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# RESENHA DO LIVRO. ESTÉTICA E EMPODERAMENTO: ARTE CONTEMPORÂNEA DA EUROPA CENTRAL PÓS- SOCIALISTA

BOOK REVIEW. EMPOWERING AESTHETICS: CONTEMPORARY ART FROM POST-SOCIALIST CENTRAL EUROPE

CRITIQUE DE LIVRE. EMPOWERING AESTHETICS: L'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE L'EUROPE CENTRALE POST-SOCIALISTE

RESEÑA DEL LIBRO. EMPODERANDO LA ESTÉTICA: ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO DE LA EUROPA CENTRAL POS-SOCIALISTA

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RESUMO: Esta recensão propõe uma leitura de *“Empowering Aesthetics: Contemporary Art from Post-Socialist Central Europe”*, de Denisa Tomková, como um gesto crítico inscrito na interseção entre arte e política. Contra a tendência de ver nessa justaposição um enfraquecimento mútuo — seja da autonomia da arte, seja da potência política — Tomková formula o conceito de *empowering aesthetics* para nomear práticas artivistas que problematizam esse entrelugar, abrindo-o como espaço de resistência e de empoderamento do coletivo através do indivíduo. O livro opera sob a lógica local-global, trazendo estudos de caso referentes à Europa Central pós-socialista — práticas situadas de artistas Romani, da diáspora vietnamita, queer, feministas e com deficiência — para formular fabulações críticas que mostram como as práticas artísticas podem intervir nos modos pelos quais identidades e comunidades são atravessadas pela violência estrutural. Assim, *“Empowering Aesthetics”* reinscreve a estética como espaço de resistência cotidiana, duracional e contínua, que almeja a destituição de estereótipos coloniais e patriarcais através da sua apropriação.

Palavras-chave: Denisa Tomková, *empowering aesthetics*, artivismo, arte e política, pós-socialismo.

# Empowering Aesthetics



Contemporary Art from  
Post-Socialist Central Europe

Denisa Tomková

BLOOMSBURY

Figure 1: Book Cover Empowering Aesthetics: Contemporary Art from Post-Socialist Central Europe by Denisa Tomková

Fonte: The Author.

ABSTRACT: This review offers a reading of *“Empowering Aesthetics: Contemporary Art from Post-Socialist Central Europe”* by Denisa Tomková as a critical gesture inscribed at the intersection of art and politics. Against the tendency to see in this juxtaposition a mutual weakening — either of art’s autonomy or of political potency — Tomková develops the concept of empowering aesthetics to designate activist practices that problematize this in-between space, opening it as a site of resistance and of empowering the collective through the individual. The book operates within a local-global logic, presenting case studies from post-socialist Central Europe — situated practices by Romani artists, the Vietnamese diaspora, queer, feminist, and disabled practitioners — to formulate critical fabulations that show how artistic practices may intervene in the ways identities and communities are traversed by structural violence. Thus, *“Empowering Aesthetics”* reinscribes aesthetics as a space of everyday, durational, and continuous resistance that seeks the dismantling of colonial and patriarchal stereotypes through their appropriation.

Keywords: Denisa Tomková, empowering aesthetics, activism, art and politics, post-socialism.

RÉSUMÉ: Cette recension propose une lecture de « *Empowering Aesthetics : Contemporary Art from Post-Socialist Central Europe* » de Denisa Tomková comme un geste critique inscrit à l’intersection de l’art et de la politique. Contre la tendance à voir dans cette juxtaposition un affaiblissement mutuel — soit de l’autonomie de l’art, soit de la puissance politique — Tomková développe le concept d’empowering aesthetics pour désigner des pratiques activistes qui problématisent cet entre-deux, l’ouvrant comme un espace de résistance et d’émancipation du collectif à travers l’individu. L’ouvrage opère selon une logique local-global, présentant des études de cas en Europe centrale postsocialiste — pratiques situées d’artistes romani, de la diaspora vietnamienne, queer, féministes et en situation de handicap — pour formuler des fabulations critiques qui montrent comment les pratiques artistiques peuvent intervenir dans les façons dont les identités et les communautés sont traversées par la violence structurelle. Ainsi, « *Empowering Aesthetics* » réinscrit l’esthétique comme un espace de résistance quotidienne, durative et continue, qui vise à destituer les stéréotypes coloniaux et patriarcaux par leur appropriation.

