Chapter 3

LISA BLOOM

CREATING TRANSNATIONAL WOMEN'S ART NETWORKS

WHEN I BEGAN FORMULATING MY IDEAS for this article, I was grappling with the challenges of conducting a professional life in Japan and the U.S. From 1998 to 2001 I taught in the first Women's Studies Ph.D. program in Japan at Josai International University (Chiba Prefecture); I am currently visiting faculty at the University of California, San Diego, in the Visual Arts Department. It was my experience of traveling between cultures that made me confront the question of whether or not feminist theories and ways of framing questions in feminist visual culture emanating from the U.S. – be these strictly feminist, or with a queer or postcolonial inflection – have any significance in other contexts outside of the U.S., and more especially outside the North Atlantic region.

This experience pushed me beyond where I had been when I edited the anthology *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture*, published in English (1999) and Japanese (2000);[1] here, I argue in my introduction that multiculturalist and postcolonialist ways of seeing have expanded English-language feminisms' frame of reference within the context of European and North American art history. When I wrote this introduction, I was unable to address how different feminist theories worked in different transnational locations outside of that limited regional context. Given my experience of traversing the Japanese and U.S. feminist contexts, it seems to me that it is crucial at this point to think about how feminist theorists in visual cultural studies in the U.S. might create international alliances, not in the sense of constructing universally valid analytical frameworks, but rather in the sense of creating a space to articulate transnationalist feminist visual cultural practices through, for example, traveling exhibitions, curatorial practices, university hirings, as well as the organization of artists' and critics' speaker series and conferences.

It is in the spirit of thinking about how such transnational practices in the arts work outside the U.S. that I became intrigued by a remarkable exhibition catalogue from Singapore. Entitled *Text-Subtext: International Contemporary Asian Women Artists Exhibition* (2000), the catalogue focuses on the history of women's art both locally and internationally within the Asia Pacific Region.[2] I was particularly attracted to it because it is one of the first catalogues in English by prominent women artists, critics, and curators from various countries within the Asia Pacific region, all of whom express their discontent with the existing system and stress the need for political participation and social empowerment through the development of adequate international networking structures for women artists and critics. The big metropolitan cities in Asia such as Singapore, Seoul, Tokyo, Osaka, Beijing, among others, have seen over the years the growth of a critical core of articulate, educated, bilingual women art

critics, artists, and curators who, endowed with the ability to analyze critically their marginalized situations within a highly patriarchal global art world, are now making informed choices about the roles they want to adopt and arguing for access to positions of power in the art world.

This catalogue is both about documenting 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 about theorizing its significance. It also draws attention to how the system of gender inequality for 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 these concepts might in the U.S. or the U.K. The 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 less the artist's own individual autonomy but a relational selfhood, situated in the context of intimate relationships with her mother and grandmother [Figure 3.1].

Other pieces in the exhibit, 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 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, who was killed by the Chinese Nationalists' army and then idolized in the Chinese media during the 1950s as representing the "spirit" of socialism of that time. One part of the installation presents a video image of a heroic bust that was constructed of Liu Hulan during this period, which provides the background to a free-standing ice sculpture that represents the same bust of Hulan, now in the process of melting and being bottled into drinking water [Figure 3.2]. This process of transformation from a bust made out of marble to one that is now marketed and consumed as drinking water is meant in part to represent the commodification of China's past within its 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 Chinese women could reconsider their relationship to Liu Hulan outside of Marxist economic theories, which are often blind to gender issues.

Given the concern with inter-Asian diversity in this exhibition, how the word "Asian" is used is significant since it is a term that does not always neatly translate from one context to another. Binghui Huangfu, the exhibition's curator, uses the term "Asian" very differently from how 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

Figure 3.1 Taro Ito, *Me Being Me*, 2000, performance, Singapore.

dominant culture using the term). Huangfu also uses the term differently from how 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.[3]

There is a lot that U.S.-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.[4] 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 U.S., the U.K., 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.

Figure 3.2 Zhang Xin, *Climate No. 6*, 2000, sculpture and video installation. Ice, stainless steel, glass, water cooler, drinking water. 200 × 85 × 40 cm.

This is not to suggest, however, an easy commonality between the Asian women writers and artists in this catalogue and the diaspora feminist theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and Trinh T. Minh-ha whom it cites, 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 field of feminist visual cultural studies, which has 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 Lisa Bloom, ed., *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); the Japanese translation has the same title (Tokyo: Saiki-sha, 2000).

