

Feminism Beyond the Female Body (wk > Ip >wk> Ip 19.07)

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Due to the event of SARS, this paper has been lying quietly on my table for a year. The version you now have in your hands is somewhat dated and unable to reflect my more recent thoughts. After finishing this paper, I did a few more experiments that resulted in opening up more frameworks of questioning. So I am not going to talk about the paper today. Instead, I will follow the questions raised at the end of the paper, and turn over a new chapter in my journey. If you would like a brief summary of the woman art scene in Hong Kong, I suggest you read *Ten Hong Kong Woman Artists: The New Generation* by Eva Man K.W.¹, which is still a relevant record of the scene today. Also, I have brought along some other materials for your reference.

In the second half of the paper, I raised two questions and phenomena: 1. When comparing artworks made by both male and female artists, we can see that femininity in artistic expression is not a quality exclusively processed by woman; 2. Therefore, besides focusing on the female body, should Feminism also expand its concerns to include other sexualities and sexes, to invite these other groups to take part in our discussions, or even to help them emancipate themselves?

As Liao Wen, a Chinese female art critic once commented, woman art is gradually digested and stereotyped by mainstream discourse. Its subversiveness has therefore been steadily whittled away; meaning woman art has “[gone] astray in the zones of differences from man cultivated by manual labor.”² Furthermore, YANG Li proposed that woman art has to “come out under its shield”: woman art in China after 1949 was first re-made into ‘asexual’ (the “Iron-girls”), then “receded into the ‘womandish’ and ‘intelligent within, beautiful without’ ladies tradition; we need an escape.”³ Thus, feminism should not be one of essentialism (of biological-sexual determination), but a method, a tactic that is subject to different cultural contexts, serving different needs at different stages; to provide – not orthodox feminism approaching the moralistic – but rather guidance. In Hong Kong, feminism and the status of women in the arts seems to be different from their peers in China. After the early endeavors of a few pioneers (that includes Choi Yan-chi in installation, May FUNG and Ellen PAU in video and new media), a new generation of woman artists, like myself, can avoid most of these hassles. There is no obligation for one to define/defend oneself before making and exhibiting art

¹ Eva MAN K.W, *Ten Hong Kong Woman Artists: The New Generation*, sponsored by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, Hong Kong: Chunghwa Publishing Co., March 2000 (publication in Chinese). Man is Associate Professor at the Department of Religion and Philosophy of the Hong Kong Baptist University.

² Liao Wen, ‘A few things about woman art: woman art as contemporary art issue since 1990s’, *The First Guangzhou Triennial Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)*, Guanzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002, pp.61-67. (original text in Chinese).

³ Yang Li, ‘Coming out from shadows: woman art’, *Art Today*, Issue 2, 2003, pp.6-9.

anymore. In installation and video in particular - two new disciplines that emerged in the eighties - and in recent experiments in multi-media, female artists have often led the field, thanks to our predecessors for preparing us a safety playground.

In a comparatively tolerant society, the urge for the right to speak, to define the female attributes is relatively lessened, releasing us from a limited scope of feminism and allowing us space to expand our ideas to include art made by other sexes, especially regarding the topic of subjectivity. Take for example Griselda Pollock, a British art historian whose vocation, on one hand, follow in the footsteps of Linda Nochlin in digging out the 'her-stories' of women who made art; but on the other hand, deconstructs the cannon and its genealogy (*Differencing the Cannon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* ⁴), especially Modernism which prioritizes men and masculinity (i.e. the artist-myth constructed around Vincent Van Gogh). Other scholars working in this area across continents include Peggy Phelan (*Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (1993) ⁵) and Amelia Jones (*Body Art: performing the subject* (1998) ⁶). Both start from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, investigating the ontology of performance, especially problematic of male subjectivity. Their criticisms of the other sexes are spoken in the voice of the feminist, which I find inspiring in theory and practice.

To move our focus from the female body to the male is also a strategic necessity; as Pollock says in the preface of her book,

“Starting at the heart of canonicity confronts the strategies of introducing difference into the cannon so as to avoid two dangers. The first danger, the ghettoisation of feminist studies in art history because of an exclusive focus on art made by women, underplays feminism as a comprehensive perspective from which to reconsider the very constitution of the study of all of art's histories. The second danger is the corollary of the feminist adulation of its reclaimed 'old mistresses': namely, the unrelenting critique of masculine culture.” ⁷

This was the direction I followed for my M.A. thesis. In the dissertation, I studied two Hong Kong male artists (Ricky Yeung Sau-churk, and Kith Tsang Tak-ping), looking at the troubled male subjectivity under political unrest and performativity in their art. ⁸

I would like to take one of these artists as an example. After my M.A. thesis, I curated a retrospective exhibition titled 'The Red Twenty Years of Ricky Yeung

⁴ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Cannon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, London & New York : Routledge, 1999.

