



Left: Conference poster outside the Henry Art Gallery Auditorium, photo: Angelica Macklin.

Right: Conference presenters at the Seattle Art Museum, photo: Alma Khasawnih.

### Narrative Summary and Evaluation of the Proceedings

*New Geographies of Feminist Art: China, Asia, and the World*, an international conference conceptualized and organized by Sonal Khullar (Assistant Professor, Art History) and Sasha Welland (Associate Professor, Anthropology and Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies), was held at the University of Washington from November 15-17, 2012. The conference brought together twenty-eight scholars, curators, and artists from around the world to discuss the practice, circulation, and cross-cultural significance of feminist art from Asia. It aimed to reorient scholarly discussion from Western to nonwestern art world centers such as Beijing and Delhi, Taipei and Tokyo, Hong Kong and Hanoi, Seoul and Shanghai, Guangzhou and Jakarta, by examining the role of women artists, the history and future of feminism, and the visual representation of gender and sexuality. It intervened in traditional approaches to art history and area studies through its notion of “new geographies” as a mode of thinking relation across spaces that are conceived as unrelated, and its notion of “feminist art” as a field of practice that incorporates artists, critics, academics, curators and audiences. Feminism emerges, by this account, as an epistemology rather than an event, an epistemology in which thinking relationally, in terms of social hierarchies, aesthetic form, and ideology, is foundational. China, Asia and the World emerge as horizons of possibility rather than bounded territories and geopolitical realities. Conference panels and roundtables were organized around six interlocking themes—the city and the country; art markets and art worlds; sites and structures—to rethink dominant narratives of feminist art. Official registration totaled 209, with 177 attending the keynote and an estimated 130 participants attending panels and roundtables, including graduate students and scholars who traveled nationally and internationally.

## Achievements

The main achievements of the conference were: (1) its focus on multi-generational, interdisciplinary, comparative, and cross-regional or transnational approaches to the study of feminist art; (2) its insistence on the art world and academy as distinct if related sites of knowledge production and critique; and (3) its translation of academic insights into practice and pedagogy through teaching, outreach and education events, and community-building in Seattle and the greater Pacific Rim.



Left: Sylvia Wolf, Director of the Henry Art Gallery, moderates “Artist Introductions: Wu Mali and Navjot,” November 14, 2012, Seattle Asian Art Museum, photo: Alma Khasawnih.



Right: Conference participants at reception, November 16, 2012, Henry Art Gallery, photo: Max Cleary.

Conference participants applauded the multi-generational dialogue forged by *New Geographies* and found it “inspiring” how “young scholars,” not least the conference organizers, initiated and participated in the debates. One senior scholar (art historian, administrator, and curator) wrote: “It is really exciting to see the engagement of so many in an area [feminist art, Asian art] that is at long last beginning to make inroads into the mainstream art world.” The conference recognized the contributions of women artists and feminist scholars that had previously been neglected and remain marginal to dominant narratives of art history in Asia and abroad. Another senior scholar (historian) wrote: “I was surprised to see Frida Kahlo appearing in the artwork of Indian women painters. It is such an interesting example of how ideas travel around the world and how we might reconfigure area studies.” Thus the conference achieved its goal of challenging the territorial boundaries established by traditional area studies that divide the Asia into East, South, Southeast, and Central (although this last category was not explored in the conference presentations), and indeed separate Asia from the world. These boundaries have, for example, disabled thinking Mexican painter Frida Kahlo alongside Indian painter Nalini Malani.

For some scholars, based in the disciplines of History, Gender Studies, or Literary Studies, this conference marked their first scholarly engagement with Art History, visual artists, and artworks. For others, based in the discipline of Art History, it represented their first scholarly exposure to and engagement with artists and artworks in parts of Asia outside their area of research. Conference

participants working in the field of feminist art wore many hats as ethnographers, historians, curators, and activists. Focusing on art produced in locations such as Hanoi, Jakarta, Bangkok, Osaka, Beijing, and Taipei, they presented original research, which combined ethnographic, sociological, historical, literary, performance studies and art historical methods. This interdisciplinary approach was necessary to the materials of their study but had not been theorized as such prior to the conference. Indeed the conference presentations made it possible to see connections between the art of Japanese-born Tanaka Atsuko (b. 1932-d. 2005) and Chinese-born Chen Qiulin (b. 1975-), between the study of visual culture and society, or as one artist put it, “between theory and practice.”

