ASIAN WOMEN ARTISTS AND THE IMPACT OF FEMINISM

Asian women are operating as artists in social and political contexts that may be vastly different from those experienced in Western democracies, but many are able to navigate successfully and effectively within these environments. This paper seeks to briefly examine the development of feminist art practice in a number of Asian communities and the diverse expressions of it. Although the extent and nature of gender discrimination and the marginalisation of women's concerns varies across these communities they remain key issues for investigation. Artists, curators, teachers and administrators have adopted strategies to move the feminist project along, as a collective or individual endeavour. The most recent example of this is the `Text and Subtext ' exhibition and conference initiated by LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, in Singapore, in June this year. It concentrated solely on Contemporary Asian Women Artists and the project's contributors were mostly Asian in ethnic origin. It is in fact, as organiser Bunghui Huangfu states in the catalogue, "the first time such a collection of women's issues has been sought in a broader Asian context".

My own intention in this paper is to describe from a Western European women's perspective some of the issues and themes that appear to be evidenced in Asian women's practice and to interpret these using the artists' own cultural frameworks rather than dominant Euro-western models.The work and opinions of a selection of artists and curators from The Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Korea, Japan, Pakistan and India are used in this task. The impetus for it has chiefly come from my experience as a curator closely involved with the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (referred to as APT), held at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, Australia, since 1993. Conference papers presented on and by women from Asia in conjunction with the Triennial and the distinctive, powerful work by women in the exhibition itself, are the sources of data for the paper.

In countries which have English as their first language, there is a wealth of literature on feminist art, and on imagery produced by women (albeit, those of colour in these communities, have only been acknowledged since the late eighties). Theorists, such as Gayatri Spivak and filmmaker,Trinh T.Minh-ha, have challenged Western regimes of knowledge and focused on Third World art and culture, but they have done so largely from their professional positions within the United States. (This is not to deny Spivak's membership of the Subaltern Studies Collective, based at Delhi University). Only in comparatively recent times have nations outside of the West been in the situation of being able to circulate documentation on the comprehensiveness of their own contemporary traditions. This has most obviously been through publications and only to economically and socially advantaged communities.

From the fifties the American model has had a huge impact on many influential artists and teachers from the Asian-Pacific region, yet modes of thinking and practice are seldom transmitted intact. Rather, it is likely that they evolve, adjust and reform into multiple expressions of feminism. While women academics may have gained university degrees in the United States and artists held residencies there, they have modified their engagement with feminism according to the particularities of their original home base. Cross-cultural transmission may mean `appropriation', but not necessarily the subsumption of distinctive sensibilities or specificities (be they of traditions, events or place).

In another respect, symbolism in art can have immediate and potent meaning within a local context as well as being relevant elsewhere where appreciation of it may be of a different order (i.e. from Western perceptions). Examples would be Shahzia Sikander's use of the `chador', or Muslim veil, and Soo-Ja Kim's use of the Korean `bottari' or fabric bundle. The subaltern `voice' holds nuances that are often overlooked in the spectacle of large-scale exhibitions outside of Asia. Paradoxically, however, it is these exhibitions (for instance APT) which draw attention in Western communities to Asian artists. In the Triennial both Sikander and Kim produced `spectacular' installations, yet subtleties of cultural meaning were inevitably lost in

translation from one context to another. Soo Ja Kim's bottari, recognise fabric as a material historically associated with women, and also having reference to the body as a `second skin'. However the contents within the bundles, of used clothing, are usually hidden from view and when spilled out on the ground at Jungwae Park (as they were in the Kwangju Biennale of 1995) they can have specific political import, attesting to military aggression and the loss of lives. When the enveloping cloth of the bottari is spread out to reveal itself as a traditional Korean bedcover, either placed on the floor as an abstract field of vibrant rectangles or hung freely in an exhibiting space from fine wires, Kim engages with a visual language which Western audiences can more readily engage. This begs the question, to what extent does an artist tailor her or his work to a particular cultural context?

Shazia Sikander was acknowledged in APT 3 as part of the `Crossing Borders' selection of participants, by which nationhood was deliberately ignored to allow recognition of the mobility nowadays of artists and the multiple cultural identities they can assume. (In fact `Crossing Borders' became a theme for APT as a whole, and in becoming so, self-critiqued the Triennial.) In Pakistan, Sikander had trained in miniature painting (a privileged traditional Moghul court genre which the National College of Arts in Lahore had resurrected as a course to distinguish itself from mainstream contemporary practice and possibly, as one commentator has observed, as a sort of post-colonial anxiety, to reclaim a history which was once glorious and noble). Sikander was one of the first to subvert this tradition of painting while retaining the decorative formalism of it. (She did this first in her thesis project in Pakistan,`The scroll' 1992 ,stretching the conventions of scale of the miniature and also including contemporary, autobiographical subject matter). Later (based in the United States) she populated her watercolours with hybrid characters which have personal and cultural significance. Moving there in the mid 1990s, Sikander gained an MA from the Rhode Island School of Design, where feminist discourses were part of the program. She began to personalise the work further and move it into new formal and performative territories. For a time, she provocatively wore the `chador' in the new environment. (Here, one can compare her to Yayoi Kusama wearing the kimono in

New York in the 1960s and more recently to Shirin Neshat wearing Islamic robes in a Western situation).