⁵ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, London & New York: Routledge, 1993.

⁶ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

⁷ Pollock: 1999, p. xiv.

⁸ Leung Po Shan, "Anxiety about gender: troubled male subjectivity in the political transition of Hong Kong", M.A. Dissertation in History of Art, University of Leeds, 2002.

Sau-churk'⁹. 'Man and Cage' is one of his most controversial pieces performed in 1987. He locked himself into a bamboo cage, and stripped half naked, immersed himself in the role of an animal (male). For 48 hours, he ate, toileted, and slept, in the cage. At that time, the British and Chinese governments had just signed the Sino-British Declaration; Hong Kong people had failed to get all the seats of the legislative council returned to them by direct election. A strong sense of futility prevailed over the territory. Looking back, Yeung explained:

"At that time I didn't have any knowledge of feminism. I did all those works with a male instinct, or more accurately, a male animal instinct----wild, straightforward, no cover-ups, a long repressed male desire. (Don't) you remember, I was a pious Christian for five years; in which period I suppressed all my sex drives, not even thinking the 'idea' of masturbation. ..."¹⁰

A direct reading of his performance would be a metaphor for the human condition: 'rather a beast'. In the retrospective, I wrote:

"His repudiation of the Western Religions, its suppression of sexual desire need not be expressed as a non-Western manifestation, but it was necessarily a male one. Furthermore, it did not need to be sexual, but it did need to be macho. Thus he regained his male power and subjectivity through the highest form of masculinity. The performance is a passive resistance to socio-political oppression in the name of 'Art'."¹¹

Criticizing the canon does not mean to degrade our masters, or to dismiss their artistic merit (Yeung and I are still good friends). What I want to emphasize here is: while we are reading works by women in a gendered framework, we very often forget males can also be read with the same frameworks. The male is simply not on our gendered agenda. He is not a gender, only woman is - he is the norm. I hope I am not victimizing our male counterparts, but my experiences in studying "troubled masculinity" like Yeung, could perhaps help our male counterparts to understand their own gendered situation and be more considerate when using other peoples' bodies (most often, female bodies) in their artistic pursuits. Working towards a similar goal, writers in Taiwan seem to be more progressive than on the Mainland and in Hong Kong: for instance critics like Chen Xiang-jun, a student of Griselda Pollock, has published her re-readings of Taiwanese icons, especially in relation to historic trauma. The early works of Yeung were explicitly misogynous and directly expressed fears of castration: women were either represented by a wide, gaping and bloody mouth ('Oedipus-ed', 1984), or an aged prostitute in decay ('Tragedy of an Old Prostitute', 1987); but after learning more about feminism, he retracted his violence toward the female body and began using other means to continue his political confrontations. However, critics then denounced him; claiming that tempted by academicism, Yeung had lost his primitive energy.

⁹ The exhibition was presented by and took place at Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong, in Nov 2002.

¹⁰ Email from Yeung to the writer on Thu, 24 Jan 2002.

¹¹ Exhibition catalogue, p. 36.

Then in March I curated another project, titled “Man-made: a project about art and masculinity”.¹² We rarely hear voices from male artists regarding their own situation and experiences as ‘gendered-subjects’; and gender studies is too often identified as ‘women studies’. Perhaps one of the reasons for the indifference of the male artist is due to women monopolizing the debate, which leaves no room for men to enter the discussion? When we subscribe to the terms and ideas of ‘women art’, could we also subscribe to the idea of ‘male art’ on equal terms? Now that feminism is fast reaching a dead alley of self-ghettoization, would more investigations and experiments of ‘the other sex’ help to deconstruct or revitalize the once radical orthodox? I invited five artists to the project: Kam Man-fai (video), Pak Sheung-chuen (mixed-media), Steven Pang (installation), Tsang Tak-ping (performance and mixed-media) and Sun Yung Hoi-sun (performance). Most of them have learnt about feminism: some of them have explored gender-stereotyping in their art and lives, some have persistent concerns regarding gender issues, some were strongly influenced by their female mentors and artists during their time in college – in short, they are not ‘typical’ or ‘normal’ male artists, and have either worked on the margins or walked on fine wire for some time.

