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A Review of: Karla Huebner, *Toyen: Magnetic Woman and the Surrealist Erotic*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020. 426 pp.
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On March 10, 2019, the blogger Petr Tomek published a radical text *Přestaňme lhát o Toyen* [Let's stop lying about Toyen], where, based on the testimony of Jaroslav Seifert, he argued that at the time Seifert met Toyen, they¹ talked about themselves in the masculine gender and, therefore, that we must take Toyen as a transgender man into account.² The linguist Jana Valdřová provided the same argument a year and a half later in her blog post *Toyen byl muž. Učme se to respektovat* [Toyen was a man. Let's learn to respect that].³ This interpretation of Toyen's gender identity subsequently began to be promoted by the organisation *Transparent*, which fights for the rights of transgender people in the Czech Republic. The ambivalence of Toyen's gender identity was stirred up again around the exhibition project *Toyen: The Dreaming Rebel*, which was staged at the National Gallery in Prague between April 9 and August 22, 2021. The curator of the exhibition, Anna Pravdřová, commented on this in an interview for *Harper's Bazaar*: 'the fact that she spoke of herself in the masculine gender, says Jaroslav Seifert, [...] that is the only source. [...] No one in France confirmed this to me. [...] Maybe she just had periods like that and then she stopped.'⁴ Both reviewers of the exhibition, Eva Skopalřová for the national art magazine *Art+Antiques* and Martin Vaněk for the main Czech art web journal *Artalk.cz*, decided to write about Toyen explicitly in the masculine gender, because they felt that the exhibition did not address these issues sufficiently.

Back in 2019, I was asked by the *Queer Eye* festival to give a talk, attended by a significant number of trans people, about Toyen's gender identity and sexuality as performed in their work. I then summarized the main argument of this lecture in the article 'I am not your lesbo! K diskurzu o soukromí "snící rebelky"' [I am not your lesbo! Towards a discourse on the private Life of a „Dreaming Rebel“],⁵ published on *Artalk.cz* in response to the exhibition *The Dreaming Rebel* in 2021. With this extensive introduction, I want to demonstrate that the debate about Toyen's (trans)gender identity is a fundamental question that has resonated both within the art-historical discourse and in public space and it is impossible to avoid it. Unfortunately,

1) As a manifestation of gender ambivalence of Toyen's self-expression, as well as for other authorities identifying as trans, I am going to refer to them with a pronoun *they* in a singular antecedent.

2) Petr Tomek, *Přestaňme lhát o Toyen*, <http://enzmannovaarcha.blogspot.com/2019/03/prestanme-lhat-o-toyen.html>

3) Jana Valdřová, *Toyen byl muž. Učme se to respektovat*, <https://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/jana-valdrova.php?itemid=38162>

4) Veronika Scattergood, 'Toyen', *Harper's Bazaar*, 4/2021, 66 and 28.

5) Ladislav Zikmund-Lender, 'I am not your lesbo! K diskurzu o soukromí "snící rebelky"', *Artalk.cz*, https://artalk.cz/2021/06/14/i-am-not-your-lesbo-k-diskurzu-o-soukromi-snici-rebelky/?fbclid=IwAR1L_19adlqcbYR7OZ2AfYe_Lz2W0i4z3tE2GAaFm8tz6nt_HDF4OiWaREc#_ftn11

this is one of the main weaknesses of the book of the art historian Karla T. Huebner in the present book *Toyen: Magnetic Woman and the Surrealist Erotic*, which has failed to respond flexibly enough to current shifts in social discussion and understanding of the past that have happened within the past fourteen years since the majority of the book was written.

Magnetic person: on Toyen's gender identity

This is not Karla Huebner's first involvement with Toyen: the avant-garde scene in the Czech lands has been the central topic of her professional interests. She contributed to the books *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (2021), *Czech Feminisms: Perspectives on Gender in East Central Europe* (2016), *Women in Magazines: Research, Representation, Production and Consumption* (2016), and *The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s* (2011). She published a study, 'Fire Smoulders in the Veins: Toyen's Queer Desire and Its Roots in Prague Surrealism', on Toyen and their networking in the surrealist movement in 2010 in *Papers on Surrealism*⁶ and, in 2013, a paper in *Journal of Women's History* titled 'In Pursuit of Toyen: Feminist Biography in an Art-historical Context'.⁷ Together with her interest in the construction of a 'new' femininity in the period after 1918 and the discourse on non-heterosexual identities at this time, Karla Huebner had the ideal prerequisites for interpreting Toyen's life and work in a broad historical context.

