

Productive Risk: Ethnicity and Gender as Contingent Categories

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One gender-disturbing message might be – in terms both of identity and space – keep moving!
– Doreen Massey¹

No more bad girls? This very title begs another question: Namely, what kind of echo might be triggered by the current pronouncements of venerable 'discourse queens', who suggest a certain "sexiness" when it comes to the most recent debates on exhibitions referencing feminism.² Yet, as much as the critique of apparently contemporary "post-political (post-feminist-/gender-) universe"³ gets to the heart of the matter, it also un.masks and demands a differentiated examination of the situation at hand, one defined and characterized by productive risk. The fact that debates of post-feminism and gender have become fashionable (e.g. even as labels for coffee table books) not only raises some alarming red flags about how banal a political movement has become, but it also re-enforces simultaneously its canonization within the art world.⁴ Although one can but concur with current debates about the absence of so-called "harsh positions" in relationship to the "Second Wave Feminism" from the 1960s and '70s, these discourse-inherent charges nevertheless refer to a nostalgic self-referentiality.⁵

Has the history of (post)feminism and, respectively, of gender studies really already been written? Could it be that norms of gender today – not only within, but also outside the US and Europe – need not be challenged anymore? How about the collision of ethnic power structures with gender-specific ones? Is an admonishing inquiry into the degree of political claims and the sometimes only imagined historical linearity of feminist art and discourse itself perhaps ending up in a cul-de-sac of internal ethnocentric hegemonies of interpretation? And, could it be that those of us who are presently engaged in these power struggles are paradoxically losing sight of critical perceptions of the continuous, complex discrimination of women in a geopolitical context?

Art and science: ethnicity and gender in German language contexts

Art historical research in German language contexts seems to only hesitatingly reflect upon the Eurocentric entanglements of its own discipline.⁶ Yet, visual art is not free from mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Not only is the critical field of cultural studies heavily neglected, but art theory in German language contexts has only recently linked categories of "race" and "geography" with those of gender discourses – a fact that contributes to the rather vague development of alternative terminology to replace stereotypical patterns of classification. Furthermore, the field of discourses spread out between art

work, museum praxis,⁷ and art theory is constituted as heterogeneous and is, thus, as divided as women's movements themselves. As a result of the persistent perpetuation of differences, power structures and hierarchies are sustained. And, with this, (post)feminism – in both production and reception – perpetuates a universally 'white' perspective: Its generalizing linearity in the development of origin, influence, and progress remains irresolvable, even as these progressive narratives imagine how time trumps space:

These patterns presuppose the self-same progress narratives that demonstrated the victory of time over space, and, in exploring feminist praxis, their effect is to produce not a critical cartography, but an uncritical chronology. – Marsha Meskimmon⁸

Furthermore, the fact that the voices in postcolonial studies speak from the position of an androcentric universalization needs to be taken into account. The total levelling of differences leaves no leeway for the mutual assimilation of cultures and stigmatizes differences as "local fundamentalisms".⁹ Although Homi Bhabha's notion of hybrids lays bare the ambivalences of (de)colonization processes and opens perspectives of a mutual assimilation of cultures, it simultaneously betrays tendencies of de-historicization. Thus, strongly conflicting differences between cultures may not be reconciled. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial feminist critique, almost unexceptionally all of the male theoreticians neglect the lifeworlds of indigenous women.¹⁰ Chandra Talpade Mohanty shows how (post)feminism imagines women of the so-called third world as homogeneous subjects due to an intermitently missing self-reflection of the researcher's gaze.¹¹

For this reason and in this respect, art theoreticians, as well as cultural producers, e.g. artists and curators, should take a productive risk in the future. First of all, a self-reflexive clarification of the beholder's perspective is required to acknowledge complex power structures, while developing alternative parameters of evaluation, and counter-discourses. The musings of autonomous subjects are to be rejected in order to integrate external dependencies and to be mindful of diversities as well as internal differences.¹² Thereby, concordances and interdependencies between (post)feminist, gender studies and (post)postcolonial topics of theoretical research may be brought into close proximity. Only a change in such perspectives, which also takes mediality into account, can open opportunities for possible resistance through social and artistic procedures of intervention. Particular attention needs to be paid to the fact that representations are communicated through diverse media, which themselves generate varied meanings, just as art itself produces its own encodings:

First of all, the focus still remains with an analysis of a(n) (objectively perceptible) content, without considering the conditioning of content through media, but also its symbolism and history, its self-reflective doubling, allegorisation and metaphorisation. – Marianne Koos¹³

It is necessary to re-orient our visual axis and to position ourselves as participants in a different kind of dialogue, whereby we re-evaluate our connections with history, re-negotiate our roles in the present, and think differently about our curatorial agendas of the gaze in the future.¹⁴

Cartographies as "conceptual decolonisation"

In recent years, gender-specific art theory and research has developed a particular attention to space as a new paradigm.¹⁵ Doreen Massey's critique of the apparent victory of time over space¹⁶ has been differentiated by Marsha Meskimmon for the art context in order to develop "critical cartographies"¹⁷ – beyond the tunnel vision of "uncritical chronologies", which, a priori, would resist rigid categorization. A process of "conceptual decolonization"¹⁸ could set forth a transcultural global dialogue instead, one that also takes into account how meanings are often separated by spatial, discursive parameters or simply by geography. A consideration of location-specific affinities allows for a differing praxis of narratives and art.¹⁹ An uncovering of gaps in historical meta-narratives (i.e. sociological, cultural and geopolitical) can account for the timely specifics of cultural producers and re-unite temporalities that have been ripped apart. An investigation of contemporary economic and geopolitical alliances opens a productive dialogue in which (post)feminist art, and the exchange of creative strategies pertaining to it, are perceived explicitly of as being complex, affected by various nuances of artistic procedures.²⁰

If with this productive dialogue, differences²¹ are understood as being similarly productive, the contingency of art²² produced by women becomes perceptible with respect to their historic residues and their specific media/materiality.²³ Such an emphasis on ethnicity and gender as contingent categories negates immutable truths such as ideas of authenticity; instead, it incorporates complex and challenging differences within women's art praxis as diversified, heterogeneous and, above all, mobile subjects who resist the paradigms of Western norms.²⁴ Therefore, subalterns are no longer just victims or a canvas for critical projections; rather, in accordance with Spivak, they now take on an active role in (post)colonial cultural production themselves and should be perceived as such.²⁵ Specifically, in the context of video art, Ewa Lajer-Burcharth exemplifies a new generation of young female artists in the early-21st century with an "unpossessing femininity".²⁶ Such artistic positions claim their space, yet explicitly refer to it as being contingent to their art.

Women's art praxis as multiple categories of variable identities

Beyond white, canonical feminism, the exhibition *No more bad girls?* offers a focus on video art and photography, whose perspectives of "locational affinities"²⁷ are meant to set in motion a productive transcultural dialogue.²⁸ According to Meskimmon, marking differences productively means to incorporate processes – more specifically, to shift the gaze from representation to articulation, examining the interplay of image and text while considering the mutual interdependencies between individual and collective.²⁹ Instead of perpetuating the polarisations of man/woman, black/white, subject/object, centre/periphery, these dichotomous categories could be fragmented.³⁰ As Meskimmon explains, these alternative cartographies "are maps of affinity rather than influence, and they recognize the possibility of multiple networks of relations between 'feminisms', art, and ideas across a global geopolitical sphere."³¹

Beyond binary categories, identities must be recognized as being fluid and variable.³² This is one of the reasons why the exhibition incorporates the social situation of migrants, sexual orientation, social status, religion, age, nationality, and colour or ethnic heritage.³² As such, the women's art praxis shown in this exhibition is not set as a homogeneous category. Rather, the aim here is that it should open up possibilities of representation, to reveal discriminating discourses of difference in contemporary art. However, above all, the exhibition offers to undermine normative encodings of gender and ethnic stereotypes as well as their fictions in pluralistic societies. What is favoured is a new set of epistemologies (those explicitly contradictory as well as complex), which can negotiate productively the ambivalence of processed identities and illuminate any fragmentations within discourses.

Such a postcolonial iconography or system of representational symbols opens up the possibility for a cartography of "diasporic doubles and multiple meanings"³⁴. This allows for a critical shifting of representations, a definition of new localities, and the achievement of translations. Thematically, the artists of the exhibition deal with the ethnicisation and sexualisation of collective bodies; the comparison of script-based and image-based societies; the overlapping of familiar images with symbols of foreign cultures through the global circulation of images; the new role of the body in discussions of cultural studies concerning the contemplation of images of foreign cultures; the re-definition of male-dominated art discourses; the female artist and her "mother role" in society; bearing witness to the denial of violence against women; female postcolonial images of travel, and the exclusion of black women from forms of representation and memories.

