Gendered Histories / Memories of Labour in (Post-) Communist Romania and Former Czechoslovakia Illuminated through Artistic Production

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Abstract: This paper addresses a lacuna in the history and memory of (post-) communist women’s labour. It aims to investigate how and to what ends the artistic production from Romania and the former Czechoslovakia illuminate “forgotten” histories of women’s labour, reclaiming at the same time a public sphere where “Her-stories” and labour-related memories can be materialized for critical-political ends. In the cultural memory of the transition from communism to democracy and capitalism, certain lieux de mémoire (places of memory) have been preserved and materialized in official cultural formats, whereas other places of memory (both physical and mental) are disregarded and condemned to become lieux d’oubli (sites of forgetting). More often than not, both in the Romanian and the former Czechoslovakian context, the histories and memories of women’s labour are deemed “unworthy” of remembrance and tend to be obscured from the official cultures of remembrance and their institutions. As this paper argues, although the official narratives of various work environments from Eastern European regions tend to conceal the presence of women and lack a comprehensive historiography on women and gender some artistic productions enact “feminist counter-narratives” and counter-memories for political ends. We claim that the political dimension of these artistic productions should not be underestimated. These feminist artworks attempt to combine a politics of memory, activism, a history from below, and artistry to reach political ambitions. At a theoretical level, this paper is informed by Amy Mullin’s considerations on feminist artistic production and the political imagination. In feminist art, which attempts to revive the memory of women’s labour, the political imagination plays a crucial role in fostering community knowledge and experiential knowledge through simultaneously envisioning more equitable futures (economical, political, social) for both men and women.

Keywords: gendered labour, women’s work, gendered histories, feminist art, women’s memories.
Introduction

As Jill Massino and Shana Penn have demonstrated, since the fall of state socialism in Eastern Europe, the studies dedicated to gender politics and the everyday lives of women under state socialism have been rather scarce (Jill and Shanna, 2009). Among these general topics, one particular issue will be the main focus of this paper: gendered history of labour in (post-) communist Romania and former Czechoslovakia and the ways in which these histories are displayed in contemporary feminist art production. By “feminist art” we mean artistic creations produced by both men and women artists focusing on women’s experiences and their struggle. Thus, the question that this paper addresses is how contemporary art tackles the topic of women’s work after the collapse of state socialism and in what ways. Thus, this paper will reveal that feminist contemporary art from these regions attempts to illuminate the forgotten histories of women’s labour, reclaiming a public sphere where “her stories” and work-related memories can be materialized for critical-political ends.¹ At the same time, these two cases (Romania and former Czechoslovakia) represent opposite poles on a virtual scale of European socialist regimes in terms of their social structure and modernization level. In this respect, Kitschelt considers Romania an example of a patrimonial communist regime type while Czechoslovakia represents a bureaucratic-authoritarian one. This typology takes many factors into account, such as literacy, urbanisation, the political activity of the working classes, industrialization and so on. The implications this typology bears for women’s emancipation are nevertheless unclear and not sufficiently dealt with².

On a theoretical level, this paper is informed by Amy Mullin’s considerations of feminist artistic production and the political imagination, especially because this paper’s aim is to explore instances of women’s labour under state socialism from the perspective of art theory, critical theory and cultural memory (Mullin, 2003). Women’s liberation through equal work or women’s refusal of this “liberatory” myth has materialized in East European regions in various forms of artistic memory. Since a comprehensive gendered history of labour is still under construction in the region, it is art’s task to highlight these silenced and under-researched histories of women’s working lives

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both during state socialism and after its collapse. Before elaborating on artistic works dealing with gender and labour history, some preliminary remarks are necessary. What does “work” mean as an organizing concept from the perspective of a gendered history of labour? To what extent can we speak of implicit and explicit conceptualizations of “work” under state socialism and beyond? According to several historians of labour, the definition of “work” should be broadened to accommodate both reproductive labour (including household tasks and child care) and production-oriented labour (Cobble, 1991; Baron, 1991). If we take a closer look at the great deal of handwork practices (from embroidery and knitting to house decorating and cleaning), we notice the statements that these hand-crafted objects make; this reminds us that a whole version of politics from below, labour history and artistry still remain veiled. The relationship between work and non-work spheres has been characterized theoretically by various structural patterns (e.g. the spill over model and the compensation model theorized by Wilensky in 1960 or the segmentation model theorized by Dubin in 1958 and 1973). Since little empirical research has been done on the relationship between work, leisure and politics (especially among handwork practices), an additional exploration into the neglected aspects of the social environment of “home” and family needs to be performed. Some feminist voices oppose reproductive work on the grounds that it is unpaid labour and therefore a source of capitalist accumulation. For example, Silvia Federici offers a similar perspective in a lecture from 2006 (Precarious Labour and Reproductive Work); yet, she also stresses that “once we say that reproductive work is a terrain of struggle, we have to first immediately confront the question of how we struggle on this terrain without destroying the people you care for. This is a problem mothers, as well as teachers and nurses, know very well.” All research into labour should not be gender neutral. Are “family” and “home” non-work domains? What is the relationship between work and leisure? What subjectivities get produced through work? How are the concepts of “work” and “non-work” deliberated? These questions need to be

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3The spillover model portraying the relationship between leisure and work (Wilensky, 1960) suggests that the nature of one’s work experiences are transferred into the non-work area, affecting one’s behavior and attitudes in that domain. The compensation model (Wilensky, 1960) refers to workers who compensate in their choice of non-work activities their lack of interest or satisfaction at work. Unlike these two models, the segmentation model (Dubin, 1958, 1973) claims that one’s work and non-work domains of activities are separate entities and no relationship between the two can be established.

answered if an exhaustive account of reproductive work, both under state socialism and beyond, is to be offered.

