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Revisiting Art, Feminism and Memory in Singapore and Japan since the 1990s: Amanda Heng and Yoshiko Shimada

Eliza Tan

Amanda Heng and Yoshiko Shimada have been active proponents of feminist-informed art in Singapore and Japan, where they are respectively based. In this conversation, the artists retrace their intersecting roles and involvement in feminist art networks and exhibitions during a salient period of its manifestation in Asia between the 1990s-early 2000s. Both born in the 1950s, their oeuvres-although differently shaped by their personal responses to particular social circumstances and individual interests, resonate with similar preoccupations. In revisiting their approaches to art-making then and now, Heng and Shimada reflect on the complex and often volatile dynamics characterising women's art networks, artists' collectives and their organisational frameworks; relationships between aesthetics and politics and performing history and identity in the contexts of Singapore and Japan today. This dialogue with Heng and Shimada began in Tokyo in July 2014 and was revised and extended by email and Skype in September 2016.

Eliza Tan: Amanda and Yoshiko, you have both witnessed and contributed towards a very particular moment in the 1990s when art activity organised on the basis of gender was gaining pace in Asia. Can we talk about your participation in these exhibitions and networks, and how these – without conflating the two – engaged notions of "*woman*" and "*feminism*"?

Yoshiko Shimada: I participated in several women's art exhibitions in Korea and in Japan, in shows curated by Kasahara Michiko. Although *Gender Beyond Memory* (Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, 1996) was an exhibition about gender – it featured mostly Western artists and I was the only Japanese artist alongside a few other Asian-American artists – Kasahara didn't use the word "***feminism***". In Korea, there was a more explicitly "***feminist***" show. I participated in *A Window Inside and Outside* (Gwangju City Art Museum, 1999), held in conjunction with an international women's conference. Historically in Korea, the women's movement is very much tied to the democratisation movement. Feminist leaders were already in the government, in power; they

organised this exhibition to celebrate women's rights. Whereas in Japan, I think Kasahara san made an all-women's exhibition as an intervention strategy, to raise awareness that women were still fairly under-represented in the art world in Japan. In Korea, it was more celebratory. In Japan, it was a way of making a point regarding the presence of women artists, although it was not called a "***feminist***" art show. In Korea, it explicitly engaged the idea of feminism. I think the location of the exhibition and its context changes the definition of a "***woman's exhibition***".

Amanda Heng: I showed my artwork *Between Women* at the Tachikawa International Art Festival, an all-women's event coinciding with the Yokohama Triennale (2000). I had a month-long residency there with other Asian women artists including Brenda Fajardo from the Philippines, Nicole Ellis and Judith Wright from Australia and Japanese artists. Interestingly, most of the women's group exhibitions that I've been involved in have mainly happened in Asia. In the 1990s, discourse on democratisation and women's issues in Asia began in earnest. It marks the beginning of a lasting interest in the relationship between democratic transitions taking place in various countries, the role of women and the differing agendas of various women's movements. In 1990, Katherine Owyoung and I co-curated the exhibition *Women and Their Art.* This happened at the time when I was already involved in The Artists' Village when it first started in Sembawang, Yishun (Singapore). It was obviously a male oriented collective. I was the only active female member besides Hazel, who was Tang Da Wu's ex-wife. She was also one of the participants in *Women and Their Art*. The festival *Womanifesto* held in Thailand in 1997 was initiated by a group of international women artists who had met previously, in other performance art events. Varsha Nair and Nitaya Ueareeworakul were two of the organisers. We started throwing out some ideas amongst us whilst we met in Bangkok. There was a lot of performance-based art happening then at different cities. Nippon International Performance Art Festival in Japan was one of them and it was at NIPAF that Ito Tari and I met. We met again in Bangkok and got to know other women artists there. We casually chatted; things happened and continued. I remember the *Women Breaking Boundaries* exhibition in Tokyo (2001) as a continuation of these relationships forged in Bangkok. Besides my participation in it, Nilofar, Nitaya, Varsha, and Arahmaini were also involved. There was also the First Woman's Art Performance festival in Osaka (2001) to which Arahmaini and I were invited. The all-women exhibition *Women about Women* (Singapore Art Museum, 1998) which I curated with Philip Cheah included the participation of Varsha Nair, Nitaya Ueareeworakul and Ito Tari, who had all been part of *Womanifesto*.

For me, participating in women's exhibitions is no different from participating in medium-specific exhibitions. After participating in all these "***women's art exhibitions***", I began to realise that it becomes boring because I'm interested in more specific discussions on issues concerning women in various conditions and cultural contexts in Asia. Such issues didn't come across in many of such exhibitions then – which were literally just about women getting together and presenting their work. That's how I felt about participating in women's exhibitions at the time. Being a woman and being an artist are important facts to be proud of.

Yoshiko Shimada: I'm remembering more, now that you mention these exhibitions! I too was involved in *Women Breaking Boundaries* in 2001.

Amanda Heng: Were you part of Ito Tari's organisation, the Women's Art Network?

Yoshiko Shimada: Not initially, and things didn't work out, but it was interesting meeting those involved in the Women's Art Network because the *Gender Beyond Memory* exhibition in 1996 featured mostly artists from Europe and America – which was fine, but I didn't really know other Asian women artists. I'd met Brenda Fajardo prior to this, but it was through the Women's Art Network that I met you, Amanda, Brenda, Varsha and others. It was good exchanging information on what's been happening in Asia with artists from Asia – for me it was quite a new thing, because I studied in America, so all my feminist practice and knowledge was America-centred.