She has succeeded with flying colours in the comprehensive presentation of artistic and social contexts in the current book. Already in the first two chapters of the book, Huebner proves this: in the chronological narrative of the first two stages of Toyen's life and their beginnings in the artistic avant-garde, she finds a number of contradictions: that between the stereotypical categories in which their companions from artistic circles put them, such as Bedřich Feuerstein's proposal to name them the [female] 'Muse of the Devětsil' (p. 8), and Toyen's self-identification, self-conceptualisation and self-expressivity, demanding equality and equity with their cis-male colleagues.⁸ Huebner describes Toyen's own understanding of identity with the period term 'androgyny', although Toyen never used this signifier in relation to themselves and neither did their cis-male artistic companions. In this context, Huebner reports on several meanings of the pseudonym that Toyen chose – whether it was a derivation from the French *citoyen* (Seifert) or a reference to gender ambivalence emphasized by Adolf Hofmeister's illustration *Ten-Ta-Toyen* [Him-Her-It-yen] (p. 13). At the same time, however, Huebner also offers an interpretation of the birth of the 'new woman', which was

6) Karla T. Huebner, 'Fire Smoulders in the Veins: Toyen's Queer Desire and Its Roots in Prague Surrealism,' *Papers of Surrealism* 8, 2010, 1–22.

7) Karla T. Huebner, 'In Pursuit of Toyen: Feminist Biography in an Art-Historical Context,' *Journal of Women's History* 25.1, 2013, 14–36.

8) Huebner states that the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design (UMPRUM) was the only state school and suggests that this was the reason Toyen decided to attend. However, The Academy of Arts (AVU) was a state school from 1896. The real reason is that at the time it was legal (access to universities for women became legal in 1919) but very unusual for a woman to attend the Academy (AVU). On the other hand, until 1946 the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design (UMPRUM) had a status of a high school, not a university, so women had attended since the 1890s. This was not very frequent but it was also not that unusual.

a phenomenon more or less present in all Central European countries. It was supposed to create a new, emancipated, practical woman who was supposed to be either a bourgeois ideal or a worker's necessity. Prototypes of work clothes or sports overalls for women were created to resemble men's fashion as much as possible, while at the same time the transgression of gender roles and stereotypes became a sensation in popular culture (a lesbian kiss of Marlène Dietrich dressed in a man's suit in the film *Marocco* from 1930). This time-shift is not self-evident; Huebner aptly adds that the French painter Rosa Bonheur (who was, by the way, mentioned by the lesbian activist Jana Mattuschová as a positive role model for lesbian women in 1931) had to obtain a police permit to wear trousers in the 1850s (p. 15).⁹

