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Exhibiting Women's Art in Post-War Europe

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Abstract

This essay elaborates on women-only shows organized in post-war Europe by the associations of (women) artists that – as initial research has shown – were major initiators of this type of exhibitions during the period. It proposes a comparative analysis of operations of this type of association in three countries whose situations during and after the war differed considerably: Austria, France and Poland. The geopolitical positions of these countries and the gender politics they implemented influenced the operation of (women) artists' associations and the organization of their annual exhibitions, but also the place they occupy in the art historical narratives.

Résumé

Cet essai s'intéresse aux expositions de femmes artistes organisées dans l'Europe de l'après-guerre par les associations d'artistes (femmes), qui – comme l'ont montré les premières recherches – ont été les principales initiatrices de ces expositions durant cette période. L'article propose une analyse comparative des activités de ce type d'associations dans trois pays dont la situation pendant et après la guerre était sensiblement différente : l'Autriche, la France et la Pologne. La position géopolitique de ces pays et la politique de genre qu'ils ont mises en œuvre ont influencé le fonctionnement des associations analysées et l'organisation de leurs expositions annuelles, mais aussi la place qu'elles occupent dans l'histoire de l'art.

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My text is derived from a research project entitled *History of all-women exhibitions in Poland*, conducted in the years 2014-2017 at the Department of Art History at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań.¹ Our first task was to gather information regarding all collective women's art exhibitions that have been organized in Poland and to create a catalog that would be as complete as possible.² The second task was to gather archival materials related to the exhibitions, such as catalogs, photographs and press articles. Using these materials, we analyzed exhibitions with the basic aim of answering one question: what reasons have been behind the organization of all-women exhibitions? Analysis of multiple applications of this exhibition concept demonstrated that there exists as much consistency as diversity in terms of the reasons for organizing all-women exhibitions, and that to a considerable degree these are related to who organizes the show and how the organizers (whether individuals or groups) are positioned in the art field.³

Our research revealed that women-only shows have been organized since late 19th century up to today, with varying degrees of intensity, but nevertheless continually. This renders them, and the gender-based separationism upon which they rest, one of the most constant elements of the history of women's art. However, existing literature does not reflect that continuity. Publications on women's art and the history of all-women exhibitions is essentially divided into two parts, intimately related to two women's movements. The first concentrates on early all-women exhibitions, contextualized within the processes of professionalization of women's artistic activities.⁴ The chronological scope of these studies varies, with some investigating the period leading up to World War I, and sometimes until World War II. The

second focus of the history of all-women exhibitions in the existing literature concentrates on feminist curatorial practices, both contemporary and from the relatively recent past (the last 40-50 years, that is, from the period that started with the so-called second-wave feminism).⁵ The period between the end of World War II and the development of feminist exhibition initiatives in the 1970s remains under-researched. When one reads histories of women artists and more specifically of women-only art activities in Europe, the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s seem to be devoid of such exhibitions.

Indeed, the impetus for women-only exhibitions organized in post-war Europe contrasted markedly with that of the 1930s, which saw the organization of some big international exhibitions such as *Exposition d'œuvres de femmes artistes* (1933 in Amsterdam; 1934 in Warsaw) and *Les femmes artistes d'Europe exposent au Musée du Jeu de Paume* (Paris, 1937); moreover, national shows at this time aimed to gather large numbers of important female artists. In the aftermath of World War II, one can hardly find such events. No comprehensive art-historical or sociological study has been undertaken to explain the dynamics of all-women exhibitions, yet the aforementioned research project on all-women exhibitions in Poland illuminated that a number of all-women art initiatives, character of exhibitions, and also the place they occupy in art history, the history of women artists as well, all this is to a considerable degree dependent on two interrelated factors: the country's prevailing sociopolitical situation at the given time, and the extent of development of women's emancipatory discourse and activism. All-women art initiatives were and remain more frequent, more intensive, and more spectacular at times when the emancipatory discourse flourishes

¹ The project was financed by the Polish National Science Centre (2013/09/B/HS2/02065). The research team: Agata Jakubowska (project leader), Joanna Bojda (until 2015), Luiza Kempnińska (from 2015), Karolina Rosiejka, and Karolina Staszak.

