

“Of Mice and Women” aka “the Facebook Project”

Text by Delia Popa, ARTA Magazine, #11, 2018, print version



- 1 "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary", pencil and pen on paper, 21/29 cm, 2014
- 2 "Reading Mihaela Miroiu in Bucharest II", Marker on paper, 28/42 cm, 2011
- 3 "Mummy, Mummy, if I Become a Feminist...", Marker and pencil on paper, 15/20 cm, 2011
- 4 "What is the Romanian Word for Empowerment?", Marker, watercolor and pencil on paper, 34/52 cm, 2011

As the year 2014 began I started reading this beautiful book called "**A Vindication of the Rights of Women**"¹ (1792) written by 18th century British philosopher **Mary Wollstonecraft**^{1bis} who comments eloquently as well as passionately on the deplorable situation women of her century found themselves in. She places the roots of this situation in the differentiated education her century applies to the two genders.

Throughout the book she enters an interesting (to me) virtual discussion with Jean Jacques Rousseau, one of the "fathers" of French Enlightenment. The letters insisted that the two genders would "benefit" from a differentiated education starting in their infancy, as starting

¹ A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft, in Romanian according to Wikipedia: "A claim to women's rights"

^{1bis}

Mary Wollstonecraft (pronounced / 'wulstənkrɑ:ft /; born April 27, 1759 - September 10, 1797) was a British writer, philosopher (!!) and feminist. (Wikipedia)

infancy they are different.

Mary answers to Jean Jaques repeatedly, such as here: "I have, probably, had an opportunity of observing more girls in their infancy than J.J. Rousseau. I can recollect my own feelings, and I have looked steadily around me; yet, so far from coinciding with him in opinion respecting the first dawn of the female character, I will venture to affirm, that a girl, whose spirits have not been damped by inactivity, or innocence tainted by false shame, will always be a romp, and the doll will never excite attention unless confinement allows her no alternative. Girls and boys, in short, would play harmless together, if the distinction of sex was not inculcated long before nature makes any difference."²

Mary Wollstonecraft makes an entrance in "*Mary, Mary Quite Contrary*"³ (2014), my most recent drawing from the series of so called "mouși" (in Romanian), or better still, from "*The Facebook Project*" which consists of having so far uploaded approximately 50 drawings of Anthropomorphic mice protagonists on my "friendship" page.

I have discovered Mary, as I like to call her, just before the New Year 2014 in an e-book, and as her poetic and frenzied way of writing has taken me over I have tried to visualize her as a character, and to also use a little irony on her as well.

I have the advantage of the 3 centuries that separate us, and I can make myself believe in some places that I am less naive than her, or maybe I feel inferior because I don't have a set of values as deeply thought out as she had ... I am fascinated by the historical perspective on a current issue, which allows you to see the world through the eyes of that century, or rather through the eyes of the "activists" of that century. In the 18th century, the authors wondered (as in the 19th and 20th centuries) whether women really have reason or not, and whether they can approach deep topics as men do. Activist authors answered them with all the arguments available to them.

Issues that now appear to us as hilarious, such as differentiated education in schools, or women's ability to vote, are juxtaposed with still current issues, such as the promotion of the

2 Here was the Romanian translation by Delia Popa of the original English text

3 "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary" series of works by Portuguese artist Paula Rego, inspired the title of my drawing. The quote refers to a British rhyme from the 18th century, and seems to be based on the scandalous reputation of Queen Mary of Scotland. Source: "Paula Rego, The Complete Graphic Work" by T.G. Rosenthal, Thames & Hudson, London, 2003, pg 45. My translation would be "Mary, Mary, who contradicts".

image of the "doll woman, or the woman of pleasure and luxury" in the media. -mediate. And so, with the help of the above quote (continued in the following) we arrive at drawing number 2 illustrated here, respectively "*Reading Mihaela Miroiu in Bucharest*".⁴ As the title announces, I was happy to read the books of the feminist theorist and philosopher Mihaela Miroiu, and I found out things that I think I should have found out at the age of 14, or at most 18 years old. So we find out about the amplitude of the feminist movement from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century in Romania, until the regime change:

"It is not with the dolled woman, or with the woman object of pleasure and luxury that we will step forward in the new world that is rising, in which everyone must earn through his work the right to life."⁵ "(...) we have the duty to strengthen this family life, to give women higher concerns, to call her to share all the responsibilities, to give up the doll woman, the woman of luxury, the woman the eternal child, who believes that she can live only from the work of the man, the woman a minor who does not realize the real needs of life ".⁶, wrote Alexandrina Cantacuzino, one of the most active feminists of the early 20th century, more precisely in 1928.