After the fall of state socialism, a certain interest arose among feminist artists in regards to highlighting the challenges experienced by women in traditionally feminized industries (e.g. the garment and textile industry, decorative pottery) and other labour markets. As the case studies of artistic production analysed in what follows will demonstrate, women’s labour and their work-related lives are not completely overlooked in contemporary art. Although the official narratives of various work environments from East European regions tend to mask women’s presence, a historiography that has yet to be written, some artistic productions enact “feminist counter-narratives” (Hugill, 2015) and counter-memories. In this artistic memory, the “political imagination” (Mullin’s term 2003) plays a crucial role. These feminist artworks attempt to combine a politics of memory, activism, a history from below and artistry. Yet, as Mullin points out, “What we need, if we are to understand what it is to combine” these aspects, “is an enriched conception of imagination” (Mullin, 2003: 196). What would an “enriched conception of imagination” entail? Imagination is not only a mental faculty responsible for envisioning things that do not exist but is also a faculty of cognition through which we can envision the future and the past in ways with which we are not usually familiar. Thus feminist artworks can explore political ideas and ideals in imaginative ways that, in the end, can have “both artistic and moral or political significance” (Mullin, 2003: 197). Meant to both celebrate women’s history of labour and to offer a counter-narrative to the hegemonic histories of the “new men-hero of socialist labour,” artworks combine myth and reality, history and memory and fact and fiction. How women’s work is remembered is not without political significance. The artists and their public become “historical producers to the level of public performance” of the hushed narratives of women’s work history (Hugill, 2015). Although the audience’s answer to this type of art is never fully predictable “with such an enriched understanding of the nature of the imagination, activist and political art can be seen as neither servants of some predetermined political message or slogan, nor as needing to be above or beyond politics in order to retain their art character” (Mullin, 2003: 197). What Mullin is attempting to put forth in this argument for feminist art’s “political imagination” is that it can be politically concerned and involved without ceasing to be informed by imagination and artistry. That is to say, feminist art is not a mere container for political slogans, yet this does not mean that it cannot make “a unique contribution to increasing critical social consciousness in virtue of their
“A Woman’s Work is Never Done”

As many social scientists point out, “Women’s liberation through productive work” (as theorized by early socialist thinkers) was an official objective in all former communist states (Corrin 1994, Jill and Shanna 2009, Tang 2015). Romania and the former Czechoslovakia are no exception. Yet, the convoluted relationship between communism and women’s “liberation” through work requires a further elaboration that is beyond the scope of this paper. However, while the communist regimes’ idea on the emancipation of women through work was disseminated through propaganda, “the difference between the Party’s propaganda on women and the reality of women during communism was not only striking but had a significant impact on women’s status and role” even after the collapse of these regimes.\(^5\) Thus, the relationship between women’s liberation and women’s work is twofold: on the one hand, remunerated work enables women to gain economic independence and diminishes their subordination to the patriarchal authority, and on the other hand, this “liberation” is seen by some theorists as a “double burden” which puts twice the pressure on working women (since they need to perform both productive and reproductive work). During communism (and after its collapse), this double burden was far from “liberating”. The idea of “liberation or empowerment through work” was engineered in such a way that it actually concealed the “real” political intentions of turning women into “mothers of the nation” and a workforce for “socialism’s building.” In an interview conducted in 2013 with a former worker (now retired) from the garments industry, my respondent stated, “I remember how much I struggled to be both a productive worker in the factory and a worker at home. Basically, I had no weekend and no spare time. I do not even remember what ‘leisure’ might have looked like. You know…a woman’s work is never finished and many times is invisible.”\(^6\) We consider that this assertion is extensively illuminated and materialized in the artistic production of contemporary artists like Lisa Bennett. In her piece “A Woman’s Work is Never Done” (flesh and thread), the

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\(^6\) The author’s interview in Romanian with Cristina Rusu (68 years old), May 15, 2013.
artist uses the palm of her left hand as a canvas upon which she stitches various forms with thread. As Bennett points out, “By using the technique of embroidery, which is traditionally employed to represent femininity and applying it to the expression of its opposite, I hope to challenge the pre-conceived notion that ‘women's work’ is light and easy. Aiming to represent the effects of hard work arising from employment in low paid ‘ancillary’ jobs, such as cleaning, caring and catering, all traditionally considered to be ‘women's work’. What this piece of art attempts to reveal and disclose is the dimensions of neglect when it comes to women’s “invisible,” yet never ending, labour. Although stitching into the top layer of skin is, according to the artist, not painful, the art piece displays the image of a calloused hand. The visual impact of this worn hand triggers an audacious political imagination contributing to “increasing critical social consciousness in virtue of [its] art character” (Mullin, 2000: 114).

Gendered Memories of Work in Contemporary Romanian Art

The first study – published in Romania – dedicated to feminist practices and theories during communism and post 1989 Eastern Europe was written by Olivia Niţiş. The study “Istorii marginale ale artei feministe” [Marginal Histories of Feminist Art] elaborates on various problematic dichotomies between Western European feminist artistic practices and the marginality of the Eastern European artistic production. Another example of feminism(s) dedicated analysis of contemporary art can be found in the special issue of the Romanian magazine “Arta” (number 11, 2014), coordinated by Olivia Niţiş. Still, while other former communist countries have started to document women’s memories—including the memories of labour—there is still a lacuna concerning Romania. This gap can be explained by various socio-economical-political factors as well as by the entranced “anti-feminism without feminism”. Myths about the “socialist woman” (both the heroine mother and the bus driver) have marked the “gender biased imaginary” of the communist period. During Romania’s communist period, the representations of women in both media and the arts had been restricted to certain thematic clusters such as the heroine mother, the