² The catalog is published at www.wystawy kobiet.amu.edu.pl. During the realization of the project we quickly became aware that such a catalog can never be considered complete: we can never know whether we have found information about all women-only art exhibitions.

³ Agata Jakubowska, Luiza Kempnińska, and Karolina Rosiejka, *All-Women Exhibitions as Tactics and Strategies in the Field of Art*, submitted.

⁴ See e.g. Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women's Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Laura R. Prieto, *At Home in*

the Studio. The Professionalization of Women Artists in America (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Chariklia-Glafki Gotsi, "Feminist art", "female art", "sexless art" in a modernist context: women's collective exhibitions in Greece, 1925-1937," in *Women's Contributions to Visual Culture, 1918-1939*, ed. Karen E. Brown (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 37-55.

⁵ See e.g. Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, *Politics in A Glass Case: Feminism, Curating and Art Exhibitions 1970-2010* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Katrin Kivimaa, ed., *Working with Feminism Curating and Exhibitions in Eastern Europe* (Tallinn: Tallinn University Press, 2013).

and when various political actions are being undertaken by women. This is true even if the exhibitions are not directly related to these actions (indeed, prior to the 1970s, the exhibitions were rarely thematic).

This is also the case of Poland, and at the outset of the above-mentioned research on all-women exhibitions in this country, we were convinced that collective women exhibitions were not organized in post-war Poland. No exhibitions of that type were mentioned in the narratives on art from that period, neither in general nor in texts on specific female artists. Thus it was very surprising for us to find information on a series of all-women exhibitions organized in communist Poland in the 1950s by the Association of Polish Artists, more precisely by its regional branches.⁶ This “discovery” encouraged me to take a closer look at all-women art initiatives in the post-war period in other European countries.⁷ I focus on three countries: Austria, France and Poland. Poland, as indicated above, was my starting point and I wanted to compare it with other countries where the situation during and after the war differed considerably. My choice has fallen on France and Austria. Following the types of exhibitions organized in Poland at that time – that is, shows prepared by the Association of Polish Artists – I concentrated on the activities of similar associations. Another reason for focusing on activities of women’s artists’ associations was that the initial research indicated that they were major initiators and organizers of all-women shows during and after World War II.

Women artists associations and gender politics in the aftermath of World War II

When analyzing (dis)similarities between the post-war situations in different countries, a number of factors must be taken into consideration, including

the degree to which the war and its associated devastation influenced the art world, restricting the operation of associations that had previously been active. The degree to which warfare and the politics of the occupation influenced everyday life (as well as that of the artists) and the functioning of relevant institutions affected the possibility of organizing exhibitions. In studying the ability of initiatives to organize all-women exhibitions, it is also extremely important to consider the gender politics of the post-war governments.

In writing about the situation in Austria of the time, Maria Mesner has claimed that enormous disruptions of gender relations during World War II and its aftermath “were followed by a nearly ubiquitous presence of the nuclear family with its bi-polar, complementary gender roles.”⁸ The policies of the ruling parties – especially the Catholic, conservative People’s Party – were aimed at increasing the birth rate and reiterating the importance of the family by strengthening its traditional structure. The law maintained the position of the father as the head of the family, with the wife and children subjected to him. The situation was similar in France. Although women gained voting rights in 1944 (in Austria and Poland this had occurred much earlier, in 1918), social politics were aimed at restoring the traditional family. In 1945 a law was introduced that enabled the husband to veto his wife’s desire to work (a right that would remain in effect until 1965), and the husband remained the legal head of the family until 1970.⁹ Gender politics in communist Poland were different, at least at the beginning of the period studied within this article. After the war, the ruling party aimed to introduce social, political and economic equality for women, and in 1945, as a result of the unification of law and its adaptation to the new socialist reality, regulations were introduced that aligned the positions of men and women in marriage, including in relation to

⁶ Two exhibitions organized in the National Museum in Poznań and in the National Museum in Gdańsk in 1975, on the occasion of the International Women’s Year, were another surprise.