But Alexandrina Cantacuzino did not know that waves of female identities would follow, from the smoker in factories and factories, to the mother forced to give birth at least 4 children, to the "tunable" woman of the early 21st century in Romania etc . And also she did not seem to know that there were and still are everywhere working women - who "keep" the whole family through their work, husband-women of "lower class". But the space allocated here does not allow me to continue this historical peroration and it is probably another discussion. Returning to drawing no. 2, with his help I was able to make a "stigmatized" enumeration of the feminists enunciated in Mrs. Miroiu's books, and I was able to express at the same time my joy and indignation at my late information about their existence.

So, because today's discussion, or rather today's monologue, has in mind the drawings

4 "Reading Mihaela Miroiu in Bucharest" makes reference to the autobiographical book "Reading Lolita in Tehran" by Iranian author Azar Nafisi, about the situation of women in Iran after the "cultural revolution" of 1979.

5 Alexandrina Gr. Cantacuzino, "Fifteen years of social and cultural work. Discourses, conferences, articles, letters", Bucharest, Tipografia Românească, 1928, p. 283. In "Speeches about women in Romania between the two world wars", Marian Pruteanu, in "About Women and Their History in Romania", Alin Ciupală, ebook, University of Bucharest <http://ebooks.unibuc.ro/istorie/ciupala/discursuridesprefemeie.htm>

6 Alexandrina Gr. Cantacuzino, "The Role of Women in Social and Political Life", Bucharest, Church Books Printing House, 1924, p. 5. In "Discourses on Women in Romania between the Two World Wars", Marian Pruteanu, in "About Women and Their History in Romania", Alin Ciupală, ebook, University of Bucharest <http://ebooks.unibuc.ro/istorie/ciupala/discursuridesprefemeie.htm>

with mice or "Mouși" I will detail a little their history: The drawings whose protagonists are mostly animals with mouse faces and hands (ie anthropomorphic) they originate in other drawings from childhood, through which I represented the world around me (classmates, family, city, etc.). They, the drawings, began to reappear sporadically in the period 2007-2010, among other projects. In 2011, I set out to test Facebook's "friendship" platform in terms of its ability to promote art, respectively to find an audience that might not otherwise access it.

My concerns at that time, as well as today, being predominantly feminist in nature, gave birth to some visual dialogues on this topic. Thus the little mice wonder what feminism and femininity are like in "*Mommy, Mommy, If I Become a Feminist*" (drawing no. 3), how would the word "empowerment" so used in Anglo-Saxon feminist literature be translated and not only is the Romanian word for Empowerment? " drawing no. 4, how about the emancipation of women and its impediments in "But mouse, what about the emancipation of women?", 2011, but they are eager to explore other areas of the "animal" psyche, such as sexual desire in "*But mouse, what about desire?*" / after Kiki Smith, 2011, or anger in "*But mouse, what about anger?*", 2011, or recent political events "*But mouse, what about conspiracy theory?*" following the protests against the mining law of 2013, or to indulge in ironizing the recent history of painting as in "*Upper mice command, paint the upper right corner colored*" / after Sigmar Polke, 2013.

In conclusion, the "Mice" allow me to be subversive, perhaps, in a way that a discursive text, which of course has its merits and has its place in the public discussion about feminism and social and "gender" relations in Romania and not only, wouldn't allow me. Or it would be another part of my fragmented identity, like that of any self-respecting postmodernist 😊.

Also, they aim to be not avant-guard or rear-guard, but only "guard". For now, my "guard" is better expressed in English, which can be a problem, but it may just as well not be, or change, to learn to express itself just as "cool" in Romanian. But it must find an audience, an audience outside the realm of art and the market, as it exists in its current form. (i.e. you either have high prices or you don't exist) An audience that can and wants to give 200 lei for a drawing. Thus, maybe I would overcome the high status of the artist as doll, of the artist as luxury object.

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