However, as we will see in the sexological discourse of the time, even circles close to the left avant-garde were patriarchal and heterosexist. Evidence for this can be found in the peculiar Freudian and Jungian-oriented writings of Bohuslav Brouk, who, at a young age, joined the avant-garde circles around Karel Teige, to which Toyen also belonged. His texts were full of internal contradictions. On the one hand, he referred to outdated authorities, and he held very liberal positions, for example, on the institution of marriage (which he proposed to abolish completely) and monogamy. But at the same time, he was convinced of the essentialist nature of genders and held often even misogynistic points of view. He had a liberal attitude towards homosexuality for his time, although he was, again, ambivalent. He had a certain understanding of (male) innate homosexuality, he condemned homosexual prostitution and homosexual behaviour (in, for example, prisons). It was from the position of a heteronormative worldview that he strongly opposed Weininger's theory that every individual is born more or less bisexual, and he considered hermaphroditism, including gynandry and androgyny, to be a pathological phenomenon. In his book *Psychoanalytická sexuologie* [Psychoanalytic Sexology], which he specifically dedicated to Toyen and Štyrský, Brouk wrote: 'Women are automatically predisposed to [feminine character] and appearance, and subsequently, any use of the female genitalia will make it impossible for them to attempt to become psychologically male'.¹⁰ Brouk's internally contradictory, misogynistic interpretation is best illustrated by the final passage of his chapter on homosexuality: 'Of course, only man – the penis – raised women to the human level, but at the same time he became the culprit of their inferiority, which arose through comparison with him.'¹¹ So, androgyny definitely could not be a positive category that even the most enlightened and, at the same time (in terms of sexual morality), most liberal members of Toyen's cultural and intellectual circle would use to describe them. At the same time, however, one cannot ignore secondary remarks, such as that of Jaroslav Seifert, that at some point, Toyen spoke of themselves in the masculine gender, as well as their own remark 'I am a sad painter' (which Huebner vividly translates as 'I am a sad, male painter'). Unfortunately, from the topic of Toyen's gender identity, Huebner moves on to their sexual orientation. In several subsequent chapters, she addresses shifts in Czech society regarding the acceptance of foreign feminisms and the construction of the next wave of domestic feminism. She aptly adds that domestic feminism was bourgeois and sexually restrictive (p. 34), thus providing

9) Matthew Wills, 'Rosa Bonheur's Permission to Wear Pants', *JSTOR Daily*, 8 May 2022. <https://daily.jstor.org/rosa-bonheurs-permission-to-wear-pants/>

10) Bohuslav Brouk, *Psychoanalytická sexuologie*, Prague: self-published, 1933, 113.

11) *Ibidem*, 115.

little impetus for Toyen. Huebner further focuses on the partnership with Štyrský, and she sets the previously romanticized and even sexualized image of the relationship in perspective. At this point, Huebner returns to the construction of Toyen's gender identity as she elaborates on Vítězslav Nezval's remark that Štyrský is the feminine element and Toyen the masculine element in their professional partnership (p. 45). She notes that this idea persisted until the present day, supplemented by the art historians František Šmejkal and Věra Linhartová.

At first glance, Huebner does not offer her own interpretation, only briefly commenting that we will probably never explain their relationship and never fully understand it, but the very ambivalence of their dynamic is part of the elusiveness and ambivalence of Toyen herself. Huebner returns to Toyen's gender identification when writing about their integration into Parisian Surrealism. She notes that 'the central position Toyen would assume in Prague surrealism contrasts with that of most surrealist women, who tended to operate on the movement's fringes, as friends and lovers of the men' (p. 102). Huebner claims that on the one hand, Toyen adopted the theory and practice of Surrealism far more intensively than many men, and at the same time that most other women in Surrealism were also very liberal in terms of sexuality, although they did not try to compete with men or take a leadership position. Toyen differed from these women in that, despite varying degrees of eccentricity, they did not ultimately have to adopt a conformist attitude because they had no ambition to marry and start a family like other straight, cis women within the movement (p. 103). At the same time that Brouk was formulating his essentialist theories, however, the magazine *Hlas sexuální menšiny* [The Voice of the Sexual Minority] and, subsequently *Nový hlas* [The New Voice], was published and offered alternatives to these majoritarian ideas on gender roles and sexualities. In the very first issue of the first volume, Jana Mattuschová, writing under the pseudonym 'sigma', provided a better image of a lesbian woman and at the same time pointed out the prejudices and multiple inequalities they faced in contemporary society. In the following testimony, Mattuschová described an incident that could have happened to Toyen herself: 'I myself once witnessed the rude invectives that were bestowed upon a lesbian-based lady who has the courage to walk around in clothes that suit her taste.'¹² Gynandra, whom Brouk considered pathological, became a positive model of masculine femininity thanks to Mattuschová.¹³

Karla Huebner's interpretation has an unprecedented contextual breadth: artistic, geographical as well as social, political and sexological. Despite that, the conclusions of Milena Bartlová's chapter 'Ten-ta-to-yen: Obrazy toho, o čem se mlčí' [Him-Her-It-yen: paintings of what is passed by in silence] published in 2011 in a collective monograph *Homosexualita v dějinách české kultury* [Homosexuality in the history of Czech culture] can appear to be at least more condensed or bolder. Bartlová here identifies with Huebner's conviction, available at the time mainly in her dissertation and several published studies, that Toyen can best be identified as a lesbian woman who at the same time wanted to defy traditional stereotypes of a woman's role in terms of appearance, social behaviour and life path.¹⁴ Bartlová offers the concept of *female masculinity* for understanding Toyen's identity, which was created for

12) [Jana Mattuschová], 'Lesbická láska' [Lesbian love], *Hlas sexuální menšiny* 1.1, 1931, 4.