⁷ Two chronological frames intersect in this text: a post-war period that refers to shorter or longer periods in different countries and the women movements that indicate the time around 1970 as revolutionary. Although I make references to the

1970s, as the decade when women’s art entered the new era, in this text I am interested basically in the period ending around 1960.

⁸ Maria Mesner, “Family Values: Discourses and Policies in Postwar Austria,” http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/fileadmin/media/pdf/mesner_familyvalues.pdf (09.02.2013)

⁹ Sarah Fishman, *From Vichy to the Sexual Revolution: Gender and Family Life in Postwar France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

children. However, when the Stalinist period came to an end in the mid-1950s, the loosening of state terror was accompanied by a return to traditional gender roles. In Poland, the popular slogan “Women on tractors” was replaced by “Irene, go home!” after the title of a film of 1955.¹⁰

The post-war situation in Poland would nevertheless appear more favorable for women, in comparison to France and Austria, if not for the fact that the ruling communist party restricted all grassroots initiatives. In the interwar period, a very active Association of Polish Women Artists functioned in Lviv (created in 1917). The war put an end to its existence. Lviv ceased to belong to Poland and members of the Association dispersed. In communist Poland, the operation of all associations was strictly regulated by the ruling party. Indeed, only one artists’ association was accepted: the Association of Polish Artists, which had been established in 1911 and is still active today. No association of women artists existed during the period.¹¹ In 1951, within a period of severe Stalinism, the Association of Polish Artists took the initiative to organize all-women exhibitions. They were intended to be organized regularly, every year, by regional branches of the Association, and they formed part of the celebrations of International Women’s Day (an opening was usually organized on March 8). In most regional branches of the Association, just one or two such exhibitions were organized, and in Poznań they continued to be organized until 1957. These exhibitions were organized by the government-controlled structure and their goals reflected the program of the party. At that time, this included encouragement for women to work professionally and an acknowledgment of women’s role in building the new socialist country. The organization of these exhibitions stopped during the period of de-Stalinization in the second half of the 1950s, which, as has already been stated, manifested itself in

greater emphasis on women’s role in the household and their “natural” vocation as mothers.¹²

The situation was completely different in Austria and France, where women organized themselves within structures that aimed to support only women artists. In both countries, these structures were created at the turn of the 20th century and managed to operate for many decades. However, they faced different difficulties in the post-war period and, what is crucial for their place in the history of women’s art, were met with distinct interest from younger generations of artists and scholars.

Die Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs (VBKÖ) [The Austrian Association of Women Artists] was established in 1910. In 1938 the VBKÖ made the decision to implement National Socialist parameters into the association’s agendas (requiring changes to its statue and name, as well as the “cleansing” of its list of members), and it remained active, including by organizing exhibitions during World War II. Operations continued after the war, albeit with some difficulties regarding issues such as its exhibition venue. This association regularly organized its shows, sometimes even with international cooperation, and participated in bigger exhibitions in Vienna, such as those of the “Das gute Bild fuer jeden” project. L’Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs (UFPS) [The Union of Women Painters and Sculptors] was active in France from 1881 until the 1980s. The Union put its activities on hold at the beginning of World War II, but returned to organizing its annual exhibitions in 1944, with the 60th annual exhibition in the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.¹³ Even when it was inactive, its members exhibited at other salons in Paris during the war years, which “followed one after another ‘almost without interruption – just for a time it takes for a more or less neat hanging’.”¹⁴ It was another women’s art initiative, Femmes Artistes Modernes

¹⁰ Małgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). *Irene, go home*, dir. Jan Fethke, 1955.

¹¹ After World War II the Polish Women’s League (created in 1913) was the only female organization permitted by the communist ruling party and it was controlled by it. Although it was not an association of women artists it co-organized one all-women exhibition, the only nationwide exhibition of the time: *Women Fighting for Peace* in Pałac Sztuki [Palace of Art] in Cracow in 1952.

¹² Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization*, 313.

¹³ 14 January-14 February 1944.