Intimate, abstracted ink and gouache drawings on tissue, overlaid and expanding over a large wall space represented Sikander at APT and here the chador figures in various guises as a symbol of female culture, a veil that Western feminists might see as denying outward and differentiated identity but to Muslim women it may offer a sense of community. In last year's APT conference, Professor Salima Hashmi spoke of a secret life behind the `chador'; the way it is used as a symbol by women artists working in Pakistan to indicate "protection as well as oppression".

As borne out by the response to the APT's 1999 conference session on *Women Artists and Curators*, there is a new , genuine interest in Australia not only in non-Western conceptual frameworks but, given the work by women in the exhibition, also in an art with spiritual depth and social meaning. The session allowed for a direct dialogue between women across cultural boundaries, and it proved that, despite the fact that it is not always easy to navigate language dissimilarities, there is an unconditional desire for connection between women.

Written correspondence to me from women which followed the session threw into relief the importance of recognising the impact of `tradition' in societies and of political and religious conditions impacting upon a shared gender experience. Salima Hashmi, who is based at Lahore's National College of Art wrote how "academic questions of gender discrimination can be a matter of life and death in some cultures – literally. Here [in Pakistan], issues in women's art cannot be separated from the issues in women's lives. While the struggle in some cultures is as acute as it is, the work will engage with it and reflect it." There was a salutary reminder not to assume or generalise from Rekha Rodwittiya, based in Baroda, India, when she wrote "issues related to orthodoxy, or patriarchy, or censorship, the range of interpretation and meanings vary so hugely between countries like Pakistan, India and Bangladesh". This is despite some shared cultural heritage between these nations.

It is useful to reflect now on the words and practice of previous APT conference speakers. In 1993, the artist Imelda Cajipe-Endaya launched the topic of female practitioners with her paper entitled "Examining our roles as women and as artists". This raised the perennial dilemma for women of the Philippines - how to resolve a twofold commitment to political activism (striving for equality) while exploring a personal identity based on the `feminine'. The artist is a pivotal force in the KASIBULAN women's collective based in Manila and Cajipe-Endaya brought our attention to not only her own work but that of other socially-engaged Filipina artists, such as Julie Lluch, Brenda Fajardo and Agnes Arellano. Economic, political and social realities create particular situations and consequential responses in any country. With the Philippines, women artists have often banded together to reinforce their political intent. Although aspects of the Western world's navigation of feminist issues are not always relevant in other contexts, comparisons can be made here with the collective push in the United States from the late 1960s, in support of raising the status of women. It is interesting to speculate that KASIBULAN may be a legacy of American colonisation of the Philippines.

From a South Korean perspective, installation and performance artist Bul Lee called for an assertive feminine voice to "penetrate and destroy" conventional history and language of the patriarchy. Appropriately, she was included in `Patjis on Parade', an illustrated Korean-language publication on contemporary women artists from South Korea which was published to accompany the Women's Art Festival '99. ( `Patjis' means `bad' girls ). The book concentrates on women from the 1980s, who have consciously expressed feminist concepts, and younger women artists who operate from a position in the nineties which they may prefer to see as a `post-feminism' era. `Patjis on Parade' provides an historical context; tracking women's art from the Chosun Dynasty through to the establishment of the `Expression' group in 1971 and the more focussed feminist contribution which formed part of the mid-eighties Minjung (People's Art) movement.

Also in 1993, Araya Rasdarmrearnsook from Thailand (at that time one of the very few contemporary Thai women artists with a professional reputation) spoke poetically of her introspective imagery which evokes memory, and the symbolic female body. Six years later, at the most recent APT conference, Somporn Rodboon, teacher, curator and facilitator of international artist exchanges, described the burgeoning "women's art movement " in Thailand. This has occurred since the mid 1990s and includes an initiative which grew out of Studio Xang, a low-key artist's collective in Bangkok. The initiative, `Womanifesto', is a recurrent, multi-disciplinary group event based in that city. While Judy Chicago and others in the United States drove a highly influential `women's art movement' from the early 1970s, certain Asian cultures have developed specific responses to the idea and reality of a collective female `voice'. These responses have been without the pressure of the United States 1970s model, which is now utterly fragmented and often perceived as redundant.

By way of example, Amanda Heng (from Singapore) spoke passionately at the 1999 conference of her commitment to "making space for women" through organising multi-disciplinary events such as `Women about Women' (1998). Like `Womanifesto', female artists from many Asian nations were participants. On the other hand, in 1996 art critic and curator Kamala Kapoor pointed out her perception that in India there was no collective push for change by artists of her gender, but rather a commitment to each artists' own beliefs and practices. Similarly in Japan, Emiko Namikawa (also in 1996) described the independent practice of a younger generation of Japanese women, born in the late 1960s – this idea was further reinforced in 1999 by Eriko Osaka, chief curator at Art Tower Mito.

The professional mobility of artists means that high-profile women can have careers that straddle the globe, while keeping closely in touch with their country of origin – for instance, Korean artists Soo Ja Kim (who lives in Seoul and New York) and less well-known Han Myung-Ok (based in Paris). This situation of mobility is reflected in the nature of their respective practice with its feminist intimations. For instance, Kim's

`bottari' imagery, which we have seen is constructed from traditional Korean bedcovers filled with used clothing, goes beyond an overt reference to the domestic, to suggest the body, nomadism and human dislocation. However, with increased globalisation there will be attempts for inter-connecting dialogues to reduce or lessen divides between women's issues in the new century. This will provide spaces for a wider scope of diverse experiences to be heard. Already this is happening in Asia itself, as evidenced by the `Text & Subtext' project in Singapore, and in Australia through the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art.

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