But, the idea that one could just abandon discourse still seems rather romantic in the face of global hegemonic power structures. Both production and reception of contemporary art in the context of gender, ethnicity, and mediality are constituted as a productive risk. Even more so, the tight rope act between affirmation and subversion of differences (and clichés) in art and discourse still seems to continue for the time being.

No more bad girls?

In her huge bag-type sculpture, *I Love You* (2009), **Arahmaiani** visualizes the stereotypes and negative encodings with which Arabic characters have come to be fraught, especially in a post-9/11 world. The artist challenges the perception and interpretation of the "Jawi" letters (the Malay form of Arabic script) sown from fabric which seems to oscillate iridescently between a transcultural urge for contact and its repudiation. In another twist of meaning, the look and feel of the fabric questions the semantics of surfaces of the (female) body.

In her video performance, *Melons (At a Loss)* (1998), **Patty Chang** addresses her aunt's lethal breast cancer, while at the same time hinting at – besides inferring Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) – the connections between the female body, nature, and fertility, which have never been perfectly tamed [nor acquiesced]. In this piece, the artist slices through one of two cantaloupes dangling from her x-large bra and, then, spoons pulp into her mouth. The artist is perfectly conscious of

the fact that her Asian physiognomy is present in the video.

In her video performance, *Veiling and Reveiling* (2009), **Nezaket Ekici** caricatures clichés of projections onto other cultural spheres as her ambiguous, reversed-gaze reveals how identity and representation are interwoven mutually. On the one hand, the chador that the artist wears represents, in the West, a symbol of the suppression of women; while, on the other, Ekici's masquerading questions how, in the Islamic societies, stereotypical clichés of Western women are also imagined – as always being sexy, dressed in lingerie, and wearing glaring make up.

In her machine sculpture, *Galatean Heritage* (2007), **Judith Fegerl** triggers questions of authorship and reproduction. Fegerl's hybrid aesthetics make clear how female artists today develop their own forms of representation, beyond passively-connoted modes of production. Within the context of the (male-produced) pictures of time-transcending artist heroes, the artist herself refuses to endorse such male longings for self-reproduction, which has a long history of connotation within the art circuit as such "bachelor machine(s)" by Marcel Duchamp and Harald Szeemann.

In her video performance, *PERRA* (2005), **Regina José Galindo** alludes to "Second Wave Feminism" and Leslie Labowitz, Suzanne Lacey, and Bia Lowe in the performance *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977) – although, here, the artist acts violently against herself. Galindo cuts the word "perra" (Spanish for "bitch" and/or "whore") into her flesh to visualize how sexual violence committed at the hands of men is inscribed traumatically – both metaphorically and physically – into the bodies of Guatemalan women.³⁵

In her large format series, *The Unknowns* (2009), **Chitra Ganesh** quotes feminine images, which overlap in a collage of anonymous female subjects, B-movies of the 1960s and '70s, paintings from the period of French orientalism, documentary photography of prostitutes, and studio photography from India. Ganesh shows how exotic images of femininity – after they have been removed from their respective cultural contexts – circulate globally and are given new meaning by the mass media.

Mathilde ter Heijne comes to terms with her journey to the matriarchal Mosuo ethnic group in China. Here, in contrast with the masculine-encoded image of the explorer, the particularities of the feminine gaze are revealed in order to realize one's own emancipation.³⁶ Although the risk of a (re)stabilisation of dichotomies needs to be taken, the documentary media used (i.e. radio play *Further Than We've Gone* [2009], video *Constructing Matriarchy* [2007]), in response to pop-cultural media (e.g. comic *The Empire of Women – Not a fairy Tale*, [2007]), do offer post-feminist perspectives.

In her eighteen part poster installation *People of the Book* (2003) **Maryam Jafri** deals with the perception of Islam in Western cultures. Her project unfolds from the first contacts of colonisers with the Arabic world up to the questions of how fictitious narratives of ethnicities circulate in today's societies and how reality is distorted by representation. From a migrant's perspective, the artist creates cartographies of shared interests as much as tensions between postcolonialism and (post)feminism.