13) [Jana Mattuschová], 'Gynandra standardním zjevem dneška' [Gynendra, a standard phenomenon today], *Hlas sexuální menšiny* 1.5-6, 1931, 3-4.

14) Milena Bartlová, 'Ten-ta-to-yen: Obrazy toho, o čem se mlčí', in Martin C. Putna, ed., *Homosexualita v dějinách české kultury*, Prague: Academia, 2011, 349-358, quoted on 353.

cultural history by Jack Halberstam in their book *Female Masculinity* from 1998.¹⁵ Halberstam shows that female masculinity does not consist of any inversion, or ‘man play’ either, but is a legitimate self-expression and performativity of femininity, and may or may not be associated with transgender identity and lesbian orientation. Huebner repeats the question of whether Toyen was a transgender man or a lesbian woman in the conclusion, without offering the possibility that these two variants are not mutually exclusive. For most of their life, Toyen could not go through the transition, i.e. the operation changing their sex, which was first performed in the Czech lands in 1942 to Zdeněk Koubek (FtM), and not until 1958 to a French citizen (MtF), so life in a female body even in the case of gender dysphoria, was Toyen’s only option for most of their life. And it is from this point of view that we must admit not only their emotional and sexual orientation towards women, but also the possibility of a gender identity other than cis.

On Toyen’s sexuality: what does *Surrealist Erotic* mean?

Karla Huebner herself noticed in her fourteen-year-old dissertation that Toyen’s erotic drawings have two facets, which is perfectly recognizable in the reproductions of them in the *Erotická Revue* [Erotic Revue], published by Jindřich Štyrský. Some seem more academic and lyrical and are signed, others have a naive, crude style (and also include various sexual practices) and are anonymous or signed with a pseudonym.¹⁶ Karel Srp also noticed the multitude of styles and signatures in the *Erotická revue*, but he could not give a satisfactory answer as to why this was so. Only Huebner has provided a convincing critical analysis: ‘Toyen, in fact, divided her contributions to the magazine into three groups. Those marked “XX” were rough primitivist sketches from around 1925. [...] In contrast, the drawings signed “T” mostly dated from the beginning of the 1930s and were considerably more sophisticated in style and content. [...] The third, much smaller, group was that of those openly designated “Toyen”. The only pictures so designated were a hermaphroditic drawing and the three drawings for the Malinowski excerpt.’¹⁷ It is erotica, heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual, that has been the central theme of the artistic historiography of Toyen’s work in the last twenty years. A heterosexist and to some extent patriarchal view is represented by Karel Srp’s catalogue from 2000 with the simple title *Toyen*. Srp states here that Toyen ‘dealt with erotic themes more consistently only thanks to Štyrský’s activity’, which completely ignores Toyen’s sketchbooks from the twenties and the entire production containing lesbian erotic desire. As if true and correct eroticism is only heterosexual and hetero-erotic, including the one that Toyen is led to by a man.¹⁸ This is also confirmed by Srp’s extensive subsequent text, which analyses with an almost bizarre obsession how Toyen depicted the penis, and closes a passage of several pages with the implausible statement that ‘naturally, it was the only organ that interested her

15) See Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

16) Karla T. Huebner, *Eroticism, Identity, and Cultural Context: Toyen and the Prague Avant-Garde*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh PhD Dissertation Thesis, 2008, 51, 210–212.

17) Ibidem, 211.

