

global feminisms

NEW DIRECTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ART



that have hitherto remained outside of the feminist canon.¹³⁵ To do the same with works of art allows us to recognize “subterranean feminisms” in objects that investigate issues such as the global epidemics of violence, war, pollution, and so forth. Furthermore, when seeing the works synergistically—that is, together in the exhibition space—the cross-cultural dialogues between works becomes all the more enlightening. For instance, located together in one section of the exhibition are works of female political agency and activism, including photographs by the Beijing-based artist Yin Xiuzhen, who has documented an action-performance, *Washing the River* (page 261), 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 Afghani artist Lida Abdul, titled *White House* (page 168), 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, the object of pain a symbol of the geographic barrier created along the West Bank to delineate land between Palestine and Israel (page 214). Politics and activism of all denominations are encountered everywhere in *Global Feminisms*.

Women across the globe face certain and varying limitations of artistic expression, as well as fears of censorship, imprisonment, and exile. The Iranian author Shahrnush Parsipur, for instance, was imprisoned in 1989 under the Ayatollah Khomeini for her feminist novel *Women without Men*, which was banned soon after being published in Tehran that same year. The novel, written from a feminist perspective using mythological terminology, comprises several short stories about the lives of five different women: a prostitute, an aristocrat, two working-class girls, and a schoolteacher. In order to escape the oppressive restrictions of family and social life in contemporary Iran, the five women eventually find themselves in a garden on the outskirts of Tehran, where they vow to form a new society “without men.”



Fig. 14

Arahmaiani (Indonesia, b. 1961). *Lingga-Yoni*, 1994. Acrylic on layers of rice paper and canvas, 71 3/4 x 55 1/8" (182 x 140 cm). Courtesy of the artist

Throughout the novel, some of them murder, marry, go through spiritual transformations, commit suicide, or are raped. No wonder the novel proved provocative. Incidentally, Shirin Neshat's recent body of video work, of the same title, is based on the book by Parsipur, with whom she collaborates on the project.¹³⁶ Parsipur now lives in exile in the U.S.

Several of the artists in *Global Feminisms* have faced similarly grave situations. In 1983, 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—an act of rebellion not appreciated under the Suharto dictatorship. Then, in 1994, Arahmaiani took part 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)* (page 175) and *Lingga-Yoni* (fig. 14), the former of which is 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

3
 Parastou Forouhar (Iran,
 2). Detail from the *Blind*
 series, 2001. Courtesy of
 the artist. (Photo: Jogi Hild)



for us 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, this is only the second time since 1994 that Arahmaiani has been able to present this work, 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*, at the Golestan Art Gallery in Tehran, the Iranian artist Parastou Forouhar was censored by the Iranian Cultural Ministry. *Blind Spot* (fig. 15) 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 *Strassen*, 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. Exhibitions like *Global Feminisms* seek to underscore those complex translations and interpretations.

Emily Jacir's video installation *Crossing Surda* (*A Record of Going to and from Work*) (page 209) was 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 American 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.

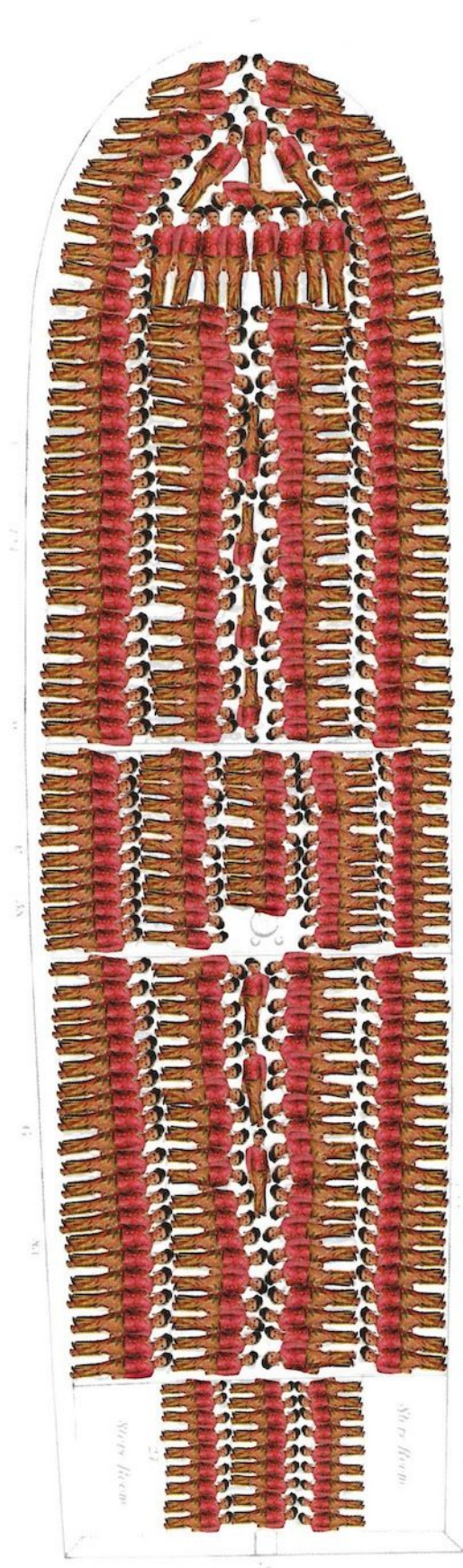
That identities can be "contradictory, partial and strategic,"¹³⁷ in the words of Donna Haraway, is an idea that is central to *Global Feminisms*, which embraces anti-essentialist concepts because it recognizes that identities (self, gender, racial, class, and so forth) are fluid, and never stable. Tracey Emin interviews her bad and her good selves (page 197); Amy Cutler illustrates an army of tiny "Amys" to conquer the world (page 193). 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