This artist elaborated: “The conference was extremely meaningful to me. Apart from sharing my views, I came to know a lot about areas I have not been so well-informed about (Vietnam). . . . It was lovely to be amongst so many thinking heads, and feel that when any ideology, philosophy, or theory put into practice brings a real change in a social world for the better, we need to acknowledge [it] and should not be hesitant in associating with it and taking it further (even if one gets labeled), theory and practice go hand in hand.” Her insight was corroborated by various communities that interacted with each other and conference presenters : university administrators and faculty, museum professionals, non-profit organization staff, local journalists, and a group of graduate students of the Department of Art History and Visual Culture at the University of British Columbia, who traveled to Seattle for the conference with their professor Katherine Hacker. One senior scholar and curator observed how the unique and well-conceived structure of the conference provided “great fodder” for thought through its balance of formal presentations and less structured discussions, and through the diversity of methods, voices, and institutional locations involved. In other words, the conference was less a summation of existing research than a call for the ongoing relevance of feminist art to contemporary society—in Asia and elsewhere—and for new approaches to its study and display in universities, museums, and public spaces. It laid the groundwork for future research on feminist art that extends and challenges the limits of area studies and art history.



“Art World” panelists Doris Sung (York University), Kajri Jain (University of Toronto), and Chin-tao Wu (Academia Sinica) take questions from the audience, photo: Zac Buschmohle.

## Program

Thursday, November 15, 2013

Shu-mei Shih (Professor of Asian Languages & Cultures, Comparative Literature, and Asian American Studies, UCLA) opened the conference with a keynote address titled “From World History to World Art: Reflections on New Geographies of Feminist Art in Asia.” Taking a cue from discussions of world history and world literature, the lecture asked how we might conceive of world art and the place of Asian feminist art within it. Drawing upon her previous theorization of *minor transnationalism* and *the Sinophone*, Prof. Shih argued for the importance of approaching the world not from a totalizing perspective but through a palimpsest of “arcs” that trace connections between artists, art practices and objects that do not conform to nation-state or regional borders, thereby recognizing *and* belying the hold of these forms of political organization on constructions of knowledge and imagination. She made a distinction between feminism as theme and feminism as ethical stance or methodology by examining the careers and works of five artists: Patty Chang, Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha, Shu Lea Cheang, Marine Ky, and Wu Mali. In conjunction with *New Geographies*, Prof. Shih was a Katz Distinguished Lecturer under the auspices of the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, and prior to the conference, she met with graduate students who had taken a microseminar on her work (led by Associate Professor Edward Mack, Asian Languages & Literature) titled “Transnationalism, Visuality, and Identity,” and led a colloquium titled “Racializing Area Studies, Fetishizing China.”



Keynote address by Shu-mei Shih (UCLA), Kane Hall, photos: Max Cleary.

Friday, November 16, 2013

On Friday morning, Catharina Manchanda, Jon and Mary Shirley Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Seattle Art Museum, led conference participants on a special tour of *Elles: Women Artists from the Centre Pompidou*, a major exhibition of feminist art on view at the museum from October 11, 2012-January 13, 2013. Originally organized by the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2009, *Elles* narrated the history of contemporary art exclusively through the work of women artists. *New Geographies* was organized to coincide with this exhibit, as a way to explore how feminist art

from Asia disrupts and revises both contemporary nation-based art histories and global feminist art history.

Conference organizers Sonal Khullar and Sasha Welland opened the afternoon panels in the Henry Art Gallery auditorium with an introductory address. They charted their conceptualization of the conference as an interdisciplinary conversation, propelled by shared feminist commitments and curatorial experience, at the juncture of their specializations in Chinese and South Asian art and art historical and ethnographic methodologies.

The paired panels “The City” and “The Country” explored the shifting role of gender and the work of women artists in the context of early twentieth-century anti-colonial nationalism and late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century economic liberalization and urbanization. They traced the dialectic of rural and urban in visual representation through both of these periods, which have come to mark the “modern” and the “contemporary” in art historical discourse. In a format continued throughout the conference, each panel featured three presenters and one moderator who introduced the speakers, posed questions to put the panelists in conversation with each other, and took questions from the audience.

A reception following the panels brought conference presenters and participants together with the curatorial staff of the Henry Art Gallery. This campus art museum, which focuses on contemporary art, was the venue for an installation, *A la belle étoile [Under the Sky]* (2007) by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist, as part of the citywide exhibition of *Elles*. Also at view at the time, as part of the exhibition *Now Here is Also Nowhere*, were Korean artist Kimsooja’s *A Needle Woman* (2005), a 25-minute silent video, and Indian artist Ranjani Shettar’s *Fire in the Belly* (2007), a hanging sculpture made of acacia wood. Conference participants were granted free admission to the galleries and given special tours of the exhibitions by Henry curators. Holding the conference sessions in the Henry auditorium provided a unique opportunity to enact a critical exchange between the art world and academy on the subject of feminism and transnationalism, which was a key goal of the conference.