In her series of small format photographs, *My Mom's Diary* (2009), **Agnes**

Janich refers back to the figure of the Polish mother as a pathetically occupied, projection screen for concepts of motherhood in the public sphere, rooted in national and religious ideologies. In her image commentaries, the artist thwarts the current neoconservative relapse of Eastern European societies into traditional role models and stages the relation of mother and daughter as a cross between fetish and rival; she achieves this by placing herself in the picture instead of the mother figure.

Nadia Khawaja encounters the viewers of her performance video work, *eye am* (2001), literally at eye level. The focussing of one of her eyes reminds us, on the one hand, of the "evil eye" that has been (and still is) associated worldwide as being inherently female; and, which, particularly, in Islam, can be warded off by wearing the *Nazar*, the eye of Fatima. The alleged distance the Niqab, the Muslim veil for the woman's face, produces turns paradoxically into an irritating, inescapable (physical) intimacy in Khawaja's piece.

Elena Kovylna's video, *Carriage* (2009), is a remake of famous sequences on the Potemkin Stairs in Odessa from Sergei Eisenstein's film *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). In this piece, she highlights how, in reality, for female cultural producers and far from mythical (male) artist legends, a post-socialist, apparently de-ideologised space does not feel any less disoriented than before. The work underscores how, up to the present day, nothing has changed regarding the non-existent social security for female artists in Russia.

In her photo series, *Trading Lies* (2006), **Nomusa Makhbubu** positions herself within the bizarre settings of a Museum of Colonial History; she does so to challenge memories long neglected in the process of the re-invention of the South-African identity. The interior shots remind us of the fact that, in nineteenth-century portrait photography, (white) women were mostly photographed in family portraits and not, say, occupying any political function. The fact that, at the same time, black women were only photographed out of an ethnographic interest, illustrates the ambivalent relation between the colonised and the colonisers.

Elodie Pong's video, *Je suis une bombe* (2006), refers to the current post-feminist generation of women, with their awkward position between their own roles and multiple opportunities. Pong's contradictory images of women of a powerful yet vulnerable generation show how gender identity is produced performatively. The artist not only frames contradictory media models of femininity for identification – between the sexualised pole dancers and innocence of teddy bear-clutching girls – but also reveals drastically how women still style themselves as objects.

In her video, *A Space Exodus* (2009), **Larissa Sansour** pursues an ironic play with geopolitical and gender-specific constellations of power, so far as no woman, and especially not a Palestinian woman, has ever set foot on the moon. Sansour's ironic pot shot at the history of great male heroes and Western hegemonies updates an historic event with a critical hint at the situation in the Palestinian Autonomous Territories. With an almost eye-winking sarcasm, she states: "A small step for a Palestinian, a giant leap for mankind."

Vociferously, **Ene-Liis Semper** rejects connections with radical positions of "Second Wave Feminism" and refuses a universalised appropriation by art critics.

Against this, she claims a nuanced way of handling the provocative radicalism of her works dealing with the visualisation of violence. When, in her performative video work, *Oasis* (1999), a man's hand shovels dirt into the mouth of the artist before planting a primrose in it, this ostensibly everyday act of gardening leaves the artist quasi-muzzled.

Andrea Sunder-Plassmann questions the feminine stylization of the exotic, when, in her video, *Apornithosis / Verwandlung in einen Vogel* (2003/2010), she is made up as an Indonesian bride. With this, the artist evokes the Western regimen of "the gaze" in the form of a Neo-Colonialist position, which she herself exemplifies with a longing for authenticity. This "cross-cultural dressing" highlights how colonial and erotic desires of an idealized femininity are anchored in the collective memory even in this day and age.

In her series of photographs *The Day I Became a Woman* (2009), **Newsha Tavakolian** allows visual access to a ceremony in Iran that is held when nine-year-old girls first wear the chador. In contrast to the projected images of the apparently sad and lonely everyday lives of Iranian women, Tavakolian's work provides sensitive and differentiated insights into the private lives of young girls. Simultaneously, *The Day I Became a Woman* questions the function such public (and even private) displays of female life play within this specific system of representation.