Fig. 2

Skowmon Hastanan (Thailand, b. 1961). *Red Fever*, from the *Fever* series, 2000. Inkjet print, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)

Fig. 3

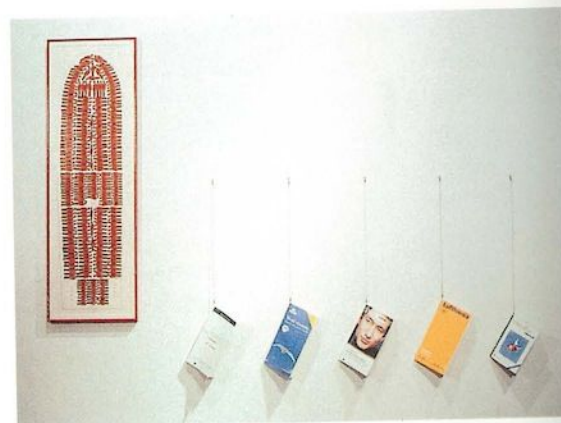
Skowmon Hastanan (Thailand, b. 1961). Installation view of *Red Fever*, from the *Fever* series, 2000. Inkjet print, airline pamphlets, dimensions variable; overall: 36 x 60" (91.4 x 152.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist. (Photo: courtesy of the artist)



by the presence of commercial pamphlets issued by airline companies (fig. 3).

The second trope concerns the artwork as a challenge to the systems that attempt to order women according to imposed agendas. Artworks are judged to be especially successful when they are able to reveal how such orderings have been carried out. In this regard, the media of performance and photography offer special opportunities. Performance enables artists such as Arahmaiani viscerally to incorporate the viewer into her world, albeit for a brief time. In *Offerings from A to Z* (fig. 4), black-and-white photographic images of heterosexual couples in various amorous poses both surround and challenge the seemingly lifeless body of the artist, lying on a stone plinth situated deep inside a square open pit. Standing at ground level and looking down at her body, the viewer unwittingly becomes complicit in the death of the artist. The subsequent documentary photograph, the main source of evidence attesting to the performance's occurrence, only confirms the centrality of sacrifice. It neither offers nor corroborates other interpretative possibilities.¹⁶

The third trope concerns the artwork as an object that physically intervenes in the world beyond the parameters of the work's conception, execution, and display. For example, the cyborg works of Lee Bul



What Is Feminist About Contemporary Asian Women's Art?

(page 62), begun in 1997, wreak violence on the exhibition spaces by means of contradiction and disjunction: the eye registers the image of the cyborg as incomplete—a fragment detached from a whole body—yet the high degree of finish and the plenitude of surface detail seem to contradict this perception. The scale of Lee's installations forces another disjunctive moment: though many of the works are human-scaled and few exceed an average adult's height, the way that they are suspended from the ceiling, out of the viewer's grasp, signals a denial of human possession.

How these tropes came to prominence correlates with a number of contextual currents. In the case of artists whose careers unfolded in the U.S., part of the importance accorded to the artwork as an object comes from the curious situation of the 1980s through the early 1990s. Though the rubric of "identity" gained momentary acceptance, artists of color often found themselves outside the doors of the mainstream art world. Several of the artists took matters into their own hands by reifying the concept of an Asian American art through such groups as the New York-based *Godzilla* and exhibitions such as *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, organized by the painter Margo Machida in 1993 and initially mounted at the Asia Society in New York.¹⁷ Other examples include the projects of Hastanan, who co-curated a number of shows focused on the theme of Asian American art from 1990 to 2001, both as a member of *Godzilla* and as part of the curatorial staff at the Queens Museum of Art.¹⁸

Yet the constant premium placed on the artwork as a vehicle for representing the artist's identity grated on those who saw a need to distinguish between an art world centered on the artwork and one that privileged the artist. In 1993, the critic and curator Alice Yang asked whether "the link between race and artistic practice [can] be conceived beyond the logic of simple negation or illustration?"¹⁹ Some artists heeded Yang's challenge. In Hastanan's *Fever* series, mentioned earlier, the work's



capacity for illustration depends on its manipulation of the relationships between visual forms. The images of women, identical in size, costume, and facial expression, combine at larger scale to form a capsule-shape distinguished by alternating rows of brown-ochre and magenta-scarlet (fig. 2). Now in the realm of the aesthetic, the work fully acquiesces to its objecthood: the picture's rigid conformity to principles of regularity and symmetry deliberately deprives it of immediate emotive impact.

Fig. 4
Arahmaiani (Indonesia, b. 1961).
Offerings from A to Z, 1996.
Installation and performance
in a Buddhist crematorium in
Chiang Mai, Thailand. Courtesy
of the artist

Arahmaiani (Indonesia, b. 1961)



Display Case (Etalase), 1994–2007. Display case with photograph, Buddha icon, the Qur'an, Coca-Cola bottle, fan, Patkwa mirror, drum, box of sand, and condoms, $37\frac{3}{8} \times 57\frac{5}{8} \times 25\frac{3}{4}$ " (95 x 146.5 x 65.5 cm). Installation view of the artist's solo exhibition *Sex, Religion, and Coca-Cola* at Oncor Studio, Jakarta, 1994. Lent by the artist. (Photo: © Manit Sriwanichpoom, courtesy of the artist)