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Art Essay
Curating Transnational Feminisms

Maura Reilly

HOW MIGHT ONE CURATE an exhibit that represents, in art, “transnational feminisms”? In March 2007, Linda Nochlin and I took up this challenge for the inaugural exhibition of the Brooklyn Museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. For such an occasion, visitors might well have expected a broad overview of US feminist art from the 1970s to the present, situating the Sackler Center within the historical context of the women’s movement in the United States. Instead, Nochlin and I chose to focus the exhibition, *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, on feminist art worldwide. US feminist artists were certainly not slighted; but by looking beyond the borders of North America and Europe, we hoped to challenge what, we argue, is still a Western-centric art system. *Global Feminisms* was the first curatorial project to take transnational feminisms as its main subject.

The goal of the *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* exhibition was to forge an alternative narrative of art today by presenting a wide selection of young to mid-career women artists, all born after 1960, from an array of cultures, whose work visually manifests their identities (sociocultural, political, economic, racial, gender, sexual) in myriad innovative ways. At the same time, it fully acknowledged the profound differences in women’s lives and in the meanings of feminism worldwide. In other words, this all-women exhibition aimed to be inclusively transna-

tional, evading restrictive boundaries as it questioned the continued privileging of masculinist cultural production from Europe and the United States within the art market, cultural institutions, and exhibition practices. By extension, therefore, it also challenged the monocultural, so-called First World feminism that assumes a “sameness” among women. It hoped thereby to help open up a more flexible, less restrictive space for feminism as a worldwide activist project.

Global Feminisms embodied and mirrored the major transformations in feminist theory and contemporary art practice over the past few decades. It demonstrated the shifts from sameness toward difference, diversity, and finally transnationalism in the 1990s. It sought to include multiple voices: hyphenated artists living in the United States, nonhyphenated artists, non-Euro-Americans, exiles without homelands, nomads, and so on. It was not meant to be, however, a celebration of happy pluralisms, a United Nations-style parading of women-of-the-world, which would mistakenly purport to be what Gerardo Mosquera calls an “illusory triumph of a transterritorial world.”¹ Instead, Global Feminisms was a careful exploration of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls “common differences,”² which is to say, Global Feminisms explored the significant similarities as well as the contextual differences among women across and within cultures, races, classes, religions, sexualities, and so forth. Using a curatorial strategy that placed these diverse and similar works in dialogue, these “common differences,” which are context-dependent, complex, and fluid, are underscored, generating fresh approaches to feminist artistic production in a transnational age.

In order to highlight the disparities, the particularized differences, and the necessarily variegated responses of women artists to similar thematic material (e.g., hysteria, death, pain, old age, war, sex, motherhood, race), the exhibition’s installation at the Brooklyn Museum did not follow a linear chronology, nor a geographic delineation, but was instead organized loosely into four sections within which the works could overlap: Life Cycles, Identities, Politics, and Emotions. Life Cycles charted the stages of life, from birth to death, but *not* in a traditional fashion, of course; Identities investigated the multifarious notions of self (be they racial, gender, cyborg, political, religious, or otherwise); Politics examined the world through the

eyes of women artists whose overt declarations demonstrated that the political has now become deeply personal (the inverse of the 1970s' feminist dictum "The personal is political"); and the final section, Emotions, presented artists self-consciously parodying, often through hyperbole, the conventional idea of women as emotional creatures or victims.

The four sections in which the exhibition was installed at the Brooklyn Museum should not be understood as universal categories but rather as an attempt to organize the works as broadly as possible based on recurring subjects and concepts that arose during the course of our research. In bringing together such a large selection of works by women from across the globe, we hope that current and future viewers will make different connections than we did. Thus, despite the fact that our version of the exhibition was organized into four sections, we encourage subsequent venues, viewers, and scholars to emphasize other relationships among the works and to create different associations and connections, of which there are an infinitude.

The looseness of the four categories—Life Cycles, Identities, Politics, and Emotions—also allowed for a wide range of artists to be exhibited and shown in juxtaposition to others whose modes of practice and sociocultural, racial, economic, and personal situations might be radically different from their own. This type of relational analysis, which places diverse, transnational works by women in dialogic relation with careful attention to complicated histories, seeks to produce new insights into feminist art today.