Remarks

- 1 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1994, pp. 1-16, p. 11.
- 2 See Bojana Pejić, 'Warum ist Feminismus plötzlich so sexy? Analyse einer Rückkehr anhand dreier Ausstellungskataloge', *springerin*, no. 1, 2008, pp. 18-21. See also FKW // Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur, *Unentschieden. Paradoxien des Hypes um Feminismen in Kunst und Kultur*, no. 47, 2009.
- 3 See Edith Krebs, 'Cooling Out. Paradoxien des Feminismus', *springerin*, no. 1, 2007, pp. 67-68. With the cooperation of Edith Futscher, one accompanying panel of the exhibition will examine this question of "sexiness of art and feminism" with respect to exhibitions, art magazines, and symposia during the last years. A second panel with Nora Sternfeld will discuss the situation of female curators.
- 4 Put more pointedly, is this peculiar struggle for representational sovereignty betraying an awkward helplessness in the face of new tendencies, which are even being defined as marginal and dissident, because they no longer fit into the heroic canon of 'true' feminist practice? Because, following Marsha Meskimmon, feminism itself has now become an art canon, albeit an alternative one, which in its chronological consistency, unites primarily US artists, whose works are established normatively and as substitutes for multi-voiced positions. Deviant, quasi "peripheral" positions seem to be excluded from this canon, as they are deemed less advanced or fringe phenomena that follow their own rules. Here, it is imagined that, in due course, the feminist revolution will eventually reach the "others", too, locally and globally. See Marsha Meskimmon, 'Chronology through cartography: Mapping 1970s feminist art globally', in *WACK!: art and the feminist revolution* (exhibition catalogue), edited by The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007, pp. 322-35, p. 324, 326. The process of the decolonization of the inquisitive gaze began earlier in the U.S. than in German-speaking countries, due to the context of "women of colour". However, even the exhibition "Women Artists 1550-1950" did not represent a single black woman.
- 5 Nevertheless, this critique should not be misunderstood as the expression of a linear or even time-transcendent art historiography. Yet, the relation between feminism, art, and politics may be re-considered.
- 6 This essay builds on the following, highly recommended publications: Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, Karl Hölz and Herbert Uerlings (eds), *Weißer Blicke. Geschlechtermythen des Kolonialismus*. Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2004. Annegret Friedrich (ed.), *Die Freiheit der Anderen. Festschrift für Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff*. Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2004. Graduiertenkol-