Perhaps the questions I set out to untie were too tangled to begin with, or perhaps I put my boot on the wrong foot, but nevertheless I have to thank them for their trust and friendship. They lent their male bodies for a feminist interrogation, but tasted failure. When I invite women artists to talk about their experiences, very often conversations would turn into a chatty afternoon; but when I tried the same with our male artists, conversations turned to silence. It just isn’t part of the way they’ve been brought up or their culture. Although each addressed the question I put to them in their works, I failed to get them to exchange ideas. Thus the biggest lesson of ‘Man-made’ was the gender difference in methodology. This April, some ‘Live Art’ practitioners came to Hong Kong: Kira O’Reilly being one of them. As expected, she did a one-to-one performance – inviting a member of the audience, one at one time, to make a cut on her skin. At the forum, Ho Siu-kee¹³ asked, what if the audience comes to her performance just to look at her naked body. I brought the question back onto Ho: what if they came to his performance just to see him hammering his piece of gold half naked? My question provoked an explosion of laughter in the auditorium. He answered that although he uses his body as his subject of investigation, he deliberately keeps a distance from issues like sexuality. But how can we avoid sexual and racial emblems marked on our bodies? When we turn the tables, the real taboo is the male body.

JiaFang-zhou was the editor for a special issue of *Mei shu wen xian* on the topic of “man art” some years ago, where he advocated a model for categorizing sexual attributes in artistic expression, by defining “man art” as the opposite of “woman

¹² At Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong, March 2004.

¹³ HO Siu-kee (sculptor) investigating the relation between the human body and perception. Ho is a leading figure in the Hong Kong art scene and participated in the Venice Biennial in 2001.

art”, while leaving a large unaccounted area of ‘art without sex’ in between the two categories.¹⁴ I don’t know much about the recent situation on the mainland, but I can still smell the chauvinism inherited from the Avant-garde movement: the woman’s body as the most ready-to-hand metaphor for urbanism and modernization. A few months ago, I saw a video by Zhou Xiao-hu at the Hanart TZ Gallery 20th Anniversary Exhibition. A large majority of the audience was captured by his humour in “The Gooney Gentleman”, but watching the man drawing out his sexual fantasy on his own torso, which in the process gradually transformed into a woman, I felt frustrated and wondered whether I should be annoyed or just marvel at his frankness. It was such an honest account of male-narcissism. However, supposing male artists in China were given the chance to learn more about feminism, I wonder if they would then be more conscious and sensitive about gender issues or would they still indulge in these kinds of tricks. But am I talking nonsense as a “first-world” feminist to a “third-world” situation? How should we face these male chauvinists¹⁵ as a feminist? Should we respect their freedom of speech, as if supporting the rights of a minority, preserving tradition, or respecting cultural relativism? As for feminism embodied in “Man”, I am still waiting for enlightenment. (Translated by Leung Po-shan and Man Wai-kwang)

Endnotes:

1. Eva Man K.W., *Ten Hong Kong Woman Artists: The New Generation*, sponsored by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council, Hong Kong: Chunghwa Publishing Co., March 2000 (publication in Chinese). Man is Associate Professor at the Department of Religion and Philosophy of the Hong Kong Baptist University.
2. Liao Wen, “A Few Things About Woman Art: Woman Art as Contemporary Art Issue Since 1990s,” *The First Guangzhou Triennial Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)*, Guangzhou: Guangzhou Museum of Art, 2002, pp. 61-67. (Original text in Chinese).
3. Yang Li, “Coming Out From Shadows: Woman Art,” *Art Today*, Issue 2, 2003, pp. 6-9.
4. Griselda Pollock, *Differencing in Cannon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories*, London & New York: Routledge, 1999.
5. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London & New York: Routledge, 1993.
6. Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
7. Pollock: 1999, p. xiv.
8. Leung Po Shan, “Anxiety About GenderL Troubled Male Subjectivity in the Political Transition of Hong Kong,” M.A. Dissertation in History of Art, University of Leeds, 2002.
9. The exhibition was presented by and took place at Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong, in Nov. 2002.

¹⁴ JIA Fang-zhou, *Mei shu wen xian* (special issue on Man Art), 2000, vol. 20, Hubei mei shu chu ban she.

¹⁵ “xiao nan ren” (小男人) in original Chinese version. It means “little man” if translated literally.

10. Email from Yeung to the writer on Thu, 24 Jan 2002.
11. Exhibition catalogue, p. 36.
12. At Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong, March 2004.
13. Ho Siu-kee (sculptor) investigating the relation between the human body and perception. Ho is a leading figure in Hong Kong art scene and participated in the Venice Biennial in 2001.
14. Jia Fangzhou, *Mei shu wen xian* (Special issue on Man Art), vol. 20, 2000, Hubei mei shu chu ban she.
15. "Xiao nan ren" (小男人) in original Chinese version. It means "little man" if translated literally.

P.S. The paper was first presented at the "FEMINISM IN CHINA SINCE THE WOMEN'S BELL International Conference" at the Fudan University, Shanghai, June 2004. An abridged version in Chinese (a significant amount was cut due to political sensitiveness) was published in a magazine in China. It is therefore my pleasure to share the original Chinese text in its entirety with readers here, although leaving the ideological gap between the Mainland and Hong Kong un-solved.

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