Likewise, Kasahara Michiko was educated in the University of Chicago, so her ideas were pretty much based on Western feminism. There are ideas that are "***imported***" from the West. However, in Asia, there are so many diverse contexts in which feminism is practiced in different ways – so it was interesting speaking with these artists and understanding their individual situations.

Amanda Heng with artists Juliana Yasin, Ho Soon Yeen and Tan Kun Yi, Singapore, 1992. Artist's collection.

Women and Their Art **exhibition and event series co-curated by Amanda Heng and Katherine Owyoung, Women in the Arts Singapore (WITAS), Singapore, 1990. Artist's collection.**

Amanda Heng: You mentioned earlier about your relation with the Women's Art Network – that things somehow didn't work out. What were the differences that caused this?

Yoshiko Shimada: Tari organised it, but I didn't really know any of the other participants. Many were not really practicing artists – they only made art to "***express***" their personal issues, which is fine. I'm not criticising them for expressing themselves, because certainly, women artists' political positions are often expressed through the personal, but I felt they were using art exclusively as a form of personal therapy and that the issues expressed were singular. Yes, "***the personal is political***"; but negotiating the intersection between the "***personal***" and "***political***" was not their agenda. It was as if they were solely unloading their personal issues into the public sphere through art-making. There was insufficient critical and theoretical discussion amongst us. I tried to suggest discussing this problem further but some thought I was being harsh, too critical – that I was not practising sisterhood. So, yes, as you said, it becomes boring that way.

Amanda Heng: After participating in a few of such women's shows, I began to question: what exactly are the currently most pressing issues that women are facing in art and in their societies which have yet to be raised? Shows like this become problematic when we circle around the same issues amongst the same group of women so that it all becomes very comfortable; when the sole agenda becomes about women simply seeking support for each other without pushing themselves to critically consider our current social realities. There was a bit at the end of *Women Breaking Boundaries* when we all came together and attempted to raise certain issues concerning the societies which we individually came from. One of the participating artists spoke about the situation in Pakistan, the challenges that women face in terms of opportunities for education, marriage rights and their place in the workforce in Pakistan. However, the meeting was organised in such a way that it didn't allow the time or space for more critical, in-depth discussions to develop. Also, since these were held in Japan, language barriers and issues of translation often arose, making it difficult for discussions to gain momentum. The other problem, I feel, also relates to how there wasn't yet a strong, concerted feminist movement in many parts of Asia at the time. We were all trying to deal with these issues in our own local contexts. At the time, there were relatively few symposiums where Asian women artists have really come together to discuss what feminist art practice meant in the different cultural contexts of Asia.

Perhaps such discussions were taking place largely within academic circles, but not so much amongst practitioners. Generally speaking, there was amongst us an inability to discuss feminism on a more theoretical level. The introduction of feminist art and theory in art schools in Singapore only began in the 1990s. At Lasalle College, Irina Aristarkhova tried to introduce feminist art, while I tried to propose workshops analysing the relationship

Yoshiko Shimada and BuBu interview women officers of the Self Defence Force (SDF), Kumamoto Base, Japan, Oct 2002. Artist's collection.

between art-making and women's identities, although these were initially rejected. It was only much later when I was invited to create performance-based proposals that I was able to weave into these sessions perspectives on gender and feminism. The college administration probably realised that art students needed to be exposed to such discourses.

Yoshiko Shimada: In colleges and art schools in Japan, I don't think there are any strong feminist teachers. A couple of very prominent women art historians died in their fifties. After their death, in the late 1990s, there weren't many, e.g. Hiroko Hagiwara, Rebecca Jennison or Ueno Chizuko, who retired from Tokyo University and runs the Women's Action Network now. Currently, the general opinion is that having institutions centred on women's studies is "***positive-discrimination***" against men, and students are not showing enough interest in women's studies.

Eliza Tan: Yoshiko, you participated in the 2005 edition of *Womanifesto***. Unlike previous physical editions, this took the form of a virtual museum, comprising artists' videos and documents of performances which are still accessible today at Womanifesto's online archive. The work you showed here –** *Women in Camouflage* **(2002), documents the day you and Bubu spent with female soldiers in the Self-Defence Forces (SDF) in Kumamoto. It engages with the issue of continued U.S military presence in Okinawa since the Allied occupation, rape and wartime violence. What was the process of creating this?**

Yoshiko Shimada: Minamishima Hiroshi, curator of the Kumamoto City Contemporary Art Museum, suggested that we make an artwork around the SDF base, to be presented as part of the museum's inauguration exhibition. We went to the SDF base in Kumamoto and interviewed women soldiers, trained with them and stayed overnight. I later combined this with interviews of women initiating women's only anti-war demonstrations in Kyoto. When it was shown in Tokyo (Ota Fine Arts, 2003), the SDF office got the curator Minamishima to tell us not to show the video. We ignored him. Subsequently, I made a trip to Okinawa with Okinawan-American performance artist, Denise Uehara. This was the first time I went to Okinawa. My uncle died during the war on the way to Okinawa when his military ship sank. I took some video footage and combined it with the Kumamoto interview.