18) Karel Srp, *Toyen*, Prague: Prague City Gallery, 2000, 84.

in the male body.¹⁹ A single, laconic mention is made of lesbian desire in Srp's monograph, the addition of which also points to Srp's essentialist conception: 'She was interested in lesbian love [...] as well as in various natural themes falling under the male or female principle.'²⁰ In the catalogue of the exhibition *The Dreaming Rebel*, Toyen's eroticism is dealt with by Anne Le Brun, who was involved in the project as an eyewitness and friend of Toyen. Her text is therefore more of a personal statement than a professional analysis (it lacks a scientific apparatus, after all). It is characterized by a double effort: to find internal coherence in Toyen's erotic themes and to convince the reader that this work by Toyen is comparable to the legacy of 'great men' such as Turner, Rodin, Picasso, etc. Le Brun finds Toyen's approach to the violent sexuality of de Sade's concept as typical, yet although she correctly mentions that this interest in heterosexual eroticism arose at the behest of Bohuslav Brouk in 1938, she does not realize that it probably could not have been a desire with which Toyen would have herself identified.²¹

The first suggestion that Toyen was a lesbian woman is presented in Huebner's current book on page 15, but she immediately adds that we have no information about their first alleged partners or socialization among Prague's lesbian community.²² As Huebner further shows, a stay in Paris and encounters with both relatively openly living lesbian couples and a liberal nightlife were probably decisive for the formation of Toyen's sexuality. The meeting with Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, when Cahun was actively involved in the editing of the gay magazine *Inverions*, must have made a great impression on Toyen. Huebner devotes an entire section of the book to the interpretation of discussions about sexuality of the time; she addresses the Czech reception of Freud, Weininger, Rank and Reich (the latter two also referred to by Brouk), as well as the first emancipation efforts of sexual minorities, for which the research and activism of Magnus Hirschfeld were essential. Huebner does not mention the reception of Richard Krafft-Ebing, who was, alongside Weininger, one of the few positive sources for Brouk's chaotic sexological theses on homosexuality. Bohuslav Brouk did not really recognize female homosexuality, although he did to a very limited extent just to be coherent with male homosexuality. He claimed that most women resort to 'pseudohomosexuality limited to genital satisfaction'.²³

In the sixth chapter, Huebner addresses the surrealist visual vocabulary in the work of Toyen and to some extent Štyrský, based on the reading of Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukařovský and Jindřich Honzela, although each of these authors, viewing it from a different perspective and position, arrived at the need for a normative surrealist semiotics. The contrast between the full and empty torso in *The Magnetic Woman* (1934) and *The Abandoned Corset* (1937), as well as the fragments of the female body – be it the decapitated head or the play with the 'regendered

19) Ibidem, 93.

20) Ibidem, 88.

21) Anne Le Brun, 'Nezkrocený přepych: Toyen a Erotismus' [Untamed luxury: Toyen and eroticism], in Anna Pravdová, Annie Le Brun and Annabelle Görger-Lammers, eds, *Toyen: 1902–1980: Snící rebelka*, Prague: National Gallery, 2021, 305–318.

22) The only 'testimony' of Toyen's lesbian desire was provided by Jaroslav Seifert in his memoirs, see Jaroslav Seifert, *Všechny krásy světa: Příběhy a vzpomínky* [All the beauties of the world: stories and reminiscences], Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1982, 346. More recently, referring to the 1950s, see Meda Mládková, *Můj úžasný život* [My amazing life], Prague: Academia; Museum Kampa, 2014, 51.

23) Bohuslav Brouk, *Psychoanalytická sexuologie*, 122.

body' in the *Drawing [Hermaphrodite]* (1932) – represent for Huebner the woman, the female genitalia or the masculine woman (a woman who seduces another woman), although it relies on a reference to the rather old theories of Bohuslav Brouk. Milena Bartlová reaches a similar conclusion somewhat more convincingly by comparing the fragmented female body parts in Toyen's work with the collages of Claude Cahun. Bartlová points to the ambivalence of the ideal of female beauty in the case of lesbian creators: it is a bodily ideal that they simultaneously desire, while at the same time wishing to suppress their own desire for it.²⁴

So what does the surrealist erotic, which is signified in the title of the book, mean? Does Huebner manage to defend this concept? I believe that this is the main contribution of the book: the surrealist field opened artistic expression to the most up-to-date scientific sexological views, which probably would not have been possible without the inherent left-wing political orientation of both the local, and global, surrealists. The connection between politics, artistic creation and liberal sexual morality is shown very convincingly by Huebner, and Toyen is at the same time a vehement actor, a passive recipient and a reproducer of these ideals and ideas.