8For example, in Prague the Women’s Memory project (backed in 1996 by Gender Studies Center in a private flat) has managed to establish an archive of oral testimonies (oral history) whose focus is— among other things—the gendered histories of labour (e.g. Pavla Frýdlová’s book based on interviews with women physicians, Ženy v bílém (Women in White), deals with the memory of women medical doctors).
working woman, the caretaker and the sportive woman. More often than not, women were represented in visual propaganda as men’s equal co-worker. Certain criteria dominant in the current popular visual culture—such as age, aesthetic appearance or sex appeal—were completely disregarded during communism. Interestingly, after the fall of the regime in 1989, “average” women have disappeared from the visual culture during the transition to democracy and capitalism, with the exception of the omnipresent occurrence of those considered sexually appealing, “hot” or “good looking.” The transition to a “free market” economy through privatization has fostered a massive de-industrialization (especially of the traditionally-feminized textile industry), forcing many Romanian women to opt for unemployment. This unexpected change in women’s lucrative status has led to the re-traditionalisation of gender relations after communism’s “liberation through work.”

Representations of the hard-working woman have disappeared while the “sexy, young, fit girl” visual patterns have become more pervasive in media and popular culture. In an interview conducted by Corina L. Apostol with the Bucharest-based art collective Bureau of Melodramatic Research, the artists aptly pointed out that their research on the visual representations of women before and after 1989 had a grass roots dimension (Critic Atac, 2011). In the interview, the Bureau of Melodramatic Research further mentioned that the official institution of remembrance of Romania’s communist period retained the copyright to all photographs taken during official events from 1945 to 1989 (the so-called Fototeca Online a Comunismului Românesc /Online Photo-Archive of Communism). Women are nowhere to be seen in this official photo-archive, and the artist collective engaged in independent research documenting women’s presence from other neglected sources (such as the former magazine dedicated to women, “Femeia”). The Bureau of Melodramatic Research is not the only Romanian artist (collective) which signals the disappearance of “average” women from the visual culture of transition as well as their replacement with “topless”, “sexually appealing,” young, slim women whose feminine attributes are mostly associated with consumerist culture.

As early as 2002, the conceptual artist Liliana Basarab questioned the hegemonic regimes of representation through which women were depicted in the post-communist era. In a 4’09’’

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colour and sound video entitled “Untitled/ Et si tu n’existais pas” (Iaşi, 2002), the bald artist smokes a cigarette behind a glass wall—reminiscent of the shop window displays associated with the West’s consumerist societies—while two solid hands cover the glass wall with images of “attractive” women from glossy magazines. The artist’s physical presence is then gradually covered by photographs taken from glossy magazines; the entire action takes place to Joe Dassin’s notorious song “Et si tu n’existais pas.” Liliana Basarab envisions the washing up of women’s image in a consumerist culture in a political-critical way.

Figure 1: Liliana Basarab, “Untitled/Et si tu n’existais pas”, film, 4’09”, color, sound, 2002 Camera: Matei Bejenaru, with: Liliana Basarab and RO (Nicolae Radu), Editing: Liliana Basarab and Sorin Aruştei, Maria Alina Asavei’s screenshot, courtesy of the artist.

In the same manner, “Accidents, Mutations and Mistakes” (Bucharest, Mora Gallery, 2008) displays, among other things, pregnant ceramic bottles as part of Basarab’s ceramic-based installation. The pregnant ceramic bottle is the instantiation of the mother as the depositary of family relationships doomed to imperfections and mutations. Unlike the “heroine mother” of Ceauşescu’s national communism, the pregnant ceramic bottle displays both the counter-narratives of pregnancy and degenerative family relationships, which can be extended outside the traditional family relationships of power and influence. Although women are usually left out of Romanian art history, the 2016 project “Fete cu Idei [Băieți cu Picturi]” (Girls with Ideas [Boys and Paintings]) reveals the rich scene of women’s art world in Bucharest. The curators Delia Popa and Giles Eldridge invited five women artists from Bucharest (Raluca Popa, Liliana Basarab, Ioana Gheorghiu, Aurora Kiraly and Delia Popa) to reflect on their artistic situations in an exhibition (installed in Cluj). The curators also edited a catalogue where they analyze the current artistic production in two “of Romania’s leading scenes: Cluj and Bucharest” (Popa & Eldridge, 2016). Although both Bucharest and Cluj host vigorous art movements in post-communist Romania, “in Cluj there appears to have been a well lauded history of predominantly male painters...in Bucharest there is a distinctive feature of women art practitioners, which includes artists, curators, gallerists, cultural managers and art writers.”10 Women art practitioners reflect on past and present histories of productive and reproductive labour and put forth creative ideas of how the veil of oblivion and ignorance can be challenged.

10 Delia Popa and Giles Eldridge, Fete cu Idei [Băieți cu Picturi] (Bucharest: ArtCrowd Association, 2016, p. 5)
A few male Romanian artists also deal with gendered histories and the memories of labour in their work. For instance, Matei Bejenaru (the initiator of the Periferic biennale of contemporary art in Iaşi) displayed a photographic documentation of “Women at Work” within the international exhibition “Power & Play” (De Markten, Bruxelles, 2014). The photographic exhibition was conceived around the concept of “gender” as revealed in the works of ten contemporary Central and Eastern European artists. The exhibition was advertised as one of the first attempts at illuminating the relationship between feminism and photography in Eastern Europe. Not surprisingly, the gap in addressing these issues in artistic language is explained through the fact that “concepts such as feminism, liberation, and equality had quite a different interpretation under communism. Also during the political and socio-economic transformation after the fall of the Berlin Wall, little attention was paid to women’s position in society or to their participation in the changes.”