Eliza Tan: What strikes me, Yoshiko, is how the work continues to resonate with the current situation in Japan today, particularly in view of the most recent discussions around Shinzo Abe's bid to revise the pacifist constitution to potentially allow for the expansive mobilisation of Japanese forces abroad, for the first time since WWII. Amanda, I am led on the other hand to think of the works you have made which refer to military combat, national identity and ideas of femininity.

Amanda Heng: As a female artist, I am intensely aware of the representation of the body, and the onerous demands that society places on the feminine form. Since 2000, when I first donned the iconic *kebaya* of the Singapore Girl in a performance, I have continued to explore and problematize the gendered stereotypes engendered by the national airlines of Singapore, using the contrasting reality of my version, *Singirl*, as a way of challenging mainstream perceptions of gender and national identity. For me, the national marketing is complicit with inscribing patriarchal society's values on the female body.

In Singapore, there are two icons relating to gender issues – the image of the male Singaporean who goes into the army to serve compulsory military service, and the archetypal Singapore Girl. When I was dealing with the image of the Singapore Girl, I used the camouflage print with that of the *sarong kebaya* to make an intervention on the gender roles prescribed through institutional policies in our country – these are prominent images that speak to the audiences in Singapore. I also wanted to bring out the idea that often, we think that a woman should have no

association with violence but women can be very violent. Today, women can be part of the military service but they are mostly relegated to administrative tasks as men here think that women's national service role should be limited to producing babies.

Yoshiko Shimada: That's interesting, because I did video interviews with the Self Defence Force (SDF) in Japan – well at that time, that was before the Iraqi war, so they had never been outside, they were only doing exercises within Japan. The people I interviewed said they joined the force to help out with rescues in the case of earthquakes and other disasters, but now it's become a real military force. At that time, if something happens, if somebody invades, we all knew, the Japanese assumed that the Americans would take care of it. The SDF in Japan was just kind of like a puppet, a facade, whereas the real force was America. Now, with the current nationalist prime minister, he wants the SDF to become more like a Japanese military, they are more "***real***" now, and they are accepted as something more real amongst the Japanese public as well. When I showed that work in 2000, people still had the impression that, the Self Defence Force was not really a real thing or taken seriously. There's a scene of an eighteen year old girl climbing up a huge rocket launcher and operating it, almost like an image taken from animation or a cartoon. When I made those interviews, the girls were saying that for the sake of the equality of women she wanted to go out to the front line. At that time, they didn't think it was for real, but now it's quite realistic, for women to be recruited and deployed in combat. Now it's very real with the government changing the constitution to realise a more substantial military force; the whole context of this artwork I made in 2000 has now shifted.

Eliza Tan: Amanda, in 1999 you initiated a Women's Artists' Registry in conjunction with Irina Aristarkhova's exhibition *A Self of One's Own*. **You also founded the collective Women in The Arts Singapore (WITAS). Prior to this there seem to have been no other forums in Singapore dedicated to women practitioners. Have these since continued in some form or another, led to other events or given rise to other networks?**

Amanda Heng: WITAS was active between 1999-2005. We launched a website in 2003 (www.wita.sg). Some of the women artists who participated in *A Self of One's Own* became members. Irina was not really active or involved, although some of her students became active members.

Eliza Tan: What did WITAS involve and did this in some way intersect with your simultaneous involvement in the group The Artists' Village, when you were experimenting with various modes of collectivism, performance and public engagement – which were forms that were just beginning to emerge in the 1990s in Singapore? I found Lee Wen's description of this moment quite interesting. He notes that you co-organised the exhibition *Open Ends* **(The Substation, Singapore, 2001) – comprising documents of your performances – as an example of a situation where, driven by a desire to '**overcome the inconsistencies our museums and cultural institutions, which of better resources, are failing to accomplish the cultural mission with balanced representation**', artists have sought to self-organise and document their own evolving practices and activities.[2]**

Amanda Heng: I was involved with The Artists Village between 1987-92 before it was officially an art collective and when it was first an artists' village in the literal sense – an artists' colony in Sembawang, Yishun. As part of an art festival in 1992, I headed the organisation of performances and activities at Hong Bee Warehouse and subsequently left to study in Australia. When I returned in 1994 and started working at The Substation, my focus shifted from working mostly with The Village to finding ways of contributing to the development of the art scene in Singapore as a whole. Performance Art Project (PAP) was a programme I started at The Substation to engage the art community and public in performance art practices and the resulting discourse continued through *Open Ends*. It was my attempt to work collaboratively with artists, curators and writers involved in performance art. I invited Audrey Wong and Lee Weng Choy (then co-directors of The Substation), Susie Lingham and Matthew Ngui to curate an exhibition comprising performance documents and relics of activities held between 1985-95. We published an edition of twenty-five books with these photo-documents in them.

I found it problematic that when people thought of performance art in Singapore at that time, they tended

to immediately associate it with only Tang Da Wu and Joseph Ng, ignoring the fact that there were many different and co-existent forms of performance art going on at the same time, initiated by other artists. I organised *Open Ends* during a period when the art community was facing discouragement after Ng's arrest and the government's suppression of performance art, when certain political issues were deemed "***off limits***". In the 1950s, people in Singapore demonstrated a spirit of self-organisation in their engagement with social issues. *Gotong Royong* would be the "***politically correct***" term in Singapore for such a spirit. This was the same spirit I embraced and which defined WITAS, to get together and create a space and opportunities for yourselves. In discussion with other women artists, we decided to start a local group; Sarawati (who participated in *Womanifesto II*) and myself purchased a shelf for my studio and invited women artists to deposit their portfolios there. That was the inception of WITAS. The main aim of WITAS was to create an archive, encourage women to share about their practices and raise their visibility.