Catherina Manchanda leads special conference tour of *Elles*, Seattle Art Museum, photos: Alma Khasawnih.

*Saturday, November 17, 2013*

The full-day Saturday program alternated two panels and two roundtables. The panel pairing of “Art Markets” and “Art Worlds” addressed the emergence of feminist practices and new networks and assemblages of practitioners in response to growing markets for contemporary art from Asia. They considered how women artists in Asia constitute and reconfigure art worlds, that is, systems of commission, transmission, production and reception. The paired roundtables, “Structures” and “Sites,” featured short presentations by and discussion among curators and artists, respectively. The curators’ roundtable included independent and museum-based curators, as well as an auction house professional and an academic who reflected upon the role of the market and the academy in curatorial practice. The artists’ roundtable featured three distinguished artists, Hung Liu, Navjot, and Wu Mali, based in San Francisco, Mumbai and Taipei respectively, with artistic careers spanning decades that demonstrated diverse positions on the relationship between feminist politics, art-making practice, and geographic location.

Full documentation of the program, including panel and paper abstracts and participant biographies, is available on the conference website: <http://depts.washington.edu/newgeos>. All conference lectures, panels, and roundtables were audio recorded (with presenters’ official consent) for research purposes.



Left: Audience at the Artists’ Roundtable, photo: Max Cleary.



Right: Coffee break conversation, Doris Sung (York University), Julia Andrews (Ohio State University), Maud Lavin (School of the Art Institute of Chicago), photo: Angelica Macklin.

## **Research**

### *Insights Gained*

The conference proceedings generated a path-breaking conversation among scholars and practitioners across disciplines, area studies expertise, and generations of scholarship that revealed how institutional organization of knowledge has prevented important modes of comparison in

scholarship, as well as artistic and curatorial practice. For example, many of the presenters commented that not only had they never been at a conference focused on feminist art practice in Asia (in spite of long careers, in some instances, in which feminist inquiry has been a significant intellectual influence), they had also been introduced to the lives and works of some artists in other Asian regions for the first time. It became clear that national and regional silos of knowledge have powerfully shaped art historical discourse to date, and that feminism as a methodology provides a productive way to explore other geographies of artistic practice and interpretation across time and space. These geographies include imperial and colonial representations of the “oriental woman”; feminist deconstructive responses over the long durée to this wide-ranging archive of “knowing the other”; artists’ diasporic movements between regimes of knowledge, identitarian politics, and representational logics; the conjunction of global culture industries and neoliberal restructuring that has created new hierarchies within and between nations; and transnational activist alliances and artistic modes of critique. These geographies are not simply sequential, but are often overlapping and reinforcing. The discussions that unfolded and the questions formulated at the conference also revealed tensions between methodologies (art historical, ethnographic, statistical, curatorial, studio and community practice) that invite further research and discussion in terms of how “feminist art” as a field requires the multivocality of disciplinary commitments as well as healthy skepticism of disciplinary boundaries that occlude connections and areas of analysis. In other words, debates over what feminist art is and how to study or enact it are not something to be overcome, but precisely what will deepen and enrich this field of inquiry in ways that will generate new questions, methodologies, and theories within the disciplines and area studies.



Conference participants at reception, November 16, 2012, Henry Art Gallery, photos: Max Cleary.

### *Future Research*

Future research will require genealogical research around categories such as “woman artist” and “feminist art” in national and transnational contexts to understand the differential salience and affective resonance they have for scholars, artists, curators, and museum audiences in particular locations and of particular generations. How have these terms been used or rejected, experienced as liberating or limiting, by differently positioned social actors in the art world? How do they make visible or obscure certain artists and artworks; or organize the world in particular spatio-temporal ways? What other terms, narrative forms, or modes of representation have developed alongside