Bejenaru’s photographs reveal the hidden side of women’s work in post-communist Romania as well as the social dimensions of their labour. As in other previous pieces (e.g. the series of photographs “Work, Memory, Movement,” 2008-2010 and “Strawberry Fields Forever,” 2002), the artist investigates the universe of women’s work both in post-communist Romania and in other Western countries where Romanian women are forced to work for minimum wage to make ends meet. For “Strawberry Fields Forever,” the artist photographically documented the daily life of Romanian women working illegally (as irregular migrants) in a strawberry farm in Lleida (Catalonia, Spain). The photo-installation reveals the essence of daily life for these women whose free time is also spent collectively. Their lunch breaks, as well as weekend gatherings, take place within the perimeters of the strawberry farm. For instance, one photograph displays a moment of “leisure” when a worker, still wearing her work clothes, enjoys smoking a cigarette. Bejenaru’s photographs further reveal the relationship between women’s work and leisure as well as the types of subjectivities that get produced through work. As these visual sources indicate, the concepts of “work” and “non-work” are intermingled and difficult to disentangle. The artist went beyond merely documenting the daily life of these women workers and staged a performance at the Barcelona Centre for Contemporary Culture. He cooked homemade strawberry jam in front of the visitors (the art public) and put all the jam in small jars. On each jar, the artists added a label on

which he wrote the hourly wages (3.29 Euros) paid to the Romanian women migrants for their work on the strawberry plantation. The public was then invited to buy the homemade jam. The title of his project – “Strawberry Fields Forever” – has most probably been inspired by the Beatles song with the same title released in 1967. As in the Beatles’ song, Bejenaru’s artistic production also addresses a certain type of “reflective nostalgia” for a past that is not necessarily longed for but can be used as a basis for critiquing the injustices of the present. This piece of art fosters the viewer’s political imagination (Mullin, 2003) in envisioning the hardships along with the economic, social and epistemic injustices these women migrant workers are subjected to for a better life. “Strawberry Fields Forever” is not only a piece of activist art that attempts to disclose injustices, but it also reveals the silenced voices of the women workers. Actually, making their voices present and heard in the public sphere of art speaks volumes about women’s rights in terms of equitable remuneration. As Corina Lăcătuș poignantly argues, “The performance piece draws attention to the women’s rights to fair remuneration and working conditions, by linking their illegal status inextricably to the demand of both cheap labour in agriculture and the consumption of cheap goods” (Lăcătuș, 2017: 277). In addition to raising awareness to the working conditions and economic injustices, Bejenaru’s performance also attempts to normalize “the lives of these illegally working women, by integrating them into the public sphere, telling their stories and linking them to the product of their labour” (Lăcătuș, 2017: 277). The artist uses the strawberries picked up by the migrant women to produce his “limited edition” art-jam. Although all the money received for the strawberry jam was given to the women, it cannot be claimed that these women participated directly—as co-authors—to the performance. “Strawberry Fields Forever” is about Romanian migrant women and is dedicated to them, yet it is not truly a form of collaborative, collective art production. What the performance does instead, is trigger the viewers’ mental and emotional faculties of imagining how it feels to pick up strawberries all day, all the while being away from your family, for 3.29 Euros an hour.

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1Svetlana Boym’s cultural theory of nostalgia distinguishes two type of longing for the past: “restorative nostalgia” and “reflective nostalgia.” Longing for one’s past is, according to Svetlana Boym, a form of “reflective nostalgia.” Unlike “restorative nostalgia” (which is a longing for a “nation-home,” an absolute truth and so on), “reflective nostalgia” is a type of social and cultural memory more diverse, more malleable and composed of individual memories and idiosyncratic narratives. Unlike “restorative nostalgia,” “reflective nostalgia” can also have a critical dimension in which the present is criticized in the light of the past. For more on this distinction, see Svetlana Boym, The Future of Nostalgia, New York: basic Books, 2001.
Other feminist critiques of the post-communist transition to capitalism via artistic practice are revealed in the art exhibition entitled “Femina Subtetrix” (Ivan Gallery, Bucharest, 2015). The artists Sonja Hornung and Larisa Crunțeanu disclosed forgotten histories and memories of women’s work by taking the textile factory called APACA, a factory built during the communist era that predominantly employed women, as a lieux de mémoire. APACA, as other textile factories from Central and South-East Europe, is part of the communists’ legacy of feminized garment industries. Various media sources point out that APACA was not only a textile factory where the work force was almost exclusively feminine, but also a “Factory of the Homeland’s Falcons” (in Romanian - “Șoimi ai Patriei”). As Costin Anghel writes, the factory had its own kindergarten where the “Homeland’s Falcons” enjoyed a nutritious alimentation every day: the kindergarten’s cafeteria was much better supplied with meat and culinary vegetables than other communist kindergartens. According to the interviews conducted by Costin Anghel with the kindergarten’s teachers (now retired), the APACA’s nursery school was “very special” in the sense that the children were left there all week long. Only on Saturday at noon did the mothers take them home for a day and a half.