Mots-clés: Denisa Tomková, empowering aesthetics, activisme, art et politique, post-socialisme.

RESUMEN: Esta reseña propone una lectura de *“Empowering Aesthetics: Contemporary Art from Post-Socialist Central Europe”*, de Denisa Tomková, como un gesto crítico inscrito en la intersección entre arte y política. Contra la tendencia a ver en esta yuxtaposición un debilitamiento mutuo —ya sea de la autonomía del arte o de la potencia política— Tomková formula el concepto de empowering aesthetics para nombrar prácticas activistas que problematizan este entre-lugar, abriéndolo como un espacio de resistencia y de empoderamiento del colectivo a través del individuo. El libro opera bajo una lógica local-global, presentando estudios de caso en la Europa Central postsocialista —prácticas situadas de artistas romaníes, de la diáspora vietnamita, queer, feministas y con discapacidad— para formular fabulaciones críticas que muestran cómo las prácticas artísticas pueden intervenir en los modos en que identidades y comunidades son atravesadas por la violencia estructural. Así, *“Empowering Aesthetics”* reinscribe la estética como un espacio de resistencia cotidiana, duracional y continua, que busca la destitución de estereotipos coloniales y patriarcales a través de su apropiación.

Palabras-clave: Denisa Tomková, empowering aesthetics; activismo; arte y política; postsocialismo.

*Empowering Aesthetics: Contemporary Art from Post-Socialist Central Europe* (Tomková, 2025) arrives at a time when nationalism, homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia are being propelled by far-right fascisms into public life. This conjuncture of fascist life-forms, promulgated through social media, is deeply entangled with post-truth regimes of un-knowledge and conspiracy, where the very conditions of reality are placed under suspicion. This anti-epistemological condition of the Chthulucene calls for an urgent rearrangement of artistic practices. As Eyal Weizman reminds us, there is a need for investigative aesthetics to

attend to “histories of genocide, structures of white supremacy and patriarchy, and systematizations of state or corporate violence, colonization and dispossession [that] are naturalized and placed beyond question”. (Fuller & Weizman, 2021: 29). Although genocide echoes macro-political infrastructures upon which individuals cannot easily act, there remain possibilities to intervene in the micro-political sphere through everyday practices of resistance. Echoing Foucault’s (1983) call for non-fascist ways of living, Tomková situates her project within this terrain, asking: “*whether contemporary art can ‘mitigate the impact of violence on individuals, or at least change their relationship to the world’*” (Tomková, 2025: 1).

If authoritarian formations thrive by numbing the senses — through what Weizman has described as the ‘anaesthetization’ of perception — then aesthetics becomes indispensable as a capacity to register injustice as a felt condition before it becomes thought (Fuller & Weizman, 2021: 36). The realm of sensibility to injustice has been broadly discussed in postcolonial feminism. Sara Ahmed, for instance, describes feminism as a sensibility, “how we register what is wrong; we register something is wrong because it does not fit, because what happens does not make sense” (Ahmed, 2017: 22). It is in this double register — aesthetics as a means of resisting anaesthetization, and feminism as a sensibility that refuses to normalize what does not make sense — that Tomková’s notion of *empowering aesthetics* takes shape. Rather than conceiving art as a finite object, Tomková insists on practices that unfold durationally, “related to lived experience and everyday strategies... a shift from the artist’s body (performance) to the artist’s life (biopolitical art)” (Tomková, 2025: 3), so that “the *empowering aesthetics* is not just the artwork as a finite object displayed in an art institution but rather the artist’s entire project that surrounds their very life” (Tomková, 2025: 4).