¹⁴ Catherine Gonnard and Élisabeth Lebovici, *Femmes/artistes, artistes femmes. Paris, de 1880 à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2007), 226. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

(FAM), which suspended its work during World War II and did not resume operations even after the war had ended.¹⁵

Women-only exhibitions in art historical narratives

What all of these women-only exhibitions organized by (women) artists’ associations in the post-war period have in common is, among other things, their absence from art historical narratives, including those dealing with women artists. This is perhaps most surprising in the case of the VBKÖ, as it is still active and its archives exist. Its members devote considerable energy to writing and analyzing the Association’s history. In 2011, *100 Jahre/Years VBKÖ Festshrift* was published, edited by Rudolfine Lackner, who was President of the VBKÖ, at the time.¹⁶ It included texts devoted to different periods of the VBKÖ’s activity. A reading of this *Festshrift*, but also of other texts and interviews written by the Association’s running committee members,¹⁷ makes clear that substantial attention is paid to how best to cope with the Association’s Nazi past. Indeed, discussions center on the fact that VBKÖ members who were active during the Nazi period remained present in the Association several decades later, often in positions of authority.¹⁸ Moreover, “the VBKÖ obviously felt no further need to reflect on its own doings and clearly renounce the association’s participation in the Nazi regime.”¹⁹ The everyday activities of the Association during and after World War II, such as the organization of annual exhibitions, did not represent topics of interest among the members of the VBKÖ, who instead initially concentrated on addressing the Association’s Nazi past. The meaningful change in this policy is highlighted in the doctoral thesis recently defended (December

2017) by Rudolphine Lackner, in which she discusses the operations of the VBKÖ, including in the post-war period.²⁰

Politics also influenced the fact that the post-war women-only exhibitions organized in Poland in the 1950s did not find their place in the history of women’s art. They are not discussed; they are not even mentioned. Their connections with the policies of the communist, pro-Stalinist government certainly represent a key factor. They do not appear to have been bottom-up initiatives, but an element of the politics of the ruling party. The Stalinist authorities were seemingly favorable towards women, also artists, in terms of creating possibilities for their professional development. “Seemingly” because emancipatory options were restricted to those corresponding with the government’s policy.

This kind of political objection does not refer to the activities of the UFPS. Some of the UFPS’s members were active in the resistance. Yet, the post-war annual exhibitions organized by the association are also absent from the art historical narratives. What is more, publications devoted to or referring to the Union’s history only describe its activities in the period stretching from its establishment until the outbreak of World War II (sometimes only until the outbreak of the Great War). Where later operations are mentioned, it is in the context of the boom of all-women exhibitions in the 1970s.²¹ This general absence is also evident in a relatively recent publication entitled *Dictionnaire de l’Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs (1882-1965)*.²² This three-volume publication includes names of all of the artists who exhibited at the Union’s salons and the titles of their works. It appears potentially useful to researchers seeking information on the post-war activities of the association, as it extends until 1965. However, it is in reality

¹⁵ Paula J. Birnbaum, *Women Artists in Interwar France: Framing Femininities* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Rudolfine Lackner, ed., *100 Jahre/Years VBKÖ Festshrift*. (Wien: VBKÖ, 2011)

¹⁷ See e.g. Nina Hoechtl and Julia Wiegler, “The VBKÖ’s Archive as a Site of Political Confrontation, or How Can You Sing Out of Tune?,” in *All-Women Art. Spaces in Europe in the long 1970s*, Agata Jakubowska and Katy Deepwell, eds., (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 119-142.

¹⁸ For example Grete Kmentt-Montandon (1893-1986) was the Vice-President from 1940 and the President from 1944 until 1968. Gertrude Stöhr (1915-1984), who ran the association during the 1970s is mentioned as a participating artist in the annual VBKÖ exhibition catalogs of 1942 and 1944.

¹⁹ Hoechtl, Wiegler, “The VBKÖ’s Archive as a Site of Political Confrontation,” 129.

²⁰ Rudolfine Lackner, “Für die lange Revolution! Die Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen. Österreichs 1910-1985 und der Verband bildender Künstlerinnen und Kunsthandwerkerinnen Wiener Frauenkunst. 1926-1938/1946-1956. Eine Re-/Konstruktion” (PhD diss., Wien Universität, 2017).