It was the result of many discussions and negotiations among the active members that WITAS welcomed women artists coming from different artistic practices, including foreign women artists in Singapore. WITAS started as a platform for women speakers to share their practices, but men were invited to share their views too. As it developed later, collaborations with other collectives, such as Instinct (women abstract painters) and p10 (a young artists' collective) became our focus as we sought to create expanded platforms and public forums on art.

Eliza Tan: How has the situation changed for artists in Singapore today?

Amanda Heng: I am involved in BA and MA programmes at LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts, and have observed that many students are taking an interest in gender politics, but more institutional support is required to expose students to postcolonial and feminist theory. Young artists are emulating certain practices, but without being critically engaged or understanding the conceptual underpinnings of such forms. They also need to establish their own positions by acquiring the vocabulary to articulate their concerns.

Eliza Tan: Yoshiko, let's talk about FAAB (Feminist Art Action Brigade), which you initiated in 2003, when you also organised a series of protest standings in Tokyo under the collective title *Great Japan Women's Anti-War Association*. This was a parody of the WWII Great Japan Women's Defence Organisation – women who mobilised other women to support the war effort. In conjunction with the Women in Black (WIB) protests against the US attack on Afghanistan and Iraq, you invited individuals from all walks of life, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, to don black aprons to protest against violence and forgetting. Who participated in this and how did you relate to one another?

Amanda Heng, Ho Soon Yuen, Tan Kun Yi and Juliana Yasin explore gender issues in a collaborative performance at The Space, Hong Bee Warehouse, Singapore, 1992. Artist's collection.

Yoshiko Shimada: The only thing we achieved was to organise the *Borderline Cases* exhibition in 2004 with Korean feminist artists. Kim Sunhee (then a curator at the Mori museum) was an old friend of mine and she introduced me to many prominent Korean feminist artists. Compared to the well-organised, intelligent and realistic Korean women, we were so disorganised, emotional, petty and unpractical. In the end, Korean women artists made a portfolio, sold them and helped the exhibition financially. Korean feminists participated in the social protest against dictatorship in the 1980s and have experienced real politics. They are very wise and hold powerful positions in the government and society. Whereas in Japan, feminists are still very much marginalised and we seem to be resigned to that position. We are polarised (such as in academia, sex work, family, etc.) and have not tried to unify our force.

It was mostly FAAB members and teachers and students from Ochanomizu women's university who participated in the Great Japan Women's Anti-War

Yoshiko Shimada (Left) with Ito Tari (Right). *Great Japan Anti-War Women in Black* **standing protest at Shinjuku station, Tokyo, 21 Mar 2002. Artist's collection.**
Installation view, *Feminist Fan in Japan and Friends* **at Youkobo Art Space, Tokyo, Jan-Feb 2016, with Shimada's** *Missing/Becoming a Statue of a Japanese 'Comfort Woman'*. **durational performance, 29 Nov 2012, Japanese Embassy, London.**

Association protests. Cynthia Enloe was present too, although she did not wear a black apron. Many anti-war women activists were uncomfortable about wearing the black apron and making fun of the Great Japan Women's Defence Organisation. A very strong, fixed idea and image of peace persists, exemplified by tropes such as a mother and child with a white dove in their hands, or women as victims of war. The ominous black apron as a relic of WWII was unacceptable for them.

Eliza Tan: Since then, how have Japan-based feminist artists been organising themselves?

Yoshiko Shimada: Recently, Ashita Shojo Tai (The Tomorrow Girls Troop), organised by a group of younger feminists, has emerged. This year, instead of staging a solo exhibition during her Tokyo residency, Australian artist Kate Just invited other feminists including Ashita Shojo Tai and myself to collaborate in making the exhibition *Feminist Fan in Japan and Friends*. She was seen as coming from a neutral position as a foreign artist-in-residence, although problems might perhaps have arisen if a show like this had been initiated by a feminist organisation, for example, the Image and Gender group. Some of the artists might not have participated, or the institution might not have agreed to host it. There also seems to be a generational gap between feminists in Japan. One of the members of Ashita Shojo Tai reflected on how when she tried to organise campaigns against sexism in Japanese pop culture, the older generation was quite dismissive. Some feminist organisations are polarised by academic elitism and individuals who adopt the roles of gatekeepers, while favouritism is practised in the art world.

Amanda Heng: Coming back to the Women's Art Network – do you think that differences in sexual orientation caused polarisation within the network?

Yoshiko Shimada: I think they felt strongly about how lesbians in Japan are discriminated against. It is still a hushed subject. It's good that they formed a group on their own – but the Women's Art Network itself should not have been a self-help group, although they retained the characteristic of one. I tried to have an exhibition with members from the network, but because most of them were lesbian, they said no. I think they were fearful of exposing themselves to the public and also they didn't want to exhibit with male artists and heterosexual artists. I suggested we include the male artists but they said no. I wanted to question the Women's Art Network, to question their definition of "***woman***".