In the transition years from the communist to the capitalist economy, APACA ended up being privatized and restructured. As a consequence, many women workers lost their jobs and all other “benefits.” While the factory is still present in Romania’s collective memory as a lieux de mémoire (place of memory) associated with the national myth of “the best textile factory” in Eastern Europe, the memories of women’s work, life and struggle (both during communism and after its collapse) have been obliterated or simply considered as “not worthy of remembrance.” In the cultural memory of the transition years, certain lieux de mémoire were preserved and materialized in official cultural formats, whereas other places of memory (both physical and mental) were disregarded and condemned to become lieux d’oubli (site of forgetting or being forgotten). The memory of women’s work and everyday life at the APACA was not the topic of

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13The concept of “Ilieux de mémoire” was introduced and popularized in the vocabulary of Memory Studies by Pierre Nora in “Between Memory and History: Les lieux de mémoire,” Representations, 26 (1989), pp. 7-24. Nora used it to designate physical, mental and symbolic places related to a group’s remembrance (collective memory).
14The formula “Homeland Falcons” refers to the Romanian communist organization of pre-school children (aged between 3 to 7 years old) instituted in 1976 by Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime.
16Ibid.
cultural production in the post-communist Romanian cultural milieu. Yet, this neglect should not necessarily be understood as an act of forgetting per se. Nikolai Vukov argues that in the antagonism between memory and forgetting, there is a third element correlated to cultural memory production—the unmemorable: “The latter does not designate things that memory cannot hold and has relegated to the realm of forgetting, but rather things that are not ‘worthy’ of remembrance and that, although remembered, never enter the realm of representation” (Vukov, 2008: 324). Perhaps APACA’s women and their work are seen as not “worthy” of remembrance in light of the post-communist politics of memory. However, where the official institutions of remembrance fail to illuminate the histories and memories of women’s productive and reproductive labour, the artistic production attempts to bring them to the fore via artistic and political imagination. In an exhibition report written for “Artmargins,” Ulrike Gerhardt mentions that although “Femina Subtetrix” does not display the image of women workers, the presence of their labour and its memory is ubiquitously being instantiated through “a radical material abstraction of the women’s experiences.”\(^{17}\) Gerhardt goes on to analyze the exhibition by mentioning,

“The first untitled work one discovered upon entering the exhibition was a concrete cube with two opposing apertures, each about the size of a fist. An exhibition text encouraged visitors to put their hands inside each hole and to ‘Reach out to each other.’ In some cases, visitors managed to touch another visitor’s fingertip;—as one feels the cube’s soft, hand-shaped and waxed cavern and the eventual trace of the other person’s body warmth, the work invokes the notion of a concealed ‘proto-feminist’ lady - or sisterhood in the factory.”\(^{18}\)

The performative dimension of this installation brings the visitor to the verge of a living history of labour and sisterhood, avoiding the mere representation of women’s presence in the work process. At the same time, the imaginative faculty of knowledge is not limited to visual perception but exceeds the boundaries of visuality by re-enacting the feelings and emotions of solidarity. This untitled installation is not the only participatory piece displayed within the “Femina Subtetrix” exhibition.

Figure 2: Larisa Crunteanu and Sonja Hornung, “Femina Subtetrix” at Ivan Gallery (2015); Photo by Iulian Stanciu, courtesy of the artists.

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\(^{18}\) Ibid.
Another untitled piece reveals a ball of twine that was situated between two metal plates and made noise when the public shook them. According to Gerhardt, “Visitors were encouraged to shake it, upon which one heard the sound of unknown small objects, presumably stones and rubble from a post-industrial landscape. The monotonous, mechanical and tiny rattle evokes a fleeting image of thousands of female workers in uniforms seated in front of their sewing machines performing textile work” (Gerhardt, 2016).

Other contemporary artists bring to the forefront forgotten histories of women’s manual labour that might be easily associated with the “work of pleasure and leisure” (such as knitting or embroidery). For instance, Aurora Kiraly displays personal-political messages knitted on textiles for her installation “Life-Love-Memory” (Călina Art Gallery, Timișoara, 2016). The “hand-made” pieces read “hate the radio alarm”, “the midnight red wine glass”, or “Bills & Duties: Too much trouble, too much stress.” All these instantiations of what the curator Liviana Dan calls “Reality Check” remind the viewer that there is a voice of everyday life in every piece of art and a constant confrontation with the status quo. For the group exhibition “Fete cu Idei [Băieți cu Picturi]” (Cluj, 2016) Aurora Kiraly also displays the piece entitled “Viewfinders” consisting of photographs of women’s working hands and profiles revealed on cardboard boxes.

Figure 3: Aurora Kiraly, “Viewfinders”, 2 table top objects, drawing, cardboard, photography, photos from the catalogue of the exhibition “Fete cu Idei [Băieți cu Picturi]”, Cluj 2016, curators Delia Popa and Giles Eldridge, Bucharest: ArtCrowd, 2016, pp. 52-53, courtesy of the artist.

As Niţiş points out, Marilena Preda-Sânc’s pieces also reflect her “interests for geological constructions and the personal body as a self-referential method of understanding movement and space with the impulses of confronting social power relationships breaking and entering its mechanisms.” Like Liliana Basarab’s confrontation of the fabricated images of “attractive” women from glossy magazines, Marilena Preda-Sânc’s “Daily Diva” (2010) also addresses, in a critical manner, the ritual of self-image cosmetization. This ritual of never-ending exercising, physical fitness, “beautification” and projecting a more attractive image of the self prevents any “lightness of being” (to paraphrase the Czech writer Milan Kundera). “Daily Diva” reveals the repetitive daily practice of self-image “beautification,” addressing at the same time the devastating

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effects of including these practices as a necessary part of a woman’s daily routine. These practices of self-cosmetization invade the already crowded schedule of women’s existence, preventing them from enjoying their free, non-work time. This external pressure to look attractive and in good physical shape also prevents many women from contemplating the “lightness of being” (freedom) and it turns them into characters and images “weighed down”.

Women’s Labour in Czechoslovakia during and after State Socialism: an Artistic Survey

“I have two kids and I want to dedicate my time to them … I am alone to do so now.”

This was Andulka’s reaction to her new boss’s inquiry into reasons for dropping the previous managing position she held and accepting a lower-paying job with an inferior professional and social status. Produced in 1977, Žena za pultem belongs to the long line of state-sponsored mundane TV series that aimed at depicting everyday life in the socialist Czechoslovakia, but this series actually stands out owing to the fact that it centred on a woman as its main character.