If we examine the artists in the exhibition who explore motherhood as a topic, for instance, the differences in content, form, and modes of address are striking. Australian artist Patricia Piccinini's *Big Mother* (fig. 3) consists of a hairy, six-foot tall, female Neanderthal who suckles a human baby, with a bright-blue leather-studded diaper bag in the ready at her side; while from Japan, Hiroko Okada's *Future Plan* offers up a utopian option for childrearing: in her future, hairy-bellied, smiling men will become pregnant and happily carry the burden. Men can certainly be mothers, so can eunuchs. In a series of photographs begun in 1990, Indian photographer Dayanita Singh has been documenting the life of Mona Ahmed, a *hijra* (eunuch) living in a rural village in India with her stepdaughter, Ayesha (fig. 1). Singh's photographs challenge many assump-

tions about what constitutes maternity and what it has to do with one's sex and/or gender. Catherine Opie's *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (fig. 2) similarly subverts tropes of normalcy. In it, she presents herself as an aging, nursing mother, whose gaze lovingly meets that of her oversized, one-year-old son, Oliver. The ghostly remnant of a scratching on her chest in fanciful script reading "Pervert" reminds viewers knowledgeable about her work of an earlier *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, which shows the artist in full sadomasochist regalia replete with leather mask and pants, naked torso, and forty-six metal pins piercing her arms. Opie's vision of motherly intimacy, while clearly subverting traditional heterosexual notions of what is "normal," is innocent and pleasant when seen in juxtaposition to Swiss video-artist Emmanuelle Antille's video *Night for Day*, which portrays bizarre, creepy moments shared between a grown woman (the artist herself) and her mother, including scenes in which the mother bites her daughter's thighs, scrubs her back with a sponge, and places a red dress upon her recumbent, seemingly corpse-like body.

A curatorial strategy of relational analysis, such as the one employed in the Global Feminisms exhibition, also allows us to reread political, activist, religious, anticolonialist, environmental, and other work as, in Ella Shohat's words, a kind of "subterranean, unrecognized form of feminism." Shohat has argued that this kind of work is often left out of Euro-American trajectories of feminism, because it is not "cast exclusively around terms of sexual difference." She argues that the participation of colonized women in anticolonialist, antipatriarchal, and antiheterosexist movements, which have not been "read" as relevant to feminist studies, often led to direct political engagement with feminism.³ One section of the exhibition reflected on this kind of female political agency and activism, including photographs by the Beijing-based artist Yin Xiuzhen, who has documented *Washing the River* (fig. 6), an action-performance in which the artist and passersby cleaned polluted blocks of ice before returning them to a river in Chengdu, China. Nearby is a video by the Afghan artist Lida Abdul, titled *White House*, which shows the artist silently whitewashing two bombed-out structures near Kabul, Afghanistan. The Israeli video-artist Sigalit Landau swings a barbed hula hoop around her bloody, naked midriff in *Barbed Hula* (fig. 4), her pain a

symbol of the geographic barrier created along the West Bank to delineate land between Palestine and Israel.

Women across the globe face varying limits on their artistic expression, as well as fears of censorship, imprisonment, and exile. In 1983, under the Suharto dictatorship, the Indonesian artist Arahmaiani was imprisoned and interrogated for a month after a performance in which she had drawn pictures of tanks and weapons on the streets. Then, in 1994, she was involved in a major controversy that centered on two works she had included in a solo exhibition called *Sex, Religion, and Coca-Cola* at an alternative space in Jakarta. The two works, *Display Case (Etalase)* and *Lingga-Yoni*, the former included in *Global Feminisms*, were so offensive to a group of Islamic fundamentalists that they were immediately censored, and death threats were leveled at the artist. At first glance, it is easier perhaps for us



Figure 1
Mona with Baby Ayesha, 1990
Dayanita Singh (India)
Gelatin silver print, 12 x 18 inches



Figure 2, left
Self-Portrait/Nursing, 2004
Catherine Opie (United States)
Chromogenic print,
edition of 8, 40 x 32 inches
Courtesy of Regen Projects, Los Angeles

Figure 3, right
Big Mother, 2005
Patricia Piccinini (Australia)
Silicone, fiberglass, leather, human hair
edition of 3, 175 cm. high
Photo: Graham Baring, Courtesy of the artist







Figure 4, above
Barbed Hula, 2000
Sigalit Landau (Israel)
Single-channel DVD, loop,
color, 1 min. 52 sec.
Courtesy of the artist

Figure 5, left
Venus Baartman, 2001
Tracey Rose (South Africa)
Lambda print, 47 x 47 inches





Figure 6, opposite page
Washing the River, 1995
Yin Xiuzhen (China)
Set of 4 chromogenic photographs,
edition of 12, each 31 1/2 x 47 1/2 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Chambers Fine Art