²¹ Fabienne Dumont, *Des sorcières comme les autres. Artistes et féministes dans la France des années 1970* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014).

²² *Dictionnaire de l’Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs (1882-1965)*, Pierre Sanchez, ed. (Dijon: L’échelle de Jacob, 2010).

quite disappointing, as in spite of its data collection, the historical introductory essay written by Chantal Beauvalot only concentrates on the period leading up to the beginning of World War II. The Union’s post-war activities are mentioned only in brief. Beauvalot writes: “The exhibitions lasted until 1987. But this was not really the time for salons: [...]. Like many other artistic societies, the Union had, moreover, settled in a daily routine: the heroic age has passed.”²³

Modernism versus traditionalism

The way Chantal Beauvalot concludes her text – with the words “the heroic age has passed” – is symptomatic of the position of women artists’ associations and of all-women exhibitions in the post-war period. They are essentially considered to have been important in the period of the professionalization of women artists (the beginning of the 20th century) and only regain their importance in the 1970s. Their post-World War II activity is ignored because it is not groundbreaking and influential. Annual exhibitions were not spectacular but casual. Women artists’ associations and the exhibitions they organized did not lose their *raison d’être*, the promotion of women artists and their establishment in the art world (if simply to enable women artists to earn their living from art), yet their ambitions were rather small.

Another reason for the loss of significance or lack of interest within the art world in women artists’ associations was that, generally speaking, they grouped artists who were interested in traditional art, and not in new tendencies. Already during the interwar period, avant-garde women artists basically did not cooperate with their female colleagues in joint efforts to promote women’s art, and associations became more and more

conservative. This tendency was also present in the post-war period: women artists who grouped and exhibited together did not belong to progressive art movements (although this was to change in the 1970s, when multiple avant-garde all-women exhibitions were organized).²⁴

Another narrative on women artists in post-war France can be instructive here. It comes from a book written by Catherine Gonnard and Élisabeth Lebovici, published in 2007: *Femmes/artistes, artistes femmes. Paris, de 1880 à nos jours*. When Gonnard and Lebovici describe the Union’s operations in Paris and the renewal of its activities in 1944, they write that:

...among the women artists, those who actually exhibit in these Salons [Salons active during World War II] [...] are those who resigned themselves to the conventions advocated by the Society of women painters: figurative while allowing some well pacified loans from the hated modernity [...] all this continued quietly after the Liberation.²⁵

As they indicate, the Union at that time did not attract the attention “of any of the women we have just mentioned,”²⁶ implying any of the women worth being inscribed into the history of post-war Paris.²⁷ The Union’s war and post-war activities are mentioned in brief, but dismissed on a stylistic basis, for failing to be sufficiently modern or avant-garde.

The tension between modernism and traditionalism is also part of the post-war history of the VBKÖ. Most critics have deliberated on the extent to which the works by its members represented “Traditionsgebundenheit” (confinement to tradition).²⁸ Some have attempted to prove that women artists belonging to the VBKÖ were also interested in more contemporary art styles. They argued that its exhibitions have not been limited to

²³ Chantal Beauvalot, “Honneur aux femmes ! Jalons pour comprendre la naissance et le fonctionnement de la société de l’Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs,” in: *Dictionnaire de l’Union*.

²⁴ On the relationship between avant-garde and feminist art see e.g. Gabriele Schor, *Feminist Avantgarde: Art of the 1970s* (Munich; Londres; New York: Prestel; Wien: Verbund AG, The Sammlung Verbund Collection, 2016). It is necessary to underline that the number of materials related to these exhibitions is scarce, especially in terms of photographs. We are lucky if we find catalogs and press articles. The catalogs at this time were devoid of images, the press articles included few at best. The artists exhibiting at these shows did not belong to the canon and their oeuvre is not elaborated. For that reason it is practically impossible to reconstruct the works

exhibited, so I do not offer my analysis of the works shown, but refer to discussions made by others.