Against the enduring figure of the solitary genius — a Eurocentric device of patriarchy and whiteness — Empowering Aesthetics foregrounds practices that emerge from marginalized subjectivities: Romani artists, the second-generation Vietnamese diaspora, LGBTQIA+ and disabled practitioners, and women artists. As Tomková notes, “they do not focus on the heroic figure of the individual artist but rather highlight the emancipatory struggles of the community in question” (2025: 6), often through collaborative processes. This displacement of artistic heroism resonates with long-standing feminist critiques of canon formation. As Linda Nochlin already argued in her seminal essay, “the white Western male viewpoint, unconsciously accepted as the viewpoint of the art historian, is proving to be inadequate” (1971: 2). For her, the very question ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’ can, if answered adequately, create a chain reaction that destabilizes the very foundations of art history (1971: 2–3). Nochlin further reminds us that great art is never the product of pure inspiration: “The making of art involves a self-consistent language of form... which have to be learned... through study, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation” (1971: 5). Picking up this thread, Ewa Majewska has argued for a new category of the ‘weak avant-garde,’ one that “combines the feminist rejections of patriarchal visions of genius and creativity with the demand for an expanded epistemology — one including marginalized and colonized territories in art history and practice” (2016: 1). It is precisely this horizon that Empowering Aesthetics engages, translating the critique of patriarchal genius into the durational and collective practices of marginalized communities in post-socialist Central Europe.

The book's first case study turns to Roma artists, who face long-standing cultural hegemony and aesthetic discrimination in Central Europe. As Tomková argues, "'Roma art,' despite being a simplifying label, has the potential to challenge cultural hegemony and aesthetic discrimination. It can be a very productive term, if chosen consciously as a site of resistance' (2025: 23). Rather than celebrating singular achievements, this chapter highlights how Roma symbols and motifs contribute to what Tomková calls an everyday resistance of *empowering aesthetics* (2025: 22). Emília Rigová exemplifies this approach through her alter ego Bári Raktóri, a stereotypical image of a Roma woman that she both embodies and destabilizes. "That's the role of the double agent,' she explains, 'that I actually work for both parties'" (Tomková, 2025: 29). This doubleness recalls Gayatri Spivak's famous reminder that "*the subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with "woman" as a pious item*" (1988, p. 308) Rigová's work inhabits precisely this paradox: the stereotype must first be reiterated in order to be dismantled. In so doing, she transforms an imposed image into a critical tool, while making visible the structural conditions that shape Roma identity. Similarly, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas reclaims Roma visual motifs and everyday materials in her monumental textile works, often produced collectively with women from her community using upcycled fabrics. These gestures recall Majewska's proposal of 'weak resistance' — ordinary, non-heroic, durational acts that build collective strength in the everyday. Mirga-Tas's collaborative practice also challenges what Tomková identifies as the aesthetic discrimination that labels certain artistic productions as naïve, folkloric, or primitive (2025, p. 10). By weaving Roma presence into the monumental language of European art history, her *Re-enchanting the World* (Venice Biennale, 2022) enacts an expanded epistemology of the weak avant-garde, one where vulnerability and care are mobilized as critical forces. In both Rigová and Mirga-Tas, *empowering aesthetics* operates durationally, dismantling stereotypes through appropriation and transforming the margins into sites of situated resistance.

The second cluster in *Empowering Aesthetics* turns to the second generation of Vietnamese diaspora in Czech Republic. As Tomková notes, the emancipatory potential of the artistic production of this community lies in its capacity to "*challenge dominant narratives, provide alternative stories and empower their local communities*" (2025: 52). Yet this potential is not detached from the burden of stereotyping: the label 'banana kids,' used in Czech media to describe children of migrants, reveals how symbolic violence operates even in cultural recognition. As artist Thu Huong Phamová observes, 'the term always reminds us that people will judge us by our appearance' (Phamová, as cited in Tomková, 2025: 53–54). In her ceramics, Quynh Trang Tran transforms this vulnerability into subtle resistance, archiving the memories of her parents' migration: "I interviewed my parents, and my grandmother living in Vietnam. I found out that my mum and dad never really talked about it with each other either. It wasn't until I did this research that I learned about the history of how my parents met and what their story of arriving in Czechoslovakia was" (Tran, as cited in Tomková, 2025: 55). Similarly, Anna Tran's installation *Checkered Memories* reworks the raffia bag, a symbol of migration, into an abstracted fabric cloud that narrates her mother's journey: "I tell a story not about myself, but about the strength of my mother... embarking on a new chapter in her life that will completely impact my life and my sister's" (Tran, as cited in Tomková, 2025: 56). These gestures echo Stuart Hall's insistence that cultural identity is '*not an essence but a positioning*' produced through difference and displacement<sup>1)</sup>. By situating personal

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<sup>1)</sup> See Hall (2019).

testimonies and family archives within contemporary art, Vietnamese diaspora artists enact a hybrid zone where belonging is negotiated rather than given. Their *empowering aesthetics* are durational, intersubjective, and rooted in everyday strategies: resisting racism, dismantling stereotypes, and making visible the complex entanglements of the ‘former East’ and the Global South.