Amanda Heng: I feel that perhaps it was a question of conflicting values arising from different sexual orientations. Although we are all women, certain women in the group perhaps didn't want to be associated with gay, lesbian and transgendered individuals. The way I see it, perhaps there was a mix-up – an art platform being used to campaign for a particular agenda. Perhaps they couldn't open up to the fact that a woman can have many facets,

many aspects that form our identities and roles we play, and people started to become territorial.

Do you remember, Eliza, that in the 2009, the Singapore-based women's voluntary organisation, Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) was in crisis? Fundamentalist Christian groups in Singapore were trying to take over AWARE because they were against the organisation's support of LGBT rights. Such differences and conflicting opinions exist, and the question about being territorial – in this case, when it happened, many women suddenly became members also because they didn't like the way that the Christian groups tried to take over. Of course, I don't agree with the way they approached things, but I also want to question if AWARE assumed that they are the authority of women's issues in Singapore. I find this quite problematic as well – the fact that AWARE is not open to different opinions and beliefs. There are these romantic ideas about "***sisterhood***", i.e., just because we are women, we are supposed to agree with each others' values and beliefs. The issue of feminism doesn't stop at going out into the streets and fighting to raise an awareness, but it's about seeing differences that exist even amongst ourselves.

There are more interesting issues to go into now in my art – I realise this isn't just confined to women's groups, a collective platform that should allow for different subjectivities to co-exist. It is a norm to assume loyalty, to expect loyalty from a group identity, but this relates more to party politics, which champions consensus and this practice does not leave room for differing views. It also denies the opportunity for negotiation and understanding through questioning and debate. We also have to accept that there are many women artists who are feminists but who do not necessarily choose to express feminist ideas in their work.

Eliza Tan: A longstanding interest in questions concerning place and citizenship informs your work. For example, Amanda, you organised *Our Lives in Our Hands* **(2007) and** *Home Service* **(2003), which sought to engage men and women from developing countries in Asia who move to Singapore to seek employment in the construction industry and domestic services. Yoshiko, you worked with filmmaker Hwangbo Kangja, feminist activist and founding member of Mirine, a collective organisation of Korean Japanese women that focuses on discrimination issues and the** *Junshindae* **(Comfort Women) issue to create** *Pachinko: Family and Nation* **(2002) and make a donation to House of Sharing for surviving Comfort Women in Korea. This, as curator Yong Soon Min observes, presents a rare instance of collaboration between a Japanese artist and a second generation Korean Japanese. What approach do you take when working with particular groups or communities, and through this, test and define relationships between aesthetics and politics, art and activism?**

Amanda Heng *Another Woman* **(1996-7), installation view at the artist's retrospective** *Amanda Heng: Speak to Me, Walk with Me* **Singapore Art Museum, 2011. Artist's collection**

Yoshiko Shimada: Working with the group of second generation Korean residents in Japan made visible a kind of conflict that occurs between aesthetics and politics. Kanja preferred to approach the project using a straight forward documentary-style and didn't really care for contemporary art. Other members of the group were happy to provide their archival materials (photographs and oral history) and let me combine them in an installation. I tried to involve Kanja in the creative process, but our aesthetic senses were very different and we could not really come up with a collaborative methodology. In the end, I made most of the works myself and Kanja probably felt that I just used their materials. I made a work of my own history related to Korean residents (about my grandfather), as one of the members said '**racial discrimination is caused by the people who discriminate, not by the racial minorities**'. I thought it important to juxtapose the experiences of both victims and perpetrators.

Amanda Heng: I think when you work with communities, you are dealing with specific issues – for

example, in my case, when I worked with foreign workers it was in response to the numerous cases of the abuse of domestic workers happening in Singapore at the time. I was not so much concerned about taking sides. I was more interested in finding out how the introduction of foreign workers into Singapore and into our families have altered family life and values, everyday life – considering that the family as a social institution is a really important one in the Singapore context. Foreign workers are sent here to work in the construction sites while their wives are left with the responsibility of looking after the family and fulfilling household tasks. Foreign women have to leave their families and children to take care of families, the elderly and children in Singapore. So the issues we were dealing with are specific, yet broad. It is not just a question about "***woman***" and "***women***" but about the values and changes in societies in which we live.

Eliza Tan: Yoshiko, is this also true in your case? I am thinking about how your work interrogates current attitudes towards legacies of war, occupation and histories of violence, especially involving women; in this case, the issue of military sexual slavery which remains highly contested in Japan and Korea.

Yoshiko Shimada: Yes, and I still continue to perform the piece about Comfort Women but I was recently in Sendai and some Sendai artists asked me: '**If you are doing some kind of political art, why don't you do something about the 3/11 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster?**' While I am indeed very aware of the nuclear threat and concerned about the lives of the people in the affected areas, one cannot simply jump on every issue just like that. I continue to concern myself with the subject of WWII Comfort Women because it remains unresolved. Yet, not only because remains unresolved, but because it is something I feel very strongly about and affects me deeply. Other issues, they affect me too, but they need time. It isn't about just making an artwork or organising a project. One has to be deeply committed to the cause one takes up. When people talk about art and activism, there's an impression that art will in some way solve the problem or have a tangible effect, but no, art does not necessarily always bear an immediate impact in the world around us. There is the potential that it will have an effect in the longer term and I'm not doing it to achieve an immediate effect.

Eliza Tan: Otherwise, you would be, well, an activist in the singular sense?

