gardes of such artists and groups, for example Malevich, Bauhaus and Kobra, are the old and heroic ones. Such an account of the early 20th century avant-garde differs from what Boris Groys offers in his article “Weak Universalism”, where he claims that what the art historians and critics portray as the heroic gestures was in fact rooted in the use of popular, unsophisticated references with the aim of making a version of a “community to come” and this is to be seen as a universalism of the weak—the uneducated, exploited and excluded (Groys 2010). This perspective is similar to Ngai’s, who claims that “these indices of art’s powerlessness in commodity society are reconfigured as indices of its distinctive ability to theorize powerlessness in general” (Ngai 2005, p. 845). Her claim, built on the revision of the neglect of approach to the art’s “lightheartedness” appreciates the cute, and other adjectives which I would like to call “unheroic” or “weak”, as those allowing the avant-garde practice, and theory, beyond the self-identification of the artist as genius. While Ngai’s emphasis consists

of defending such weakening as evasive to the ideological appropriations of self-declared criticism, as she follows Adorno, Marx and Althusser in their dismantling of the fake hopes of the self-righteous critics of commodification, who forget about their own implication in the capitalist reproduction, my accent is more on gender and geopolitical specificity. Thus, I would like to argue, in line with Spivak and Pollock cited above, that the gendered, racialized and colonial inequalities need to be embraced in critical art and practice, as it is not solely the market mechanisms of exploitation, but also those of exclusion, alienation and marginalization which account for global inequalities. This is why I think the “weak” of avant-garde theory and practice is often those excluded because of their ethnicity, sexuality, gender or geopolitical location. Foster, who speaks of the neo avant-garde in opposition to the earlier, heroic canon, did not notice the gender and racialized exclusions in the first texts he wrote about it. What he calls “neo- avant-garde” applies new and different tools—irony and distance—and embraces its own weaknesses and failures. This argument, however, does not pay sufficient attention to the structural inequalities, which have become visible in the struggles for recognition of those oppressed and marginalized after WWII. It is thus not just because of the popularity of postmodernism, but also and perhaps more importantly because of the emancipatory claims of women, of the colonized and racialized groups and individuals, and because of the LGBTQAI+ rights struggles, that we witness new changes of the avant-garde trends, to those depicted by Foster.

The connection between postmodern irony or pastiche and embracing the difference between the marginalized and the hegemonic expressions in art and culture has also been discussed by bell hooks, who, contrary to many feminist Afro-American authors on the left, appreciated the possibility of speaking one’s own particular dialect offered by postmodernism, as well as welcoming the irreducible specificity of minoritarian expressions (Hooks 2000). Without a strong emphasis on inequality, already embedded in such difference, the shift of the avant-garde art from its heroic version to the neo-avant-garde would not be so convincing and persistent. In LGBTQAI+ rights struggles, we witness further changes of the avant-garde trends.

Through such notions as the “weak universality” of the avant-garde, suggested by Boris Groys or the “cuteness of the avant-garde” developed by Sianne Ngai, we enter an entirely new realm of possibilities of de- and re-constructing the art-historical canon, as well as a new perspective on how future avant-gardes can be made (Groys 2010; Ngai 2005). It is not by accident, I believe, that Groys discusses mainly Russian art while building his notion of weak universality, while Ngai takes most of her examples from Asian art and popular culture. I believe that my own choice to discuss mainly women artists from Poland is also not accidental—all these choices and discussions would simply be impossible before postcolonial and anti-colonial struggles and the decolonization, combined with the emergence of feminist, antiracist and LGBTQAI+ struggles from the 1960s. Ignoring those emancipatory movements can, and I believe should, be seen as yet another effort by a Western Center to forget the politics of location and to re-establish the hegemony of both the Western subject as well as the male gaze, which can very well be avoided.

Foster distinguishes the irony of the neo- avant-garde from the one-to-one repetitions of the hysteric and otherwise emotionally loaded gestures in the practice of the earlier avant-garde, as he claims: “Such art often invokes different, even incommensurate models of practice, but less to act them out in a hysterical pastiche (as in much art in the 1980s) than to work them through to a reflexive way of working—to turn the contradictions inscribed in these models into a critical consciousness of history, artistic and otherwise” (Foster 1994, p. 8). I believe that the general sense of the transformation depicted by Foster between the older and new avant-garde practice is correct; however, I do not think it is just the desire to be reflexive that fuels such a shift. In line with Groys, this transition was made possible by the desire to build universality and community, which I would gladly call efforts of solidarity, using this name deliberately to connect them to an emancipatory movement (Solidarność) located in Gdańsk. This is the city where I was born and grew up. Such claim for a different kind of avant-garde, not just its irony to recognition, but also to



solidarity, is not merely reflexive, because this is not merely an intellectual reflex against commodification, but also an affective form of collective anti-hegemonic agency, as Emile Durkheim explained in his definition of how solidarity works—it is not just intellectual, but also an affective form of agency (Durkheim [1893] 1966).

The political dimension of the weak avant-garde is in many respects feminist, as it decolonizes the geopolitical distinctions, dismantles the hegemony of male-fashioned artist, as well as such versions of avant-garde. Its discussion is therefore a version of feminist aesthetics, working independently to create the world without domination, as Plonowska-Ziarek suggests feminism tries to do (Plonowska-Ziarek 2014). She rightly argues that feminist and queer melancholia, as well as contestation, can very well be co-opted by “neoliberal resilience” or “normative discourses of vulnerability”, as I indicate above, but the weak avant-garde might stand a chance to avoid such hostile takeover by several acute mechanisms aimed at resisting commodification. The in-betweenness, understood as abject, is one of such mechanisms, making it much harder to consume or understand in smooth systems of neoliberal productivity. Another is the subversive, detouring mechanisms of Situationist subverting of the *status quo* and its communications. Another is constant self-redefinition and undermining of each definition and yet another one is the recognition of the everyday and the common, not just as ordinary, but also as collective. The ability of weak avant-garde artists and their works to invite audiences to collective experience of aesthetics and by that also of the social, provides a necessary readiness for transformative work.

With these ideas of affect and emotion, we approach another important dimension of feminist revision of art and culture, which adds to what we might see as feminist aesthetics, but also constitutes an important part of what could be called the feminist avant-garde. In the rejection of the patriarchal exclusion of affect, feminist and queer scholars and artists undermine the exclusion of emotions, arguing, like bell hooks, that it wounds the society as a whole, men included, to be cut from emotions, or—like the Carol Gilligan—that entire divisions in ethics and politics are maintained in their privileging of men, because due to their exclusion or marginalization, emotions are excluded or marginalized and this should be changed (see Majewska 2016a). The contemporary avant-garde is therefore not just neo-, as it cannot limit itself to being reflexive, nor is it merely cute, because it is not just trying to avoid commodification; it also needs to actively work against colonialism, racism, sexism and misogyny. This would mean, therefore, in order to address the feminist aesthetics and feminist avant-garde in their theoretical, as well as practical forms, we need to go beyond the reflexive and uncommodified, and search for the affective, egalitarian, decolonializing, decolonial and relational as well as peripheral. The necessary critiques of heroism provided by Ngai and Foster need to be strengthened by attention to how weakness, solidarity and universality operate, in order to build a comprehensive and legitimate definition of both a feminist avant-garde as well as a feminist aesthetics capable of reading its value systems.

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