Andulka is depicted as an ideal archetype of a working female of her era – a labour-minded, respectful, intelligent, divorced mother of two who is self-confident in her private life and a valuable member of her working collective at a food store. The series tries to empathetically follow the struggles that come into her by life and tackle important gender topics like the duality of roles, as demonstrated by the initial quote, but not with great success.

Despite constantly over-emphasizing the emancipation provided to women by the socialist system, the series likewise inadvertently perpetuates and represents most of the gender-based discriminatory phenomena in the labour sphere inherent to the social and economic structures of the time. As identified and concluded by research conducted after 1989, the system more or less mimicked traditional divisions of labour. Women were pushed into less qualified, less paying and non-intellectual positions, instigated into aiming for subordinate educational and professional standards, all for the sake of preserving their primary mission—to take care of their families, in contradiction to the official Marxist dogma of labour-based emancipation. In fact, they were

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21 Andulka is the protagonist in the pilot episode of Žena za pultem (“Woman behind the counter”) series.
victims of a gendered “double burden.”23 Accordingly, even Andulka accepts the burdens of life in a martyr-like manner and is appointed to her new position by her male boss with blatant words: “Delicatessen section must be attended by the most beautiful girls in the whole shop!”24

It is not surprising that the official media and arts production in Czechoslovakia did not reach beyond the realm of state sanctioned propaganda when it came to reflecting on the roles of women.25 Academic discussion on these topics existed during the late-socialist period (like the works of sociologist Ivo Možný),26 though its development was constrained by the re-ideologization and de-liberalization of discourse after 1968. Gender-centred artistic representation, unrestricted feminist activities and the elaboration of feminist ideas in Czechoslovakia thus had to wait for the period when the democratic regime was installed.

Nevertheless, independent publications preceding the political change and dealing with women’s labour in Czechoslovak socialism did in fact appear. A pioneering comprehensive analysis was written by Alena Wagnerová, an important post-1989 Czech feminist intellectual, during her emigration in West Germany. Die Frau im Sozialismus: Beispiel ČSSR (“Woman in Socialism: Example of ČSSR”) dealt with the situation of women’s labour, among other topics, and became a point of departure for the author’s further production.27 As she later stated, her original positive account of Czechoslovak society in this respect was quite overestimated, and she realized that even though the gender discrimination was more implicit than in the capitalist West Germany, it was not less present.28


23 As Vodochodský states, women were not aware of the gendered nature of their discrimination; they attributed it to the political system and its social structure. Ivan Vodochodský, “Patriarchát na socialistický způsob: k genderovému řádu státního socialismu,” Gender, rovné příležitosti a výzkum 8, no. 2 (2007), p. 38; Phyllis Moen, Working Parents: Transformations in Gender Roles and Public Policies in Sweden (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 4.

24 “V Lahůdkách musí být ty nejhezčí ženský z celýho podniku!” Ep. 1 “Anna nastupuje.”

25 For more on this issue see Jana Oravcová, Mocné ženy alebo ženy moci? Vizuálna kultúra, reprezentácia, ideológia (Bratislava: Csy, 2015), 174–178.

26 For example Ivo Možný, Rodina vysokoškolsky vzdělaných manželů (Brno: Univerzita Jana Evangelisty Purkyně, 1983).


Wagnerová’s activity did not remain isolated, and after the Velvet revolution it merged with a stream of thought prominently led by Jiřína Šiklová. The well-renowned sociologist and persona of Czechoslovak dissent surrounded herself with other researchers and civil society activists; moreover, in 1991 she stood behind the foundation of the Gender Studies circle. First an informal platform, this circle later transformed into a Public Service Company meant to build a counterweight to a rather conservative, anti-feminist environment in the Czechoslovak society as well as to Western feminist researchers who lacked any empirically contextual basis and were thus in many cases irrelevant. The arrival of democracy and the free market finally debunked the myth of socialist gender equality (or as Šiklová put it, “Socialist pseudo-emancipation”), and inherent discrimination became apparent in its presence and continuity. As a fundamental instrument to deconstruct a stereotypical understanding of the past, contemporary gender biases and the voicing of feminist ideas in public, a truly grand oral history project was designed in 1996. “Based on the recording of life experience and the opinions of women in three generations (born between 1920–1960),” it created the only existing women-oriented collection of testimonies that in large part focused on gendered labour history and memory. Until now, nothing seems to have surpassed this effort as it remains the only organized oral history archive of its kind in the Czech and Slovak contexts, but of the same importance is the fact that Gender Studies managed to lay the theoretical foundations for further feminist-oriented academic and artistic work.

Unlike feminist intellectuals and public activists who succeeded in organizing their activities and created the aforementioned centralized structures after 1989, similar endeavours in the arts scene seem to have remained quite scattered. There was no institution, studio or collective that could be described as feminist from a long-term perspective, which suggests that searching for a more specific topic like a gendered history of labour poses quite a difficult challenge. However, a closer look reveals that several artists are reflecting on this topic in addition to approaching the aforementioned ideas in their own individual manner. What also becomes apparent from the

31Ibid., 36.
33Or even, as artist Anna Daučíková complains, her female students are mostly not interested in feminism at all. Ľuba Kobová, “Feminizmus do výtvarného umenia na Slovensku ešte len pride,” FEMA: Feministický magazín, 3, no. 6–7 (December 2011), pp. 5–6.
presented cases is that it is definitely worth looking in both the Czech and Slovak arts scenes after 1993 since they remained extremely well interconnected and reflected upon a common past.  