Yoshiko Shimada: Yes, I would just join demonstrations, or donate money towards a cause, but I make art because I feel very strongly about social issues. I think art-making is still one of the most personal and individual expressions.

Amanda Heng: I would use the analogy of how a scientist sets up a project to experiment with very specific issues, but in this case, the scientist is not being scrutinised for being political or confrontational. With artists who want to pursue personal interests through their work, instantly, you're either classified as making propagandistic, or political art – it's a common issue everywhere, not just in Singapore or Japan. Also, when viewers look at a work – do they first identify with the artist or with the artwork itself? Often works engaging strong political issues tend to draw interest and attention to the issue itself, no matter how artistically or formally inventive an artist may be, people tend to ignore that. I feel that these questions are related to art and activism – how certain activists make use of art as a platform for ideology, while viewers do not always question the artistic merit of such work. This doesn't just happen with art dealing with political issues but is often also the case with community-based art projects.

Eliza Tan: Yoshiko and I were recently discussing how currently in Japan, there are a growing number of platforms supporting the production of community-based art projects, especially after 3/11. On the one hand, while artists' responses to the Fukushima disaster reflect the emergence of new forms of social address and art-making, while at the same time making more visible how art, aesthetics and politics form a complex matrix, further questions arise as to the role of art in a post-disaster society. The extent to which projects framed as "*post-disaster art*" and "*community-based*" reflect critical positions and strategies of intervention, as well as the extent to which "*new*" art that is being made around this subject is actually motivated by the availability of such support and funding.

Amanda Heng: In Singapore, there are now special funds ring-fenced for such projects – big money, and everyone is talking about community projects! I think the difference is that with community-based projects, if you don't have that calling to care for others, it's hard. You can't pretend to care for others, just because funding is available. Imparting your skills to people and getting them to participate, such projects can be very superficial. There is at the same time great interest amongst the art community in having more sustained, and in-depth discussions on this issue – to ask ourselves critically what motivates such responses, so that artists who genuinely care for the subject can be supported by such funding structures.

I see younger artists who are involved in this sort of community-based work because the National Arts Council Singapore (NAC) provides funding for this, and NAC seems to also be tracking their activities in order to collate feedback on audiences and attendance – as a bureaucracy facilitating such projects. Young artists get involved in making work that fit the brief, so to speak, when they could benefit from thinking about and evolving their own practice more critically.

Eliza Tan: A "*top-down*" effect?

Amanda Heng: Yes. The mentality that in order to survive as an artist, you need the funding and recognition from NAC. I see a very big problem with this, which I'm not sure how to articulate in a way that wouldn't hurt anyone – the younger artists or the bureaucrats.

Yoshiko Shimada: I recently co-curated an exhibition in Sendai, of a performance artist from an older generation Nakajima Yoshio who is known for his experimental actions and performances in the 1960s-1970s, and who has recently returned to Japan after living overseas. This was not a community art project, but we spoke to a gallery owner, who said, '**Oh, there's a community space in front of the gallery, why not do a performance there?**' We went to see the space and were happy to use it. However, the neighbourhood association objected to our proposal on the grounds that Nakajima had done a lot of experimental performances in the 1960s involving nudity. They did not bother considering the fact that what he was proposing for this particular exhibition was actually an open-air painting project. They just insisted that nudity was not permitted and that they would have to shut down the performance if there were any complaints. I protested that the gallery owner had every right to decide on the activities that went on in his space and should not be dictated to by the neighbourhood association. Censorship in Japan is mostly voluntary – self-censorship. People worry about what the neighbours will say. It's always been a problem in the past, it is in the present and will continue to be in the future. In this context, community sounds really nice, but it is really another name for a self-policing watch-group.

Amanda Heng: Equally so, there's a misconception that community-based work cannot be critical. "***Community***" is now romantically linked to the idea of "***harmony for all***".

Yoshiko Shimada: Yes, it reminds me of Expo '70 in Osaka which was themed around 'Human Harmony and Progress'! Such platitudes are in fact counter-progressive.

Amanda Heng: Yoshiko, I'd like to know your perspectives on the role of the mother, which was politicised during WWII and in a postwar context. Women sometimes refuse to look at this issue critically, when it is crucial to interrogate the extent to which motherhood as a discursive construct relates to the notion of the nation as family.

Yoshiko Shimada: According to the old Japanese, feudalistic family system, women were supposed to serve the nation. The image of the mother/woman in white aprons which I've used in my work is actually an image that originated from Victorian England. The apron was the English nanny's uniform. This was transmitted to Japan in probably the mid-1900s. A woman's position in the Japanese family has traditionally been tied to a position of servitude. In modern Japan, this idea shifted and was adapted to the context of the nuclear family. The mother had to be modern and savvy in every way, yet still and if not more so able to serve family, husband and children. Women were encouraged to be educated up to a point. Women's colleges like Otsuma Women's University in Tokyo were founded in 1908 as a sewing school by Otsuma Kotaka. Their motto was *ryōsai kenbo (*Good Mother, Wise Wife).

