

In: No more bad girls?, 2010

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# No more bad girls?



KUNSTHALLE EXNERGASSE

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## Productive Risk: Ethnicity and Gender as Contingent Categories

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**Claudia Marion Stemberger**

One gender-disturbing message might be – in terms both of identity and space – keep moving!  
– Doreen Massey<sup>1</sup>

*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.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as much as the critique of apparently contemporary "post-political (post-feminist-/gender-) universe"<sup>3</sup> gets to the heart of the matter, it also unmasks 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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

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work, museum praxis,<sup>7</sup> 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 Meskimmon<sup>8</sup>

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".<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty shows how (post)feminism imagines women of the so-called third world as homogeneous subjects due to an intermittently missing self-reflection of the researcher's gaze.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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 Koos<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

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### **Cartographies as "conceptual decolonisation"**

In recent years, gender-specific art theory and research has developed a particular attention to space as a new paradigm.<sup>15</sup> Doreen Massey's critique of the apparent victory of time over space<sup>16</sup> has been differentiated by Marsha Meskimmon for the art context in order to develop "critical cartographies"<sup>17</sup> – beyond the tunnel vision of "uncritical chronologies", which, a priori, would resist rigid categorization. A process of "conceptual decolonization"<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

If with this productive dialogue, differences<sup>21</sup> are understood as being similarly productive, the contingency of art<sup>22</sup> produced by women becomes perceptible with respect to their historic residues and their specific media/materiality.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, in the context of video art, Ewa Lajer-Burchardth exemplifies a new generation of young female artists in the early-21<sup>st</sup> century with an "*unpossessing femininity*".<sup>26</sup> 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"<sup>27</sup> are meant to set in motion a productive transcultural dialogue.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> Instead of perpetuating the polarisations of man/woman, black/white, subject/object, centre/periphery, these dichotomous categories could be fragmented.<sup>30</sup> 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."<sup>31</sup>



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Beyond binary categories, identities must be recognized as being fluid and variable.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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"<sup>34</sup>. 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.

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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

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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.<sup>35</sup>

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.

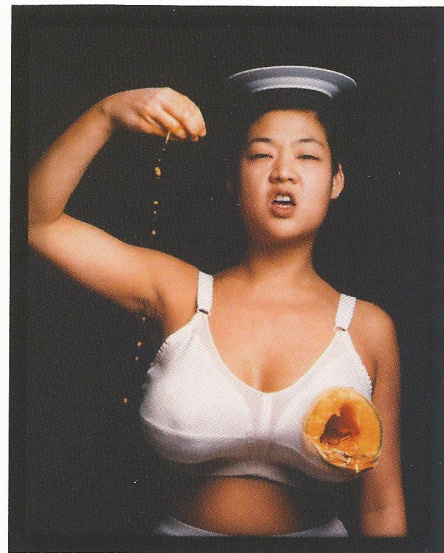
**Mathilde ter Heijne** comes to terms with her journey to the matriarchal Mosuo ethnic group in China. Here, in contrast with the masculine-encoded image of the explorer, the particularities of the feminine gaze are revealed in order to realize one's own emancipation.<sup>36</sup> Although the risk 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**

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Patty Chang



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**Melons (At a Loss)** 1998  
Colour, sound, 3:44 min.  
Courtesy Galerie ARRATIA, BEER, Berlin

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Melons

When my aunt died, I got a plate. It was the kind of plate with a color photo printed on it in a poisonous ink that you couldn't eat or else you'd die too.

The original, which was in a fine porcelain, was made back when my aunt and uncle got married, back in the days when black and white meant photo and color meant paint.

When she died, extras were printed at Thrifty's photo department. \$10.99 for saucer, \$29.99 for dinner. I was given a saucer. I was told it was because I was smaller and more petite than everyone else, not because it was cheaper. It was wrapped in a small, olive box, no silver curl-iques, no plastic flowers, just plain with a piece of tape on either end. And inside that box was a saucer minus the cup and a redwood display stand. And on that saucer was an image of my aunt two years before she died with a smile so wide her eyes turned into hairline slits, almost erased into her skin. She was just like Saint Lucy, St. Lucy of Syracuse, eyeless, sightless and carrying her baby blues on a platter. Two ripe, round grapes like the kind I'd put in a dish on Halloween and I'd make my ten-year-old boyfriend put his fingers into it. And I'd tell him, "They're my dogs, can't you tell? I pulled them out today just for you." And right there on the spot, he'd confess his undying love for me.

I imagined that she could see into whatever room where she left her eyes. And I looked up to my place just as Lucy did hers; I thought I understood all the powers that it held. And whenever I was punished for not doing something I was supposed to, I'd gently take that plate off of its redwood display stand, and I'd lick that puppy 'til her smile was erased.

Patty Chang