

LISA E. BLOOM, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, Routledge, 2010 (second edition), pp. 14–19.

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I don't want to socialize with people who imagine that gay men are what's wrong with art: the homoerotic possibilities embedded within bohemian circles are one of the things that have long been life-sustaining to queer people—meaning not only those whose desires can be described as “same-sex,” but those who simply can't live happily within the heteronormative matrix. The weird and acrobatic discourse about art and sex that we encounter in ordinary spaces attempts to contain the queerness of decisions that people make every day—the decision to paint, to start punk rock bands, make performance art, move to the city, queer the suburb, to hang out with poets and hustlers, with drag queens and intellectuals.

To think as a queer feminist is to think about the social spaces that surround art—about how some spaces tend to police and censor, and how other spaces nurture. We ask questions like: What power relationships are masked by popular narratives about art? What does art tell us about sex and desire? What kind of relationships do artworks generate between the people who gather around them? What kind of story has art history told us about the relationship between sex, desire, and art? What kinds of things can't art history account for? What's the difference between pornography and art? Between art and commerce? Where do our attitudes about sex figure into those distinctions? But more importantly, we honor the following: What does art allow us to image? What kind of world do artists call into being through their work?

The more we think about such questions and honor the difficulty of answering them, the farther we get from the art world's centers. Thankfully, out here there's more air to breathe, more room to move, to think, and to speak.

Chapter 2

LISA E. BLOOM

NEGOTIATING FEMINISMS IN CONTEMPORARY ASIAN WOMEN'S ART

IN THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, there has been an explosion of contemporary art in Asia with the growth of cities such as Guangzhou, Singapore, Shanghai, Beijing, Taipei, and others, an explosion that has spawned a burgeoning art market in Asia connected with global capital. And, just as has occurred with the growth of the Euro-American contemporary art market, this period of affluence in Asia has not made it easier for Asian women artists to establish careers for themselves on the same footing as their male counterparts. The more inflated the prices for art, the lower the proportion of commercially successful artists who are women. Data compiled by feminist art critics and curators such as Maura Reilly, Katy Deepwell, and Joan Kee further suggests that the growth of the art market doesn't necessarily open doors for women.¹ Deepwell's data from recent Asian biennials and triennials, which indicates a higher proportion of work by women (around 20–30 percent) than was previously

the case in such shows, suggests a more hopeful trend, but it is not clear whether higher numbers of participation for women in these recent shows actually translate into higher numbers of careers for Asian women artists.² This question is especially fraught if, as Reilly, “the art world [in the Euro-American context] is not yet concerned with full as work by ‘minority’ postcolonial, or other voices into the larger discourse—except as special exhibitions.”³

The downturn in 2009 due to collapsing economies around the world constrains the market, making it even more difficult for artists considered marginal to the market to exhibit and sell work abroad. Given the persistent difficulties faced by women in the face of both burgeoning and shrinking art markets, it appears that the issues raised in my original version of this “Provocation” are still extremely relevant.

When I began formulating my ideas for the first version of this essay I was grappling with the challenges of conducting a professional life in Japan and the United States. From 1999 to 2001 I taught in the first Women's Studies Ph.D. program in Japan at Josai International University (Chiba Prefecture); I am currently teaching at the University of California, San Diego Department of Communication. It was my experience of traveling between cultures and confronting the question of whether or not feminist theories and ways of framing art in feminist visual culture emanating from the United States—be these strictly feminist or queer or postcolonial inflections—have any significance in other contexts outside of the United States, and especially outside the North Atlantic region.

This experience pushed me beyond where I had been when I edited the anthology *Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture*, published in English (1999) and Japanese (2000);⁴ here, I argue in my introduction that multiculturalist and postcolonialist ways of thinking have expanded English language feminisms' frame of reference within the context of and North American art history. When I wrote this introduction, I was unable to articulate how different feminist theories worked in different transnational locations outside of the regional context. Given my experience of traversing the Japanese and US feminist cultural studies in the United States might create international alliances, not in the sense of constructing universally valid analytical frameworks, but rather in the sense of creating to articulate transnationalist feminist visual cultural practices through, for example, exhibitions, curatorial practices, university hirings, as well as the organization of critics' speaker series and conferences.