2 *Text-Subtext: International Contemporary Asian Women Artists Exhibition* (Singapore: Earl Lu Gallery, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, 2000); for inquiries e-mail: earllugallery@lasallesia.edu.sg. The exhibition catalogue has two parts: one includes the contributions of art critics, curators, and art historians, and the other consists of statements made by the artists in the exhibition.

3 Binghui Huangfu, "Contemporary Art and Asian Women," *Text-Subtext,* 158.

4 It is significant that the curator Binghui Huangfu credits her interest in postcolonial and feminist theory to the influence of Trinh T. Minh-ha and Lydia Liu among others. Note that the only feminist critic from the North Atlantic Region included in the catalogue of *Text-Subtext* is Katy Deepwell, a British art historian who is the editor of the British journal, *n.Paradoxa: International Feminist Art Journal*, one of the few international feminist forums in English. It is available on-line at <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/index.htm>, and in print, through KT press, 38 Bellot Street, London SE10 0AQ, U.K.

Chapter 4

JUDITH WILSON

ONE WAY OR ANOTHER[1]
Black feminist visual theory

IN THIS ESSAY I WANT TO consider some of the reasons for, and consequences of, the embryonic state of what we might call "black feminist visual theory."[2] In the process, I also hope to suggest at least some of what this discourse has the potential to be or do. I 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 only briefly here:[3]

1 By "we" I mean myself and this text's readers, a self-selected audience that shares at least a curiosity about, or willingness to consider, the results of a conjunction between black and feminist ideas about the visual.

2, 3, and 4 I have been a feminist since my senior year in college, when a close friend and black political comrade dashed across the campus lawn with the news "We were wrong about feminism! You have to read *The Second Sex*!"

It was 1973 and having already read Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, I was struck by the parallel role of vision in Simone de Beauvoir and Fanon's respective ontologies of gender and race. It would be another decade before their shared references to Lacan's "mirror stage" meant anything to me, and I have only recently learned the difference between the Lacanian "gaze" and the Sartrean "look" with which they were preoccupied.[4] Meanwhile, I seized the "f-word" gladly – not only because de Beauvoir's insights illuminated so many of my own experiences as a daughter, sister, student, worker, and lover. The breathtaking depth and range of her thinking was as important to me as its ideological content.

Like Fanon, by sheer intellectual force de Beauvoir blew out the jambs of mental prisons I'd grown up squirming inside. That she was white and European bothered me no more than Fanon's having been male. Both were "Others" who'd stolen white patriarchal fire to blaze liberatory trails. While each has been usefully critiqued in recent years, their radical impact remains my benchmark for the critical potential of "theory."[5]

Having come to believe that race, gender, and the visual structure one another in a complex set of interlocking, epistemological feedback loops, I have lost faith in the explanatory power of singular approaches to these cultural constructs. Yet, I am also acutely aware that linking the words "black," "feminist," "visual," and "theory" poses difficult problems. To be intelligible, terminology must be shared by members of discursive communities. As such, it reveals collective horizons of thought. The adjectives "feminist" and "visual," for example, can each be used to modify the noun "theory" in ways that will make sense to most readers of this essay. But "black theory," what is that? Theory practiced by black people? (If so, who is black? And how is theory produced by such people different from theory produced by other kinds of people?) Theory about blackness? (Then what is blackness? A category, a quality, an ideology, an experience, or some combination of these?)

Similarly, if we link the adjectives in sets of two, some pairings "work," others do not: the coherence of "black feminist theory" stems from the term's use for more than a decade as much as from the elaboration of its project during that time. Less familiar and less clearly defined, "feminist visual theory" and "black visual theory" nonetheless sound feasible. But reversing the modifiers ("feminist black theory," "visual feminist theory," "visual black theory"), in each case yields cognitive dissonance, stranding us at the limit of contemporary thought.

This, of course, is a function of the differential statuses of theoretical discourses around race, gender, and the visual – a situation, in turn, rooted in material relations of cultural privilege and institutionalized power. But it also reflects the fundamental incommensurability of the terms "black," "feminist," and "visual" – the first a social category, the second a political orientation, while the third can be (both/and, either/or) a mode of sensory perception, a category of cultural phenomena. I belabor these semantic points because they remind us of factors easily overlooked or forgotten in the rush to be intellectually inclusive or included: without discursive communities – groups whose members share values, interests, goals – new knowledges cannot thrive. And, while disparate discourses may be usefully combined, their tendency to function unevenly – in dynamic tension with one another, rather than isomorphically – must be taken into account.

So far, black feminist and visual theory have intersected at two primary sites: the black female body and the gaze.[6] Focusing on the former has made plain the futility of attempts to