- leg Identität und Differenz (ed.), *Ethnizität und Geschlecht. (Post-)Koloniale Verhandlungen in Geschichte, Kunst und Medien*. Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2005. Anja Zimmermann (ed.), *Kunstgeschichte und Gender. Eine Einführung*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2006. *Körperfarben – Hautdiskurse. Ethnizität & Gender in den medialen Techniken der Gegenwartskunst*, *FKW // Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur*, no. 43, 2007.
- 7 Representation in the context of art, too, not only mirrors power relations, but often participates in creating and maintaining them. For a reprocessing of museum representations of the exotic and a connection of postcolonial studies to exhibition theory see: Belinda Kazeem, Charlotte Martinz-Turek and Nora Sternfeld (eds), *Das Unbehagen im Museum. Postkoloniale Museologien*. Vienna: Verlag Turia+Kant, 2009.
 - 8 See Meskimmon 2007: 324. See also Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996.
 - 9 Byung-Chul Han, *Kultur und Globalisierung*. Berlin: Merve Verlag, 2005, p. 18. At the same time, Byung-Chul Han claims the inhabitability of differences in proximity.
 - 10 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Discussion: An Afterword on the New Subaltern', in *Subaltern Studies XI: Community, Gender and Violence*, edited by Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan. Delhi: Permanent Black; New York: Columbia UP, 2000, pp. 305-34.
 - 11 See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 51-80, p. 57, 71.
 - 12 The exhibition *No more bad girls?* considers itself to be a contribution to this aspect, which, given all necessary limitations, renders visible heterogeneous internal differences – while additionally taking the status of migrants into account (e.g. with the positions from an Islamic context, as can be seen in the works of Arahmaiani, Nezaket Ekici, Maryam Jafri, Nadia Khawaja, Larissa Sansour and Newsha Tavakolian).
 - 13 Marianne Koos, 'Mediale Reflexionen von Haut/Farbe und Gender in der Gegenwartskunst', *FKW // Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur, Körperfarben – Hautdiskurse. Ethnizität & Gender in den medialen Techniken der Gegenwartskunst*, no. 43, 2007, pp. 4-9, p. 5.
 - 14 See Meskimmon 2007: 325.
 - 15 See also Birgit Haehnel, 'Geschlecht und Ethnie', in *Kunstgeschichte und Gender. Eine Einführung*, edited by Anja Zimmermann. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2006, pp. 291-313, p. 297, 298. See especially Irit Rogoff for discussions of how the spatial concepts of geography are far from a universal language, absolute knowledge, or ultimate orders: Irit Rogoff, 'Deep space', in *Projektionen. Rassismus und Sexismus in der Visuellen Kunst*, edited by Annegret Friedrich, Birgit Haehnel, Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff and Christina Threuter. Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1997, pp. 52-60. See also Lydia Haustein's remarks on global networks between cartography and works of art: Lydia Haustein, *Global Icons. Globale Bildinszenierung und kulturelle Identität*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2008.
 - 16 Massey also emphasizes that globalisation is perceived of more in a temporal than in a spatial context. See Doreen Massey, 'Imagining Globalization: Power Geometries of Time-Space', in *Global Futures: Migration, Environment and Globalization*, edited by Avtar Brah, Mary J. Hickman and Máirtín Mac an Ghaill. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999, pp. 27-44. See also Massey 1994: pp. 1-16. Besides a critical examination of a dichotomous polarization of space and time, Massey demands also a de-conceptualization of place. Those who are not baffled by the term home, says Massey, link the place called home with gender encodings, and an authenticity lost and stated in the process of searching for an identity. This is because the feminine is part of the fissure of private and public. Just as time is considered typically masculine, as well as a symbol for history, politics and progress, space is often associated with place, passivity, and quiescence (apolitical). A connection between space and place is betrayed when women are associated with a stable sense of identity. In order to develop an identity of their own, women have to leave their father's (family) home, and it is this mobility that ensures fluid identities, which seem to threaten patriarchal order...
 - 17 See Meskimmon 2007: 325.
 - 18 Charlotte Klonk quoted after Meskimmon 2007: 325. Footnote 8.
 - 19 Simultaneously, and according to Meskimmon, the contradiction of ideas pertaining to a global, collective, women-specific experience should be admitted. See Meskimmon 2007: 334.
 - 20 Ibid., p. 332.
 - 21 Ibid., p. 325. Therefore, local, "dissident" artistic positions of women may no longer be subsumed by chronologies as this derivative labelling would only (re)affirm the "centre".
 - 22 And the contingency of art theory too.
 - 23 See Marsha Meskimmon, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics*. London/New York: Routledge 2003, p. 7.

- 24 Ibid. p. 8.
- 25 See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271-313.
- 26 Ewa Lajer-Burcharth. 'Duchess of nothing. Video space and the »woman artist«', in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, edited by Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006, pp. 145-67, p. 165.
- 27 Meskimmon 2007: 326.
- 28 Although art does not exemplify a new world order.
- 29 See Meskimmon 2003: 8.
- 30 See Donna Haraway, 'Situieretes Wissen. Die Wissenschaftsfrage im Feminismus und das Privileg einer partialen Perspektive', in *Vermittelte Weiblichkeit. Feministische Wissenschafts- und Gesellschaftstheorie*, edited by Elvira Scheich. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1996, p. 217.
- 31 Meskimmon 2007: 331.
- 32 Although, it should be noted that multiple categories of identity may not be set in addition to gender categories.
- 33 However, this exhibition refuses to ask the question: "what constitutes 'authentic femininity'?" It also ignores any discussion about so-called "specific feminine aesthetics", thus excluding an essentializing of gender as well as of ethnicity.
- 34 Haehnel 2006: 302.
- 35 Although, by featuring an artist from Guatemala, the curators of the exhibition do not generally intend to project violence against women into 'other' cultural contexts.
- 36 See Annegret Pelz, *Reisen durch die eigene Fremde: Reiseliteratur von Frauen als autogeographische Schriften*. Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 1993.

Fresh Fruit for Some Old Western Views

Kathrin Becker

It is not breaking news that, since about 2006, feminist discourse has been experiencing a renaissance in the Western European and US-American art circuit, spawning numerous pertinent exhibition projects. These projects trace e.g. the lines of development in gender-critical art within the context of "Second Wave Feminism" – thereby raising questions regarding further related developments and manifestations within current international art production such as *re.act.feminism* at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin during 2010. Other exhibitions are curated with a topographic focus in mind, such as the project *Gender Check – Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (MUMOK, Vienna 2009). Apart from these debates of feminist art and art history, numerous exhibitions, catalogues, contributions in magazines and discussion panels exist with a more general focus on the works of female artists, without emphasising such an explicitly politicized point of view. In dealing with young, female artists, these projects purportedly illustrate new, 'sexy' aspects of feminist discourse, even if basically just continuing along the lines of chauvinist imagination. As such, one may suppose that this is merely about repackaging 'women's art'.

