

COLTA

Scan the pores of political reality

THE CODE OF SILENCE: THE HORIZONS OF FEMINIST ACTIVIST ART



Sarah Brown. Scientific torture. 2019. Video, 28:30 min (still from video)

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Code of Silence

On September 19, at the CTI "Fabrika", the exhibition *"The Code of Silence"*, assembled by the participants of the Creative Association of curators of the TOK Maria Veits and Anna Bitkina, ends. This Friday, September 17, an *online discussion* will take place between the artist Ofri and sociologist Jessica Nevo on archival and activist work in art. As part of the *She is an expert* project, COLTA.RU publishes the curatorial concept of the exhibition and several remarks of its participants about their work and the situation around feminist art activism in Russia and in the world.

The Code of Silence is an exhibition project dedicated to issues of gender equality in the family, at the legislative level and in professional spheres, in particular in the field of art. Its task is to analyze the prerequisites and consequences of the conservative turn and the strengthening of patriarchal systems in many modern societies. In the past few years, we have seen a number of legislative initiatives aimed at restricting women's rights: the decriminalization of domestic violence in Russia, Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, new laws on the prohibition and punishment of abortions in the United States and Poland. In addition to reproductive rights, the violation of the economic rights of women, who in most countries still earn less than men, also demonstrates how governments systematically deprive women of agency and protection.

Polina Zaslavskaya in her practice studies the influence of mass culture on our behavior and the construction of gender standards. In her collage series *Fundamentals of Modern Home Economics*, she traces how fashion and consumer goods from women's magazines from the 1960s to 1970s reflected the social order and gender normality of those years and what educational function they carried for future housewives. These publications not only advised on how to cook, dress and housekeeping properly, but also offered the image of an ideal woman - a housewife, mother, worker. Glamorous magazine pictures did not tell about how such ideally constructed worlds and dreams crash against the "glass bell" described by Sylvia Plath in the novel of the same name. Advocating for the right of women to choose careers and become writers and journalists, after her tragic death, Plath became known in the literary world - always dominated by men - mentally unstable. Research into the Sylvia Plath Effect on the greater predisposition of female poet to mental illness continues to this day.



Sarah Brown. *Scientific torture*. 2019. Video. 28:30 min. (frame from video)

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Irish artist Sarah Brown also explores "special" psychological conditions attributed to women. In *Scientific Torture*, she raises the issue of manipulating the concepts of norm and pathology. Brown compares early 20th century experiments on animal vivisection, particularly dogs, with physical abuse of suffragettes in correctional facilities, when animals and women were abused because of philosophical and scientific hypotheses about their ability to endure pain.

The exhibition also seeks to draw attention to the historical achievements of women in the struggle to secure their rights at the legislative level. One of the starting points of the concept of the exhibition was Alexandra Kollontai's influential work "Social Foundations of the Women's Issue", which again turns out to be relevant, despite the fact that it appeared in 1909. Kollontai proposed systemic solutions for ensuring the economic and political independence of women, based on gender equality. She introduced her revolutionary ideas into the institution of family and marriage, supporting new principles in the field of labor law, sex education and free love. Later they were accepted by many social democratic societies. Nevertheless, even more than a hundred years later, the struggle for women's equality continues throughout the world in the context of legal systems,

The Code of Silence brings together the works of Russian and international artists and artists who reinforce the global feminist agenda. The exhibition and its public program reveal the state mechanisms that regulate women's rights and their reproductive decisions, as well as analyze the influence of feminist strategies and practices of different years on the formation of the women's movement.



Polina Zaslavskaya. Fundamentals of modern home economics. 2020. Series of collages. 73 × 55 cm, ink, colored plastic, magazine clippings

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Alevtina Kakhidze. 44.2018. Video. 6 minutes (frame from video)

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The problem of the social roles and responsibilities of women, which in the overwhelming majority of societies are still closely related to their reproductive function, is addressed in the works of the Ukrainian artist Alevtina Kakhidze. In her video "44" she reflects on social expectations and conditions that can influence the choice and attitude of women when it comes to the ability / desire to have children. The work touches on the topic of reproductive violence against women who, for various reasons, refuse or cannot have children. Their value to the state directly depends on their interest and biological ability to motherhood.

The theme of parenting and the vulnerability that arises with it continues at the exhibition in the work of Masha Godovannaya "Wilds of Sleep". The artist uses visual imagery as a tool to release the paralyzing fear for the child that accompanies any experience of motherhood. By retelling the dream about her son, the artist gives dreams the opportunity to serve as an ephemeral but strong bond between mother and child and to transfer it to another plane.