It is in the spirit of thinking about such transnational practices in the arts within the United States that I became intrigued by a remarkable exhibition catalogue from 2001. Entitled *Text+Subtext: International Contemporary Asian Women Artists Exhibition* (2001), the catalogue focuses on the history of women's art both locally and internationally in the Asia Pacific Region.⁵ I was particularly attracted to it because it is one of the first in English by prominent women artists, critics, and curators from various countries in the Asia Pacific region, all of whom express their discontent with the existing system and the need for political participation and social empowerment through the development of international networking structures for women artists and critics. The big metropolitan areas in Asia such as Singapore, Seoul, Tokyo, Osaka, Beijing, Shanghai have seen over the growth of a critical core of articulate, educated, bilingual women art critics, and curators who, endowed with the ability to analyze critically their marginalized situation in a highly patriarchal global art world, are now making informed choices about the ways they want to adopt and arguing for access to positions of power in the art world.

NEGOTIATING FEMINISMS IN ASIAN WOMEN'S

This catalogue both documents the growth of Asian women's art and art criticism in countries such as Japan, China, the Philippines, Korea, Taiwan, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Australia, and Singapore, and theorizes its significance. It also draws attention to how the system of gender inequality in relation to Asian women has developed in the arts in these various countries and how defining features of Western feminism do not always neatly translate from one context to another. For example, the term "feminist" has different meanings and was not often used by the Asian women critics and artists in the catalogue. Presumably, this is in part because the term "feminist" is sometimes seen as a Western concept, and one that is often used pejoratively by Asian men to construct Asian women as outsiders to the nation.

Because many women are negotiating for rights and responsibilities from within strong patriarchal familial contexts in Asia, it is worth noting as well that Western notions of "individualism" and "self-determination" also do not resonate in Asia in the same way in which these concepts might in the United States or the United Kingdom. The 2000 performance piece by the Japanese artist Taro Ito, entitled *Me Being Me*, exemplifies this difference. As the only lesbian "coming out" performance piece in the exhibition and catalogue, it resembles a Western-style feminism in its emphasis on a bodily centered liberation. Yet, the piece explores not the artist's own individual autonomy but a relational selfhood, situated in the context of intimate relationships with her mother and grandmother (Figure 2.1).

Other pieces in the book, however, posit community and national group formations and relations, without an emphasis on the autobiographical or the familial. How this is done varies significantly. For example, the Chinese artist Zhang Xin's piece *Climate No. 6* explores how the process of women's self-performance generally takes place in China in relation not so much



Figure 2.1 Taro Ito, *Me being me*, performance, Singapore, 2000.

to familial structures but to economic, national, and social ones. The two parts of the installation present simultaneously the same image of the Chinese socialist heroine, Liu Hulan, killed by the Chinese Nationalists' army and then idolized in the Chinese media in the 1950s as representing the "spirit" of socialism of that time. One part of the installation is a video image of a heroic bust that was constructed of Liu Hulan during this period. The other part provides the background to a freestanding ice sculpture that represents the same bust now in the process of melting and being bottled into drinking water (Figure 2.2). This process of transformation from a bust made out of marble to one that is now marketed and sold as drinking water is meant in part to represent the commodification of China's past in the new market economy. Yet, the artist sees both past and present representations of Liu Hulan as incomplete. Thus Zhang Xin leaves the viewer to contemplate actively how China could reconsider their relationship to Liu Hulan outside of Marxist economic theory, which is often blind to gender issues.

Given the concern with inter-Asian diversity in this exhibition, the way in which "Asian" is used is significant since it is a term that does not always neatly translate



Figure 2.2 Zhang Xin, *Climate No. 6*, sculpture and video installation, 2000. Ice, stainless steel water cooler, drinking water, 200 cm x 85 cm x 40 cm.

context to another. Binghui Huangfu, the exhibition's curator, uses the term "Asian" very differently from the way in which the Japanese might have used it as a form of cultural hegemony. (In the past, the Japanese, as representatives of an old colonial power in Asia, used the term "Asian art" in the same spirit as Western critics would deploy "art" in general: inevitably in each case the broad definition would pretend to be inclusive but in practice would refer only to the art of the dominant culture using the term.) Huangfu also uses the term differently from the way in which Westerners might see it as merely a homogenizing description of a large group of people that live east of the Middle East and in an area bounded by the Indian and Pacific Oceans. For Huangfu,

[t]he word Asian carries with it many interpretations . . . Firstly Asian women are not a single group. Asia is made up of many different national components. Each one having differing causal and cultural conditions affecting the state of women. It is not even possible to make subgroupings as the cultural and economic environment in each country is different . . . When Asians use the term "Asian" . . . it does have a similar point of collective departure from the West but contains a subtle unifying understanding of the diversity of the cultural practice[s] contained within its various borders.⁶

There is a lot that US-based artists and critics can learn from a catalogue such as this one that documents and theorizes new women's art and critical practices in the Asia Pacific region.⁷ Such a resource enables the English-speaking feminist audience to see the connections between influential practices in various countries within Asia and more local practices by the diaspora artists and feminist cultural critics in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada; the authors and artists included in the catalogue elaborate a new kind of feminist art theory and practice in relation to issues of postcolonialism and transnationalism.