Writing on something we know nothing about?

So how does Karla Huebner's book stand up to the current social discussion about identity politics and its projection onto the image of the artist Toyen? In this, Huebner adheres to a fairly positivist-based interpretation using very coherent art historical methodology, and she also keeps to the view that she formulated fourteen years ago in her dissertation: Toyen was a lesbian woman with her own construction of female masculinity. She does not deny that Toyen considered herself a transgender man whose desire was still oriented towards women, but sadly, she does not elaborate on that possibility. Despite the undeniable fact that Huebner opens up and presents to the Czech readership relatively bold and convincing corrections of the previous narrative about Toyen, she probably could have paid a little more attention to updating her interpretation in the face of new questions and challenges, and not only regarding the diminishing of the transgender narrative. Regarding Toyen's early painting *The Paradise of the Blacks* from 1925, for example, Huebner comments as follows: 'Toyen here presents a golden age where no one hesitated to perform any erotic act. [...] The painting simultaneously parodies the Western tradition and celebrates what Toyen imagined to be a more sexually liberated culture' (p. 80), while we lack any commentary or criticism from the position of decolonization theories.²⁵

Huebner pays attention to the transgender nature of life and work of Toyen on one single page. In a passage focused on the period's discussion on sexual minorities, Huebner asks: 'How, we might ask, does Toyen resemble or differ from sexually and/or gender-transgressive

24) Quoted in Milena Bartlová, 'Ten-ta-to-yen: Obrazy toho, o čem se mlčí', 354.

25) On the latest very coherent contributions on decolonization of this particular painting, see: Rado Ištók, 'Kapitoly z koloniálního dějepisu umění. Kapitola 3: Ráj, balón, vesnice nebo výstava?' [Chapters from colonial art history. Chapter 3: Paradise, ball, village or exhibition], *Artalk.cz*, <https://artalk.cz/2021/06/28/kapitoly-z-kolonialniho-dejepisu-umeni-kapitola-3-raj-bal-vesnice-nebo-vystava/>; Marta Filipová, 'Artwork of the Month, March 2022: The Paradise of the Blacks by Toyen (1925)', *Craace.com*, <https://craace.com/2022/03/30/artwork-of-the-month-march-2022-the-paradise-of-the-blacks-by-toyen-1925/>.

figures now embraced as part of transgender history?’ (p. 121). If Toyen identified as a lesbian woman, Huebner continues, then no, if genderless/non-binary or a man in a female body, then yes. At the same time, Huebner correctly admits that the subversion and transgression offered by their play with gender ambiguity could not only be a manifestation of gender and sexual identity, but also a part of artistic performativity. The ambiguous nature of self-identification as well as the self-expressivity and performativity of Toyen’s gender seems to prevent Huebner from formulating an unequivocal position. She writes that Toyen provides us with a ‘window into what was possible for a non-normative Czech woman of her generation’ (p. 121). It would be easier to frame these considerations in some of the postmodern discourses on the conceptualization of gender and sexuality in historical cultural production, as Bartlová provided in the case of Butler and Halberstam. Another way might be to simply realize that the very fact that Toyen was an artist can not only complicate but also simplify these considerations, as many works on queer art and queer art history show – and Huebner does not refer to them either (it would be pertinent to mention the work of Whitney Davis who has written both on queerness and on Freudian psychoanalysis). The work of art is by its nature ambivalent, has infinite meanings and interpretations and it is legitimate to articulate them, so if we cannot prove that Toyen was a transgender (heterosexual) man or a lesbian woman (or some other combination and variation from the range of gender and sexual identities), we can declare that their work is both lesbian *and* transgender, that is, that it contains lesbian codes and resonates with the transgender experience when and if it speaks to both lesbian women and transgender people. If a historic work of art tells us something about ourselves today, this insight into Toyen’s work can never be considered as irrelevant or un-scientific.



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