Sometimes referred to as the very first feminist artist from Czechoslovakia, Anna Daučíková (born in 1950 in Bratislava, Slovakia) has a very interesting personal history and rich background in feminist and LGBT activism. Her works carry a strong political and feminist message and elude common categorizations as she moves from glass sculpturing through painting to film art and photography with ease. In 1979, she made an unorthodox decision for the era and moved to Moscow, being motivated by a relationship at the time. Unlike most Czech and Slovak artists of the past and present, who dream of moving to “the West,” she found herself in a sort of internal emigration, isolated from the artistic mainstream and acting as an external observer inside the USSR for 12 years. Besides her dominant interest in structuralist painting during this period, several series of photographs were preserved and presented only retrospectively since there were no chances for Daučíková to present exhibitions officially or even among the circles of the Moscow artistic underground.

The best-known of these photographic series, entitled “Moskva/neděle/ženy” (“Moscow/Sunday/Women,” 1988), was first shown at the Gender Check exhibition in 2009 in Vienna. It consists of 24 black and white photographs captured on the streets of Moscow depicting random women Anna Daučíková encountered. Her intention was to document specimens of the so-called “Soviet woman,” an ideological gender construct which was very roughly discussed at the beginning of this section.

Figure 4: Ana Daučíková, Unnumbered, "Moskva/neděle/ženy" (Moscow/Sunday/Women), 50 x 40 cm, from a series of 24 b/w photographs, 1988, Courtesy of the artist.

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34 People active in visual arts are working in both of the countries simultaneously by an overwhelming majority.
38 Ibid.
The term describing the relentless builder of socialism experienced a semantic shift, at least in the Czechoslovak environment, as it became a derogatory, sarcastic term alluding to a rustic, ignorant, tasteless and sometimes masculine physiognomy. This detest was also present in Daučíková, as she interprets her feelings of the time that had already merged with her early feminist thoughts and realization of the social and labour context; this elevated seemingly simple photographs to a form of social study. By no coincidence, the author chose Sunday morning for her action because women exclusively populated the public space in the city during that time. The explanation for this phenomenon was very simply put in the author’s own words: “The men were sleeping from a Saturday night fever.”

Putting aside the tendency of spiralling male alcoholism in the USSR in the late 1980s, it is more than anything else a representative consequence of obligations that were exclusively associated with women in socialist societies such as weekend shopping, walking with the kids and running errands on Sundays. By performing these tasks automatically, women accepted that their free time was in fact filled with household—and family—related activities while men were using it for recuperation. As Daučíková summarized, “It is a hard labour to be a Soviet woman.” In this sense, the author succeeded in pointing to one of the lesser discussed consequences of the gendered labour division structure that prioritized men in various aspects and delivered a unique piece of visual history and memory of socialism. As she commented in retrospect, “I corrected my emotional stance, [but] my opinion remains the same.”

Several Czech and Slovak visual artists that deal with feminist topics related to socialism can also be found among younger generations. Two prominent artists are Anetta Mona Chișa (born in 1975 in Nădlac, Romania) and Lucia Tkáčová (born in 1977 in Banská Štiavnica, Slovakia), who have been collaborating together since 2000. In their conceptual works, they use various media, techniques and forms while reflecting predominantly on feminist thoughts, theories, power and social inequality.

43 Ibid.
44 They both studied in Slovakia and are currently based in Prague and Berlin. Despite being originally from Romania, Chișa has been listed as a Slovak artist several times. “List of Artists,” accessed March 17, 2017, http://www.erstestiftung.org/gender-check/exhibition/list-of-artists/.
The thematization of women’s roles (also in socialism) and labour appears several times in their work. “After the Order Graphs” is a series of 13 collages (2006–11) that reflect a recurring motif—an illustration from the *Industrial Worker* magazine from 1911. Chişa and Tkáčová created variations of this parodic symbolization of capitalist social hierarchy by using the cutouts of human figures from different magazines, a large part being from those documenting Spartakiádas. The anachronically combined and contextually displaced pictures represent different forms of inequalities (among them gender discrimination) set in pyramidal structures symbolizing hierarchies in a critique that reaches beyond any certain time, regime and place.

In “Far from you—memorials to Lída Clementisová” (2009–10), the artists touched upon the absence of women in history and memory. Lída Clementisová was the wife of the communist intellectual and minister of foreign affairs Vladimír Clementis. In 1952, he was executed for treason after two years of imprisonment in connection to the show trials of Rudolf Slánský and his alleged “conspirational centre,” with Lida being kept incarcerated for the whole duration of his imprisonment. After her release, she invested most of her remaining life in legal rehabilitation of her husband. In spite of the fact that after a decade of hard work and political negotiations she fully succeeded, she was almost completely omitted from the general historical narrative. During a series of events, Chişa and Tkáčová proposed to revive her memory through the symbolic appropriation of different monuments, thereby planting the creeping “Clematis Hybride” next to them.

The work that seems most interesting in the context of women’s labour is entitled “When Labour Becomes Form” (2007). In this piece, as the artists stated, “We published an announcement in a newspaper, searching for an elderly unemployed woman, offering her our fee for participating in the show as a reward for knitting a table-cloth. The pattern we designed for this knit work is a graph taken from the publication Women, Men and Age in Labour Market Statistics.” An impressive piece of someone’s knitting skills is the final material result of this initiative, portraying a three-dimensional graph of unemployment in relation to age and gender in

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47 Also exhibited at the Gender Check “Gender-Check_list-of-Works.pdf.”
its pattern. Besides fulfilling the basic humorous idea—forming a symbol of the precariousness of women’s labour in the age group “45 & over”—its symbolical meanings and subtext further develop ideas reflected in Daučíková’s photographs and serve as a materialized memory of the times of socialism.