Figure 7, left
Singing Prohibited
(*Prohibido el cante*), 2000
Pilar Albarracín (Spain)
Video, color, sound, 6 min. 20 sec.
Courtesy of the artist © Pilar Albarracín



Figure 8, overleaf
School Days/E,
from the *School Days* series, 2004
Tomoko Sawada (Japan)
Chromogenic print, 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches
Courtesy of MEM Gallery, Osaka









Figure 9
Detail from Blind Spot series, 2001.
Parastou Forouhar (Iran)

to understand why the painting *Lingga-Yoni* was threatening to the Muslim public: it displays a penis and vagina. However, it was *Display Case* that was the more controversial. The piece shows a photograph, Buddha, Coca-Cola bottle, fan, the Qur'an, Patkwa mirror, drum, condoms, and sand. It was the combination of sexual with religious imagery that was the most blasphemous, according to the local press. After the public outcry, and out of fear for her safety, Arahmaiani fled to Australia, where she remained in exile for a few years before returning to Indonesia. (Incidentally, *Global Feminisms* was only the second time since 1994 that Arahmaiani was able to present *Display Case*, the other occasion being at the Asia Society in New York in 1996.)

More recently, in 2002, a few days before the opening of her exhibition of photographs, *Blind Spot* (fig. 9), at the Golestan Art Gallery in Tehran, the Iranian artist Parastou Forouhar was censored by the Iranian Cultural Ministry. *Blind Spot* is a series of photographs depicting a gender-ambiguous human figure veiled from head to foot, its protruding head a whited-out or bulbous wooden form beneath a chador. In protest against the censorship, the artist exhibited the empty frames on the wall on opening night. To her delight, many people came in support, and some even purchased the frames. The show closed after one day. Interestingly, the series of photographs had been exhibited just one year prior, during the Berlin Biennial of 2001, as large outdoor murals sprinkled throughout the city streets and at sites such as the former Checkpoint Charlie. It is interesting to think about how this series is received in different contexts, how it translates, mistranslates, and reanimates as it travels from one culture to another.

Emily Jacir's video installation *Crossing Surda (A Record of Going to and from Work)* was also born out of the limitations and censorship of her artistic voice. After a humiliating experience in which the artist was held at gunpoint at the militarized Surda checkpoint for three hours in freezing rain by an Israeli soldier who had thrown her US passport in the mud, the Palestinian American artist began her 132-minute video piece by secretly and illegally recording a week of her daily crossings as she traveled within the West Bank from Ramallah to Birzeit University. The two-channel video documents

Jacir's everyday commute to and from work through some banal, some harrowing, circumstances that have somehow become normal.

That identities can be "contradictory, partial and strategic,"⁴ in the words of Donna J. Haraway, is an idea that is central to Global Feminisms, which embraced anti-essentialist concepts because it recognized that identities (self, gender, racial, class, and so forth) are fluid and never stable. British artist Tracey Emin interviews her bad and her good selves in *The Interview*; Kate Beynon's playful images constantly negotiate her hybrid identity, which she defines as "Chinese (from Malaysia)/Welsh/Hong-Kong-born/'multiple migrant'/Australian." In her illustrations and paintings, which are drawn stylistically from cartoon and comic-book graphics, Chinese text and calligraphy, traditional Chinese art, animation, and graffiti art, the recurring character Li Ji (inspired by a fourth-century story from China called "The Girl Who Killed the Python") has become a contemporary warrior girl who confronts issues surrounding immigration, multiculturalism, and indigenous Australian rights.

Many of the artists in the exhibition perform the role of the exotic, histrionic, transgender, and/or abject "other" so as to deliberately overturn derogatory or restrictive stereotypes. South African artist Tracey Rose masquerades as the Hottentot Venus crouching in the verdant African bush, in an homage to Saartjie Baartman (fig. 5), the young Khoisan woman who was brought from South Africa to Europe in 1810, where she was displayed as a public spectacle because of her large buttocks and genitalia. In her music video *Absolute Exotic*, Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen, a Filipino Danish artist, performs the role of the exotic Asian dancer while rapping about interracial relations and ethnic minorities in Denmark; Spanish artist Pilar Albarracín parodies clichés of Spanish womanhood, from flamenco dancers and histrionic "gypsy" singers (fig. 7) to a diva fleeing the streets of Madrid, trying to shake off musicians pursuing her with a traditional *paso doble*, in *Long Live Spain (Viva España)*.

While the performativity of identity underscores its constructed nature, so does its proliferation, as is visible in the work of Japanese artist Tomoko Sawada, who obsessively superimposes her "schoolgirl" face onto traditional class photography portraits (fig. 8). In one persona, she is a hipster teen with dreadlocks; in another, she is the frumpy schoolteacher.