²⁵ Gonnard, Lebovici, *Femmes/artistes*, 226.

²⁶ Gonnard, Lebovici, *Femmes/artistes*, 239.

²⁷ Evidence for this includes an opinion from an interview with Geneviève Asse who said “Une fois ou deux, j’ai visité les Salons de femmes peintres. S’il y avait eu un choix, j’aurais pu trouver cela très intéressant, mais ce n’était pas le cas. On pouvait se retrouver à côté d’un bouquet de fleurs sans qualités ou d’un chromo.” In: Gonnard, Lebovici, *Femmes/artistes*, 270.

²⁸ Lackner, “Für die lange Revolution!,” 134-140.

conventional portraits and landscapes, but that abstract paintings could be seen as well. Yet, the dominant tone of the press was (and becoming more and more intense over time) that the VBKÖ did not only distance itself from modern art, but that “the subjects of the oil paintings and graphics seem to come from a world which finds itself under a glass cover.”²⁹

The reception of all-women exhibitions organized in Poland in the 1950s should be seen in a different context, that of the socialist realism imposed by the ruling party of the time being the only acceptable art style. In the first half of the 1950s, any modernity was dismissed; all-women exhibitions were not exceptional in this regard. The discussion did not deal with the problem of modern versus traditional, but instead concentrated on whether artists followed the directions of the socialist realism doctrine, which focused upon realism and the avoidance of formalism (in fact, any modern artistic style), and emphasized themes crucial to the party, such as labor and peace. One critic writing in 1957 during the de-Stalinization period observed that

...in the period when every free creative thought was constrained by top-down rigors being in force [...], there was no question of bold invention, of imaginativeness, of searching for their own ways and of any originality. Under these conditions, the women artists did not manage to succeed in organizing exhibitions that would be interesting and standing at the right level.³⁰

The critic wrote this on the occasion of the seventh exhibition of women artists organized by the Artists’ Association in Poznań. He enjoyed the show, regarding it as the best of all those organized. Paradoxically it was to be the last one.

Conclusion

My essay has aimed to fill in the blank pages in the history of all-women exhibitions by elaborating on women’s shows organized by the associations of

(women) artists in post-war Europe. I have presented examples from only three countries and so any general conclusions based on this selection would be dubious, and could possibly be undermined by new examples from other countries. I will take a risk and say that in post-war Europe, all-women exhibitions were organized, but that the number of these exhibitions was relatively small, they did not form part of the main artistic discourse, and they did not attract those women artists that would turn out to be the most influential. Thus they did not form a revolution that was missed or ignored by the art world. The post-war exhibitions organized by associations belonged to the pre-war tradition of separatory art initiatives: they continued the work of supporting women artists in selling their works rather than raising women’s issues. They did this consequently for many years. This last remark stimulates us to confront the crucial difference among the examples discussed in this text, as it refers only to the associations active in Austria and France, and not the one operating in Poland. The geopolitical positions of these countries during World War II and subsequently, and the gender politics they implemented, influenced the organization of all-women exhibitions. It also affected the development of women-only shows in the 1970s. The post-war exhibitions did not become a basis for feminist shows, but it would be worth considering in a future study the extent to which this tradition of cooperation of women artists, which existed in Austria and France but not in Poland, influenced the development (or lack) of initiatives in the 1970s.

My objective is to advocate for further studies of post-war initiatives for women’s art, at both a national and international level, and above all from the comparative perspective I have proposed here. When observed from a distance these initiatives seem to have developed similarly in different countries – that is, the intensive development of all-women art initiatives in the 1930s was followed by

²⁹ Lackner, “Für die lange Revolution!,” 142.

³⁰ Tadeusz Pasikowski, “Dwa ukłony-dwie pochwały. Z wędrówek po wystawowych salach,” *Gazeta Poznańska*, March 23, 1957.

a significant decrease in a number of joint events, growing again in the 1970s – and all suffered from a lack of interest amongst those creating art-historical narratives. A closer look and a juxtaposition of operations of several associations does not impair these general assumptions, yet it significantly adds nuance to the image and prevents the history of women artists from becoming coherent yet false.