In the next chapter, Tomková demonstrates how queer and crip perspectives expand *empowering aesthetics* by directly confronting normativity, heteronormativity, and ableism (2025: 87). She situates these practices within a genealogy of medical and social exclusion, emphasizing their “shared pathologized pasts” (Tomková, 2025: 89). Robert Gabris exemplifies this approach: “his practice of *empowering aesthetics* uses artistic strategies through which the lives of the participants (or those impacted) are being transformed. His work represents a critical gesture and a powerful tool for the empowerment of marginalized Roma, queer and non-binary communities” (Tomková, 2025: 105). Equally, Nadia Markiewicz challenges ableist imaginaries through installations such as *Drive-thru* (2022), which “focuses on the emancipatory and transformative capacities of non-normative bodies while revealing a situation in which the majority of society benefits from solutions created for people with disabilities” (Tomková, 2025: 114). As she explains, her aim was to “shift the focus from ableist practices and narratives... to a more poetic image of what disability is and could be” (Markiewicz, as cited in Tomková, 2025: 115). For Markiewicz, visibility itself becomes empowerment: “disability can be a great tool for looking at the world and dismantling many constructs that seem hardwired into society... growing up, if I had seen more people with a body like mine it would have felt less lonely” (Markiewicz, as cited in Tomková, 2025: 117). Together, these practices demonstrate how empowerment emerges not outside of precarity, but through it, transforming fragility into a ground for collective strength.

The closing chapter of *Empowering Aesthetics* turns to feminist practices, aligning the concept with what Ewa Majewska (2016) has theorized as ‘weak resistance’ and with Jack Halberstam’s notion that: “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2011: 2), Tomková insists that “the material and social conditions that inform a person’s ability to both resist and produce art are particularly relevant as *empowering aesthetics* is produced by marginalized and racialized artists in the semi-periphery of post-socialist Central Europe” (2025: 120). Here, vulnerability is not conceived as lack but as political potential, echoing Judith Butler’s (2004) claim that exposure to others is the very condition of collective resistance. Against a backdrop of gendered violence, abortion restrictions, and even censorship of queer representation, these practices perform what Tomková describes as “an important function in challenging these narratives while contributing to building an inclusive collective memory” (2025: 125). A striking example is the work of Mihaela Drăgan, co-founder of the feminist theatre company Guivlipen, whose *Roma Futurism Manifesto* envisions a form of ‘techno-witchcraft’ as the future, blending magic and technology to empower queer Roma women. In her hands, the feminist strand of *empowering aesthetics* reframes fragility as resource, situating art as durational struggle and everyday tool for dismantling patriarchal structures.

In its traversal of Roma, Vietnamese, queer, disabled, and feminist practices, *Empowering Aesthetics* positions itself as more than an art historical survey. It is a theoretical and political intervention that unsettles the inherited opposition between aesthetics and politics, showing how art can be both durational and collective, fragile and resistant. By weaving together case studies from post-socialist Central Europe, Tomková reframes empowerment not as heroic rupture but as situated practice: the slow dismantling of stereotypes, the re-appropriation of images, and the affirmation of precarious lives. In doing so, the book offers a vocabulary for rethinking art's emancipatory potential in the present—one where vulnerability is neither erased nor romanticized, but recognized as the very ground from which resistance emerges. As Tomková (2025) herself concludes, *Empowering Aesthetics* “fills a gap in the scholarship on the region by acknowledging the importance of contemporary art from the 2000s in imagining a new positive future, in emancipating communities, in stimulating public dialogue and in healing our collective body” (p.154). It is thus not only a contribution to art history, but also a situated feminist and decolonial gesture, committed to fighting ‘social inequality, sexism and racism in our society’ (p.156). In this sense, the book operates across the local and the global, showing how situated practices in post-socialist Central Europe resonate with broader struggles against systemic violence and patriarchal-colonial imaginaries.

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