The exhibition *No more bad girls?* is a modest and – within the German speaking areas – a rather rare endeavour, which looks at a younger generation of female artists from a transcultural point of view. This permits viewers to trace connections between artists from very different geographical and cultural backgrounds, to look at the similarities as well as the differences in the work that address issues such as modes of production and distribution.

The works in *No more bad girls?* share a concern for society, which comprises relations of gender as much as heterogeneous and 'liquid' concepts of identity. *No more bad girls?* includes artists from the US, Western and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, South East Asia, South America and Africa. Some of these artists based in Western Europe and the US have an immigrant background that influences their work. In its transcultural orientation, *No more bad girls?* seems parallel to a comprehensive show staged at the Brooklyn Museum in New York called *Global Feminisms. New Directions in Contemporary Art* – "the first international exhibition exclusively dedicated to feminist art from 1990 to the present", which involves Western and non-Western artists.

However, a particular spotlight is thrown on one region of predominantly Muslim countries, such as Turkey, Palestine, Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia.¹ This focus is constitutive for the identity of the exhibition *No more bad girls?*, although it is not limiting itself, with its "transcultural outlook", to the regions mentioned. In so doing, the exhibition resists an all too hasty appropriation of

the presentation of art motivated primarily by issues of cultural politics – such as those we know of Eastern European Art from the period of the Cold War, when exhibition projects used dissident Soviet art to reaffirm the "system" in the West. In that instance, exhibitions were meant to function as an extended lever of the future's victorious power of capitalism; they continuously "mirrored" the "hell" of "real socialism".² Within the framework of a "New World Order" that emerged since the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the events of 9/11 in the US, this praxis seems to have shifted further East.

As far as Western media is concerned, "the Middle East is often represented as being an immutable monolith rooted in the doctrines of an 'aggressive' Islam."³ This representation is immediately echoed by the aforementioned praxis regarding exhibitions motivated by cultural politics, which perpetuate – even if often unconsciously so – hostile rhetorics of the "War Against Terror" and the "Clash of Civilizations"⁴, and also by way of creating a curtailed image of Muslim women. Depictions of veiled women motivate the focus on a presumed repressive, hegemonial mindset in order to highlight "feminist" issues. In Iran, the local art scene has coined the term "Chador Art", which is a sarcastic comment on the Western art circuit and its need for "branding". A look at the works of the artists of the relevant regions shows that, within this context, *No more bad girls?* projects a differentiated and heterogeneous image – one that challenges the stereotypical image of the misery of veiled Muslim women.

In her video performance, *Veiling and Reveiling*, Nezaket Ekici dresses herself up with Western "sexy" undergarments atop a chador, while wearing a long blonde wig, make-up and high heels. As such, the fuss concerning questions regarding the higher potential of suppression of two opposed concepts of feminine dress turns into an image of a "grotesque body" with a clear capacity for transformation.⁵

On the other hand, Newsha Tavakolian's series of photographs, *The Day I Became a Woman*, is concerned with the moment of a socially- and religiously-determined convention that marks the transition from girl to woman: she photographs nine-year-old girls during the "Jashne Taklif" (Celebration of Responsibility), a holiday celebrated in Shiite tradition. From this day onward, girls are allotted the status of women and, henceforth, must wear a headscarf. Tavakolian's work is different from the images of misery of the veiled Muslim women; she photographs the girls looking self-consciously and mindfully into the camera or shows them playing, adorned with pink butterfly wings.

Finally, a third example that illustrates the critical discussion of body and corporeality in the context of the 'Islamic world' is Arahmaiani's installation, *I Love You*. In direct relation to the ban of representational imagery in Islamic culture, she transforms individual symbolic arabic lettering (using the language of the Qur'an) into soft bodies of large sculptures made of fabric, with which visitors may interact physically. The inherent interactivity of the installation, which invites the visitors' physical participation, creates ironically an indirect, embodied representation of the holy scripture.