Amanda Heng: I am interested in bringing up the role of the mother in view of the increasing number of demonstrations going on in Malaysia, Thailand, Taiwan and so on, where mothers are taking to the streets in protest. This represents a critical turn, because the space which mothers have occupied in Asia has traditionally been confined to the domestic realm. Now they are increasingly fighting for change. These are the things that I would observe as making up the feminist movement in Asia. A lot of people say that in Asia, it's really progressive because there are so many women holding political office. But seriously, if you look at some of the women presidents around, if it's not because of their husbands, it's because of their father. In this case, its mothers who are taking the initiative to protest, who know what they want for their children and who demonstrate feminism. This all reminds me of the campaign that we had during former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's time – Eliza, do you remember this great debate on marriage for women university graduates? Women were apparently not producing enough babies – clever babies, to be precise!

Eliza Tan: Yes, in 1983, Lee made a speech about how graduate men were not marrying graduate women, that this would lower the quality of the country's gene pool and perpetuate the tendency for graduate women to remain single or have fewer children. He referred to the necessary inclusion of women graduates as part of the nation's 'breeding pool'**.[3] This incited angry responses largely from middle class women who objected to this patriarchal view. Interestingly, this led directly to the establishment of AWARE in 1985, the first feminist organisation to emerge since the apparent disappearance of women activists from the political scene in the early 1960s. Sociologist Chris Hudson, in his critique of the Singapore Girl trope, observes how control over the bodies of workers – and I would add, women – has always been of '**paramount importance**' since Singapore's decolonisation and post-independence period, where '**the body is constituted through discourses of nationalism and national survival**'.[4] To borrow Heng and Devan's arresting image, Lee's narrative of national crisis and survival plays out as an '**exclusive theatre of omnipotent fathers: state fathers whose creative powers incorporate and subsume the maternal function, as attested by their autonomous birthing of a nation**";[5] the Singapore Story is a narrative based on selective memory.**

Speaking of staging the past – Yoshiko, in 2000, Ong Ken Seng of Theatreworks Singapore invited both you and Bubu, alongside other Japanese artists, to participate in the multimedia production of 'The Spirits Play' (Battle Box, Fort Canning & Victoria Theatre, Singapore, 2000). Through various acts and interventions you attempted to engage multiple contexts and issues: the Japanese Occupation in Singapore; Japanese women's roles and experiences during Hirohito's Imperial Wartime State; the Allied Occupation of Japan; military sexual violence; sex and sexuality in contemporary Japan.

What stood out most for you while researching and making art on war memory in contemporary Singapore and Japanese society?

Yoshiko Shimada: There seemed to be a contradiction in Singapore. There exists an archive of oral history about Japanese Occupation, although most people I interviewed said they bear no grudge against Japan and want to forget about it. I think this is in keeping with the government's intention to historicise people's memories, making them impersonal, harmless and colourless. Ong Ken Sen's theatre production had a similar effect (I don't know if he intended that way). Aesthetics was used to detoxify the reality. Whereas in Japan, we simply forgot this – we remember the war time experiences only as victims, such as Hiroshima or Nagasaki, but make no effort to remember the crimes we perpetrated in Asia. Nowadays, the Japanese youth hardly know anything about the war. I think most don't know we invaded Singapore.

Eliza Tan: Amanda, for you, performing *Singirl,* **your appropriation of the Singapore Girl stereotype, has been a recurrent strategy for engaging with a range of issues concerning gender, national identity and historical amnesia. One such appearance was during your involvement in Ivan Heng's theatre production, based on playwright Ovidia Yu's 'The Woman on A Tree on a Hill' which explores the inherent instability of the terms "*woman*" and "*man*". What did your role entail?**

Amanda Heng: In Singapore today, many people do not marry and being single myself, I feel that society tends

to look upon us with suspicion. Singles are often regarded as "***unproductive***" and as outsiders. *Singirl* was a playful take on the notions of "***Singapore***", "***Single***", "***Sin***", to critique the image of the Singapore Girl as an exotic object offering services and smiles which cater to the white gaze. The *Singirl* character I performed in Heng's musical represented an invitation to breakaway from the norm, from traditional roles which many women in Asian society live with, and to offer alternative possibilities of women's identities. I was concerned with how performance art could be a part of a theatre production and sought to distinguish performance art from stage acting. To do this, I began my performance in the lobby before the musical began and then joined the cast on stage. Tan Kai Syng contributed a piece featuring my videos of *Singirl* visiting various locations due to be demolished in Singapore, which was screened in the theatre. *Singirl* was a means of addressing issues of urban renewal arising in the context of Singapore's thrust towards modernisation.

Eliza Tan: Your installation *I Remember* **(2005) dealt specifically with the memory of the Japanese Occupation in Singapore. From tattooing the words '**I remember**' on your body, to conducting video interviews with individuals who experienced the event and researching the names of thousands who had died during the Japanese Occupation but have not been officially acknowledged in public monuments – what were the most striking discoveries you made in the process of putting this project together?**

Amanda Heng: The names of countless civilian casualties were not registered so their memory has been effaced. After the war, the main concern for the authorities was to undertake reconstruction, but in the process of digging, bones were unearthed in mass graves from the Japanese military's operation Sook Ching, a purge involving the torture and massacre of tens of thousands of people who were deemed anti-Japanese. How do we account for those who died in the war? Members of the public contributed to this project names of their family members who died from the lack of food, medical attention, or other causes. In terms of my personal memory, since I was a young girl, we were aware of how much my mother detests the Japanese – even until today, she refuses to even go to restaurants serving Japanese food, but she was not able to talk about it. I only found out why later on, by first questioning my aunt, about her various experiences. During the war, my mom and her sisters spent their lives hiding from the Japanese. Women today continue to live under the threat of sexual violence on a daily basis, but in conditions of war, the threat is exacerbated. Individual stories like this are subsumed by overarching textbook narratives of the Japanese Occupation, we are given facts and figures of war, but I am interested in personal accounts because they convey the unrecorded realities of this experience and its human face.