This is not to suggest, however, an easy commonality between the Asian women writers and artists in this catalogue and the diaspora feminist theorists whom it cites such as Gayatri Spivak and Trinh T. Minh-ha, theorists who work in the West and choose to subvert the dominant intellectual paradigm of the "First World" from within. Rather, what I am trying to suggest is that it is important to acknowledge the ways in which these different feminisms are being brought into dialogue with one another, in different cultural contexts outside of the West. This exhibition catalogue provides an example of such an inter-Asian exchange that puts women artists and critics working in the margins of various patriarchal nation-states (in the West as well as Asia) in a feminist dialogue with one another. In doing so, catalogues such as this one deserve attention for opening up the fields of feminist visual cultural studies and art history, which have otherwise been long constrained by a "grand narrative" of feminism that is restricted to the story of art within the West, relegating the experience of non-Western women artists working in other regional contexts to the margins of feminist art discourse.

Notes

1 See Maura Reilly, "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms," *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Merrell, and New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2007), 15–45. In the same catalogue, Joan Kee comments on how few women artists from Asian countries are included in the Venice Biennale, the largest of all the international exhibitions; Kee, "What is Feminist about Contemporary Asian Women's Art?" 108. In another article, "Trouble in New Utopia" (in *Positions* 2004, 12, no. 3, 667–86), she discusses how well known Asian women artists such as Mariko Mori and Lee Bul show their work internationally but are criticized for not being sufficiently representative of Japan or South Korea from more nationalist art critics in their home country.

- 2 In an article for the special issue on "Women Artists in Asia" for *C-Arts Magazine* (Singapore; Deepwell explains that "her figures of 20–30% [representation by female artists] generally: no matter who was curating the show, whether the curators were male or female, or who chosen for the biennale." Holland Cotter stresses the difficulties that Chinese women in p. in his article "China's Female Artists Quietly Emerge," *New York Times* (July 30, 2008), that "contemporary art in China is often a man's world" and it is significant that "there ar in the pantheon of multimillionaire artist-celebrities there."
- 3 Reilly, "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms," 19.
- 4 Lisa E. Bloom, ed., *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis of Minnesota Press, 1999); the Japanese translation has the same title (Tokyo: Saikisha, 2
- 5 *Text-Subtext: International Contemporary Asian Women Artists Exhibition* (Singapore: Earl LASALLE College of the Arts, 2000); for inquiries email: earllugallery@lasallesia.edu.sg tion catalogue has two parts: one includes the contributions of art critics, curators, and a and the other consists of statements made by the artists in the exhibition.
- 6 Binghui Huangfu, "Contemporary Art and Asian Women," *Text-Subtext*, 158.
- 7 It is significant that the curator Binghui Huangfu credits her interest in postcolonial and fer to the influence of Trinh T. Minh-ha and Lydia Liu among others. Note that the only fe from the North Atlantic region included in the catalogue of *Text-Subtext* is Katy Deepwell, historian who is the editor of the British journal, *n. Paradoxa: International Feminist Art for the few international feminist forums in English*. It is available on line at <http://web.uko n.paradoxa/index.htm>.

Chapter 3

JUDITH WILSON

ONE WAY OR ANOTHER¹

Black feminist visual theory

IN THIS ESSAY I WANT TO consider some of the reasons for, and con of, the embryonic state of what we might call "black feminist visual theory."² In tl I also hope to suggest at least some of what this discourse has the potential to b write dogged, however, by a rude mental chorus:

"We who?"

"The f-word! She used the f-word!"

"The road to racial/class/gender subordination is paved with theory . . ."

"Everybody knows that *visual* is synonymous with *superficial*. Get a (socially responsible intellectual) life!"

Because such protests have been addressed in depth elsewhere, I will respond o here.³