In the vein of transculturality, the issue of the exhibition's concept is, of course, not a topographically- or culturally-inspired search for cross-connections

between individual works within the exhibition, or a search that would take place only in 'neighbouring' cultural fields. The theme of a grotesque body, addressed by Ekici, could be linked to works such as *Je suis une bombe* of Elodie Pong or Patty Chang's *Melons (At a Loss)*.

In my opinion that which deserves more detailed attention is the important impulse for overcoming the hegemonial claim that exists within European and Western feminism while looking more closely at the social and working conditions of female artists producing work in predominantly Muslim countries. This debate re-enforces the viewer's and critic's need to scrutinise categories of judgement and reveals, once more, that what can easily be perceived as "one and the same" is not always experienced the same for all. To this end, I can offer two examples. In the first sentence, I present the facts so as to suggest an appraisal in the way of traditional Orientalism, that links the phenomena in question to an apparent cultural "backwardness" of these regions that are tentatively and increasingly radicalised. The second sentence hints at the actual context of the phenomenon:

1. In the fall of 2009, the local government of the city of Lahore banned female and male students from visiting parks together.

Background: The ban is related to a military offensive launched against the Taliban in Waziristan in northwest Pakistan. This triggered a series of suicide bombings in Karachi and Lahore that targeted places that did not implement this segregation of the sexes. These places included primary schools as well as universities and art academies. The steps taken by the government were, thus, protective measures against further onslaughts of the Taliban.

2. Female Iranian contemporary artists have no access to state-run exhibition venues.

Background: This has to be seen in context with the absolute absence of a state-run institutional structure for contemporary art in Iran. Although exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran briefly experienced a period of relaxation under President Khatami and its director Alireza Samiazar, this was soon followed by a period of new, severe restrictions imposed. So that, today, in Iran, there exists no state organisation which could operate without interference from the state regarding artistic matters.⁶ Thus, the gender aspect of the above statement is irrelevant with respect to these state-run institutions. Of course, and in the same vein, the presence of female artists in alternative networks that exist side by side with state structures for contemporary art in Iran needs to be examined.

What is still missing in most predominantly Muslim regions are studies that differentiate between the work and life conditions of artists, their access to education, their share in the struggle for distribution on international and national art markets, their representation in prestigious positions at the academies, etc. Above all, and from an explicitly feminist critical perspective, in order to avoid concepts that too rigidly marginalise 'oriental' women as victims of their men, religion, and cultures, it is necessary to consider the fluidity of the beholder's perception in viewing such art.

Remarks

- 1 The cited article's use of this rather awkward, tidy naming strategy (i.e. "minor region in predominantly Muslim countries") aims to make the reader acutely aware of the sensitivity around the issue while, at the same time, functions as the expression of an often debated impotency – namely, of giving in to the struggle of categorisation at present, of finding an appropriate "catch all" phrase for this rather heterogeneous region. It is, more precisely, not about the "Arabic region" but involves a larger territory beyond boundaries of language, religion, and culture. Artists from this region of the world do not produce "Islamic art" as Islam is not the only religion observed there. Finally, terms such as "Middle East" imply a dialectic of East and West as an expression of traditional Orientalism, of tradition versus modernity, backwardness versus progress, etc.
- 2 Regarding instrumentalisation of unofficial Soviet art from a Western perspective of cultural politics, see: Kathrin Becker, 'Cultural exchange as own goal', in *Metaphern des Entrückenseins: Aktuelle Kunst aus St. Petersburg* (exhibition catalogue), edited by Badischer Kunstverein and Künstlerhaus Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe: Hatje, 1996, pp. 35-42.
- 3 See Nada Shabout, 'Are Images global?', *Nafas Art Magazine*, August 2009. http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2009/nada_shabout [accessed March 8, 2010].
- 4 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- 5 See Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 8. "The images of the grotesque body are precisely those which are abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics. [...] The classical body is [...] closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek. [...] The grotesque body is [...] multiple and changing [...] [I]t is identified with [...] social transformation."
- 6 See Hamid Severi quoted by Alessandro Topa and Roshanak Zangeneh, 'Kunst unter dem Diktat Gottes. Die islamistischen Behörden mischen sich zunehmend ins iranische Kulturleben ein', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 5th of March 2009. http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/kultur/aktuell/kunst_unter_dem_diktat_gottes_1.2144445.html [accessed April 8, 2010].