Sonya Kazovski. The battle of dead and non-existent souls. 2019. Performance Documentation
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Installation "Scene 5 - Playback" by Sonia Kazovski is dedicated to the life and work of the Cuban artist Ana Mendieta. It is believed that her husband, a famous New York minimalist artist of the 1970s, is to blame for the death of Mendieta. Karl Andre. During the trial, his defense argued that Mendieta was unbalanced and therefore committed suicide. As evidence of the artist's insanity, the court was presented with her work. "Scene 5 - Playback" is a translation into Russian of one of the chapters of Sonya's play "The Battle of Dead and Non-Existent Souls", published in 2019. The text, intended for both individual and collective reading, invites exhibition viewers to participate in the process of overthrowing established narratives of art history and revising the principles of museum collections and the institution of authorship. Kazovski's work is an active rethinking of the current state of affairs in the artistic environment, especially those aspects of it that have long been ignored or exploited.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminist ideas and women's rights were discussed much less openly in the Soviet Union. The research and curatorial project Leningrad Feminism by Olesya Bessmeltseva and Philip Fenghaus tells the little-known story of a group of Soviet feminists persecuted by the authorities for publishing almanacs on the living conditions of women in the USSR, which initiated the underground women's samizdat movement. The magazines "Woman and Russia" and "Maria" described the realities of the life of a Soviet woman, which ran counter to the official ideology. The publications, which immediately aroused interest outside the USSR, touched upon the issues of domestic violence, highlighted the inhuman conditions of detention in women's prisons and the abuse of women in maternity hospitals and abortion clinics.



Nika Dubrovskaya and David Graeber (The Yes Women). Never mind us! 2019. Installation in a public space. Alexanderplatz, Berlin

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Natalia Nikulenкова. Captured bodies. 2021. Video, poster, performance, personal diaries, objects. 12 minutes (video) and 30 min. (performance at the opening)

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Natalia Nikulenкова's new research project, *Captured Bodies*, is aimed at the practice of caring for and creating a safe space for current and former inmates of the juvenile colony. The performance, which is the result of their three-year interaction with the artist, is based on their diaries. The script for it included their personal stories, in-depth interviews and "girl's profiles". Addressing the issue of the construction and transformation of social norms and crimes, Natalia Nikulenкова's work focuses on how the penitentiary system affects the behavior and self-expression of those who are directly "captured" by it.

The exhibition also highlights the involvement of women in socio-political processes in different countries and historical contexts. A joint project by Petra Bauer and Rebecca Katz Tor "And still to come. Travel Sketches" is an artistic interpretation of the process of establishing ties between Swedish and Soviet socialists in the 1920s, when women's rights in these two countries began to move towards gender equality. Inspired by the revolutionary transformation in the position of women in the young Soviet state, a group of women from Sweden traveled to the USSR to learn from this experience, taking photos of the places they visited along the way. The work is based on the idea of a mental journey into the past and the future. In discussing how early feminist movements embraced "traditionally feminine" activities such as sewing or cooking, Bauer and Katz Tor question whether they have the potential for resistance and new forms of collectivity and solidarity.



*We are doing this section together with the **She is an expert** project - the first database of women experts in Russia. The goal of the project is to make the opinions of women who produce knowledge and are ready to share experiences visible in the public space.*

<https://www.colta.ru/articles/she/-28300-vystavka-kodeks-nemolchaniya-tsti-fabrika-kuratorskaya-kontseptsiya>

For the slogan "Never mind us!" (German "*Lasst Euch Nicht Stören*") is a study by artist Nika Dubrovskaya and anthropologist David Graeber about divorced women in the former GDR, whose pensions were cut - in fact in punishment for divorced status - after the unification of Germany. As divorced, these women did not receive the compensation that was due to married women in Germany. At the same time, they were also deprived of the support they could count on in the socialist GDR. For 30 years, these women have been fighting for their rights, using all possible political and legislative levers. They even got a UN resolution condemning actions against them. The German government remains adamant, constantly postponing a decision on this issue and, in fact, waiting for the death of these women. Thirty years ago there were 800,000 of them. Today there are about 300 thousand left. *The Yes Women* . It brings together artists, researchers and activists who analyze the current state of Western democracy in their works.

The exhibition also presents contemporary examples of interdisciplinary feminist initiatives and collectives in a complex multinational and multi-ethnic environment. The Voice Archive online session, led by artist Ofri Lapid, is based on her immersion in the Haifa Institute for Feminism, the first and only archive of the history of feminism and the queer movement in Israel. Created by activists and enthusiasts, the archive contains evidence of social and political processes that often remain outside the scope of official history. It contains court records for domestic violence cases, among many other significant documents. The majority of the victims are Russian and Palestinian women. These protocols were recorded by members of the institute, volunteers with special training, to observe what is happening in court and to keep independent records. At the center of the event is the question of the presence of an outside observer in the judicial system and its role for a subjective critical approach to justice. The discussion is accompanied by a collective reading of excerpts from the minutes kept at the institute and interviews with its archivists, as well as a search for links between the practice of archiving and the work of the writers Maggie Nelson and Ruth Behar.

The exhibition of the Creative Association of Curators of the TOK "Code of Silence" is one of four laureates of the open international competition *apexart* - 2020–2021 , in which more than four hundred projects took part.

apexart is a New York -based non-profit arts organization founded in 1994 that challenges the ideas of culture and art by organizing international exhibitions and open competitions annually, where more than 2,000 applicants and juries from over 65 countries participate each year. The Code of Silence is the first exhibition of the *apexart* competition in Russia.