Figure 5: Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkacova, "When Labour Becomes Form", ručné háčkovanie / handmade crochet, 130x160 cm bavlna / cotton yarn, 2007, Courtesy of the artists

By defining their target group as women born at the latest in 1962, those having definitely finished their secondary or primary education and reached productive age almost ten years before the socialist regime in Czechoslovakia collapsed were the ones that fit the description. Thus, they were fully exposed to all the negative factors of the socialist’s gendered labour division as described above. Therefore, it was not only the age and gender per se that potentially formed discriminatory pretexts against these women, but also their statistically documented under-qualifications and the non-applicability of their original occupations in a post-transformational situation and the stigma that they carried over from the socialist epoch.

In the context of a gendered “double burden” under socialism, the knitting ability itself highlights the fact that taking care of the family and the household did not consist only of simplistic activities. Fine manual skills like knitting and sewing were complementary to the “socialist woman” package and were expected of them. These skills, stemming from traditionally women-oriented trades, were taught not only through intergenerational transfer in the family but also in schools. It can be assumed that the primary reason for these pragmatic hobbies to be maintained, even up until the late-1980s, was to tackle the constant undersupply of the consumer of goods and light industry products; their low quality and only virtual variability. Against the equality claims by the official ideology, as women were deemed to have more free time after their less demanding and important jobs, or opting to become full-time housewives, such acquisition of skills and practices was a social norm.


With the arrival of the capitalist economic system and the international free market and goods trade, consumerism currently dominating ex-socialist European states rendered knitting and similar complements of the socialist division of labour obsolete. As encountering someone with advanced knowledge of these skills is an increasingly rare occasion, “Labour Becomes Form” represents the materialization of a memory of a past time and symbolizes all the demands and constraints placed upon the shoulders of socialist women – creating an image of the proverbial “superwoman,” not dissimilar to that which Adélka mentioned in the very beginning of this section.

**Some Concluding Remarks**

Without claiming to have offered an exhaustive examination of all artistic productions dealing with the gendered history and memory of labour in (post-)communist Romania and the former Czechoslovakia, this paper has attempted to put forth an argument according to which some artistic productions are able to enact “feminist counter-narratives” (Hugill, 2015) and counter-memories. We claimed that the political strength of these feminist artistic productions can facilitate envisioning more equitable futures where women’s labour (both productive and reproductive) is no longer overlooked or intentionally obliterated by the hegemonic narratives of labour history in Eastern Europe and beyond. These feminist artworks attempt to combine a politics of memory, activism, a history from below, cultural memory and aesthetics for political purposes. Despite the different structural characteristics of the socialist regimes and the societies of the past, the problems and themes that are illuminated in the presented case studies from (post-) communist Romania and former Czechoslovakia are of a very similar nature, documenting the validity of claims of the general socialist emancipation’s failure asserted by post-communist feminist literature.

As stated from the beginning, we have chosen to analyse and compare Romanian and former Czechoslovakian’ feminist artworks addressing women’s labour because the two cases stand for opposed poles on a virtual scale of European socialist regimes in terms of their modernization level. In this respect, Romania is an example of a patrimonial communist regime style while Czechoslovakia represents a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, this

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discrepancy in the level of modernization of the two countries has also consequences for the way in which women’s productive labour is understood. This aspect is also not addressed in the academic literature on this topic. However, the post-communist artistic memories of women’s labour in both countries reveal similarities regarding the never ending roles a woman should perform. In consequence, both cases indicate that “a woman’s work is never done.” If we zoom in on contemporary art production dedicated to women’s labour in both cases (Romania and former Czechoslovakia) we can note that many Romanian art pieces are conceived in such a way to also engage the public in their production of meaning (e.g. Bejenaru sells “limited edition jam” to an art public, Sonja Hornung and Larisa Crunțeanu conceive art installations that depend on public participation for their realization and so on). In the case of the former Czechoslovakia, the only occurrence of the public engagement in the artwork’s production can be noted in Chișa and Tkáčová’ piece “When Labour Becomes Form” (2007) where the artists hired an elderly unemployed woman to knit a table-cloth.

Both case studies reveal how artistic memory works can function politically and critically. At the same time, their political engagement highlights the silenced and under-researched histories of women’s working lives both under state socialism and after its collapse. These artistic practices reveal and disclose the power relations existent both inside and outside the notion of class and patriarchy. Because ideology (in an Althusserian sense) does not necessarily refer to a systematic body of ideas put forth by certain groups but also to material practices, the artistic productions analysed in this paper show how these material practices can be challenged or dislodged.
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Figure 1: Liliana Basarab, “Untitled/Et si tu n’existais pas”, film, 4’09”, color, sound, 2002 Camera: Matei Bejenaru, with: Liliana Basarab and RO (Nicolae Radu), Editing: Liliana Basarab and Sorin Aruștei, Maria Alina Asavei’s screenshot, courtesy of the artist.
Figure 2: Larisa Crunteanu and Sonja Hornung, “Femina Subtretix” at Ivan Gallery (2015); Photo by Iulian Stanciu, courtesy of the artists.

Figure 3: Aurora Kiraly, “Viewfinders”, 2 table top objects, drawing, cardboard, photography, photos from the catalogue of the exhibition “Fete cu Idei [Băieți cu Picturi]”, Cluj 2016, curators Delia Popa and Giles Eldridge, Bucharest: ArtCrowd, 2016, pp. 52-53, courtesy of the artist.
Figure 4: Ana Daučíková, Unnumbered, "Moskva/neděle/ženy" (Moscow/Sunday/Women), 50 x 40 cm, from a series of 24 b/w photographs, 1988, Courtesy of the artist.
Figure 5: Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkacova, "When Labour Becomes Form", ručné háčkovanie / handmade crochet, 130x160 cm bavlna / cotton yarn, 2007, Courtesy of the artists