Sawada's "self-portraits," if one can call them that, also comment on the Eurocentric misconception that all Asians look alike, placing the viewer in a complicit position as s/he scrolls the rows of schoolgirls looking for subtle physiognomic, sartorial, light- versus dark-skinned, or other differences among sameness. In the tradition of the feminist photographers Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura, Sawada's is a complex game of gender and race deconstruction.

That gender is also "a kind of imitation for which there is no original,"⁵ as Judith Butler tells us, can be demonstrated by British painter Jenny Saville's oil sketch for *Passage*, a larger-than-life painting of a naked, fleshy, male-to-female transsexual in a semi-recumbent, come-hither pose. S/he looks out expectantly at the viewer, heavy-lidded eyes, pink lips pursed, arms back, silicone breasts up, legs splayed to expose her belly, thighs, and penis, all set against a background of warm Mediterranean blue. Saville presents the viewer with a "gender outlaw," a liminal figure irreducible to one gender or sex. As the artist explains, "I wanted to paint a visual passage through gender—a sort of gender landscape."⁶

When seen in juxtaposition to works in the exhibition that examine similar thematic material, the particularized and related responses of women artists in very specific situations become all the more acute. Exhibited near the Saville sketch is a cyborg sculpture by the South Korean artist Lee Bul. Hybrids of machines and organisms, cyborgs are celebrated by cyberfeminists as creatures in "a monstrous world without gender," as Haraway explains.⁷ Like Saville's sitter, Lee's cyborg sculpture is devoid of simple definition: an un- or de-sexed, three-legged creature with a long tail or braid of glass beads. Adjacent to that object, the US artist Cass Bird offers a photograph of a gender-ambiguous individual with cutoff shirt, tattoos, and a baseball cap bearing the words "I Look Just Like My Daddy."

Common differences between and among women transnationally are also underscored by comparing Singh's images with Oreet Ashery's *Self-Portrait as Marcus Fisher*, which shows the Israeli artist in drag as a Hasidic rabbi with *peyot*, looking down at her large, exposed breast, or with Latifa Echakhch's self-portrait in which the Moroccan artist is shown with cropped hair seated atop a Muslim prayer rug wearing androgynous attire and a traditional prayer hat. Using World War II "pinups" as her source

material, Echakhch plays with the limits of seduction and provocation: she is a Muslim woman cross-dressed as a *jeune croyant* (youthful believer) who glances seductively at the viewer while touching her exposed foot—a gesture that is considered taboo in the Islamic religion, according to the artist. Although a certain amount of irony is present in the work, it also investigates the strict religious and social codes prevalent in the Muslim community, within which nonbelievers and especially women are made to feel like outsiders.

In 1970s' and 1980s' Second Wave feminism, the war against sexism often took precedence over concern with racism or homophobia in the ranks. There was a general fear that a focus on differences other than sex and/or gender would result in the dissolution of the larger feminist agenda against sexism and that the goal of female empowerment would be diminished. This precise argument, although under a different academic guise, is being used today by many against those who are interested in pursuing a multicultural or transnational feminism for fear that its focus on multiple differences (race, class, sexual, religious, and so forth) will lead to political relativism or fragment the movement into multiple "isms" with no central focus. Instead of discovering power in the difference of our shared struggles *as women*, to some difference has come to mean disunity. Global Feminisms countered that by demonstrating that difference does not have to pose an a priori danger to unity and alliance. It is only through the understanding of our "common differences," as we have visually emphasized through the careful placement of diverse cross-cultural works in the exhibition, that solidarity is achieved. In the end, Global Feminisms hopes to have contributed productively to this and other dialogues about racism, sexism, and Euro-America-centrism in contemporary art.

NOTES

This essay is adapted from Maura Reilly, "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms," in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (London: Merrell, 2007), 15-45. The volume is the catalog for the exhibition, which opened at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in March 2007.

1. Gerardo Mosquera, "Notes on Globalization, Art, and Cultural Difference," in *Silent Zones: On Globalization and Cultural Interaction* (Amsterdam: RAIN, 2001).
2. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "'Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggle," in her *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 244.
3. Ella Shohat, "Area Studies, Transnationalism, and the Feminist Production of Knowledge," *Signs* 26 (Summer 2001): 1270.
4. Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in her *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 155.
5. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 21.
6. Jenny Saville, interview with Simon Schama, in *Jenny Saville* (New York: Rizzoli in association with the Gagosian Gallery, 2005), 126.
7. Haraway, "Cyborg Manifesto," 181.