Eliza Tan: Amanda, *I Remember* **was certainly a form of archival work. Yoshiko, you have been collecting and archiving people's secrets as part of your project** *Bones in Tansu - Family Secrets* **which has been ongoing since 2006. More recently, Amanda's** *Worthy Tours* **has been about the preservation of cultural artefacts and how such objects are archived or simply deemed as useless old objects, while Yoshiko has been preoccupied with researching the personal archives of Japanese artists who had been active during the 1960s and 1970s, and who had been part of the Bigakkō school. In fact, you have recently founded an archive dedicated to collecting material relating to the work of Matsuzawa Yutaka (1922-2006).**

What is the most striking observation you've made through the course of your research and archiving, concerning how memory is stored, organised and interpreted by institutions and individuals such as yourselves?

Yoshiko Shimada: In Japan, there aren't many public institutions that initiate archiving ordinary people's experiences, and when they were archived, they seem to be used to form a unified "***National***" memory to serve a specific agenda. For example, Showa-kan in Tokyo is a museum focused on the Tokyo air-raid at the end of the WWII. They focus on Japan's suffering and our united effort to '**rise from the ashes**'. There is no mention of American responsibility or Japan's bombing Chinese cities. It was as if the air raid was a natural disaster. My *Family Secrets* project was to bring personal memories into public, but without generalise them. They remain personal and private, and the viewers are required to face them one-to-one.

Amanda Heng: Storytelling was the earliest form of archiving and passing down your history and heritage. With the introduction of language policies in Singapore in the 1980s, this changed and grandparents stopped relating their stories to a younger generation owing to widening language barriers between generations. Younger generations speak mainly English and barely any dialect. I began using this form of art-making as a way to deal with multiple issues; as a means of talking with the older generation about the war, and with *Worthy Tours*, to address urban renewal and ask how and why these old places carrying important memories were suddenly disappearing so quickly. I find this form of storytelling naturally very effective as a method of archiving, and an equally poignant form of empowerment. When you go to the older generation and ask them about their memories and history, they become alive, awakened by a sense of how something that they possess is now useful.

Things like that are very important to me. It made me realise that this dynamic was something I had never before experienced. For example, Mum never talked about the war before until I asked her about the war and even then she didn't want to talk about it. I had to ask my aunt and piece it all together. My aunt started talking and Mum started recalling and then she was able to talk about the war. You seldom get a chance to create such conversation these days. It used to be a culture, but it's disappearing. It's really very important for us to bring them back and I'm really interested to say that it is a very traditional, primitive form but the challenge is how then such forms can take on contemporary relevance. Archival work also raises many important questions about the act of remembering; that memories are selective and they are also determined by power relations at play within the process.

Yoshiko Shimada: Yes, in relation to why these ephemeral oral histories and archival materials are disappearing, the question also comes up concerning what gets memorised and how. When I was working with Yutaka Matsuzawa's archive, organising his papers and memos etc, I encountered a curator who was only interested in what he called Matsuzawa's "***real works***" (such as paintings in frames and objects) those were the things he wanted to take back to the museum, he wasn't interested in the little things, all the memos, etc. But Matsuzawa, he was a conceptual artist! All the little things he did – the writings and language he used, constitute his art! Yet, there's this perception that what's important, that should be stored and collected and remembered, are objects which take a certain form, whereas all other material – paraphernalia, are not regarded with such priority.

I think that it's changing slowly. I'm trying to preserve all these small artefacts. Hopefully, with the artefacts relating to Bigakkō which I collected, these are going into the archive of the Tokyo National Research Institute of Cultural Properties. People are beginning to grow more aware of the importance of such collections. In most cases, however, so much remains unrecognised. Only the big things, big names – those who 'made it' and wrote memoirs, make it into official history and are remembered. All the other little voices are forgotten. There is so much material, not only relating to Matsuzawa's own work, but works, publications and letters from many other artists. He initiated Data Centre of Contemporary Art in 1971 as a worldwide project to archive conceptual art. I think the most important thing about archiving is not to be specific and selective, but to archive wholly. Matsuzawa is often categorised simply as a conceptual artist, but he had done variety of works including poetry, painting, objects, writing, performance. He also had manifold interests – from esoteric Buddhism to cybernetics. Art history (and institutional history in general) tends to simplify and compartmentalise an artist, but the life and work of an artist is much more complex. Archiving should work to preserve the dynamism of individuals.

Notes

1. See http://www.womanifesto.com/project/woman-in-camouflage/ and Yoshiko Shimada & Bubu 'Made in Occupied Japan' *n.paradoxa* vol. 5 (Jan 2000) pp.46-47
2. Lee Wen 'Performance Art in Context: A Singaporean Perspective' MA Thesis, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore (May 2006) p. 49
3. Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez, Sumiko Tan (eds.) *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 1998)
4. Chris Hudson *Beyond the Singapore Girl: Discourses of Gender and Nation in Singapore* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2013)
5. Geraldine Heng and Janada's Devan 'The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore' in A. Ong and M.G. Peletz (eds.) *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (California: University of California Press, 1995)