them? What are the feminist politics of storytelling or curating via particular sets of artists, artworks, or artmaking practices? Feminist scholarship of the last two decades has embraced intersectional analysis—an understanding that social position and subjectivity are always produced by multiple, interlocking, and shifting hierarchies of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.—as a rebuke to enunciations of “universal sisterhood” that excluded, marginalized, or essentialized Third World women and women of color. How are the politics of intersectionality complicated by feminist art that crosses epistemic registers of difference? For example, how do discourses of race, ethnicity, indigeneity, *adivasi* (tribal in India), or *xiaoshu minzu* (ethnic nationality in China) inform, replace, or remain tangential to each other? Or, what challenges does late nineteenth-century Chinese anarcho-feminist He-Yin Zhen’s analytic category of *nannü* (male/female) pose to the sex/gender system that is fundamental to modern Western feminist thought? And how does visual arts practice intersect with discursive formations of gender? Asking transnational, transcultural *and* transhistorical questions about woman and feminism will be central to developing *new geographies of feminist art* as a rubric for future research projects. Thinking about feminist art in terms of “art worlds” and “new geographies” highlights the impossibility of a unitary subject of “woman” or of feminism and reorients inquiry towards questions of power, ethical practice and differential consciousness.



Left: Audience at the Artists’ Roundtable, photo: Max Cleary.



Right: Artist Wu Mali (National Kaohsiung Normal University) chats with graduate student and translator Shuxuan Zhou (UW Gender, Woman & Sexuality Studies Department), photo: Angelica Macklin.

## Pedagogy

In conjunction with the conference, Sasha Welland developed a new introductory undergraduate course, *Feminist Art and Visual Culture in a Global Perspective*, offered through the Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies (GWSS) Department at the University of Washington. This course takes to the global level that premise that feminist art is a field of practice and inquiry that is neither simply social nor aesthetic, in which entanglements of form and ideology, representation and politics are questioned, turned over, and remade. It asks how social categories like gender and sexuality are constructed in similar and different ways across cultures, and how the work of feminist artists



responds to these powerful formations as shaped by local and global institutions. Rather than assuming that feminist art begins in the West, it explores an art history of innovation and intervention grounded in centers like Beijing, Johannesburg, and Mumbai. It was listed this first time as a special topics course, but in future iterations will be offered as a permanent GWSS course under the streamlined title of Global Feminist Art. For more information, including a student-produced feminist art archive, please see: <http://courses.washington.edu/femart/wordpress/>.



Undergraduate students in the Feminist Art and Visual Culture in a Global Perspective course volunteer at the conference registration desk, photo: Angelica Macklin.

### Co-Sponsorship and Community Outreach

The conference was made possible by a major grant (\$25,000) from the American Council of Learned Societies, funded by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange. It was administered with such organizational skill and efficiency by the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, working in conjunction with the Henry Art Gallery staff, that presenters repeatedly commented it was one of the best-run conferences they had ever attended. They commended the “superb” and “complex” operations of professional staff, conference assistants, and student volunteers, noting especially the excellent hospitality, smooth coordination, and technical preparedness that marked the event as exceptional. Matching support came from multiple UW units and community partners, including the Simpson Center for the Humanities; Solomon Katz Distinguished Lectureship in the Humanities; Divisions of Arts and Social Sciences; Jackson School of International Studies; School of Art; Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies; Center for Global Studies; East Asia Center; China Studies; South Asia Studies; Southeast Asia Studies; the Henry Art Gallery; and the Gardner Center for Asian Art and Ideas of the Seattle Art Museum. This support attested to how a collaborative project between two University of Washington faculty members grew into a campus-wide and city-wide collaboration through the conference.

In advance of the conference, organizers arranged two community outreach events. On October 28, 2012, “Women and China’s New Documentaries,” an event held at the main branch of the Seattle Public Library, included a screening and discussion of the experimental film *Self-Portrait with Three Women* (2010), dir. Zhang Mengqi, a coming-of-age story about a young woman who combines

dance and documentary to explore her relationships with family and recent Chinese history. The panel discussion featuring UW scholars from Cinema Studies and Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies engaged a multi-generational audience in a lively debate, in Chinese and English, about gender, memory, and the politics of persuasion in cinematic representation. A second event, “Artist Introductions: Wu Mali and Navjot,” held on November 14, 2012 at the Seattle Asian Art Museum, brought together two artists participating in the conference to present their work and engage each other in a public conversation moderated by Sylvia Wolf, Director of the Henry Art Gallery. Based in Taiwan and India, respectively, Wu Mali and Navjot discussed the trajectories of their art practices over several decades, their situated feminist perspectives, and their site-specific processes of working with communities.

The success of these outreach efforts is attested to by coverage of the conference on two area blogs: <http://slog.thestranger.com/slog/archives/2012/11/16/good-job-whatshertitses-where-i-am-now>

<http://www.artandpoliticsnow.com/blog/>



UW graduate student conference participants and volunteers, Henry Art Gallery, photos: Max Cleary.

Left: Shuxuan Zhou (Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies), Kathy Morrow (Cinema Studies), Xiqing Zheng (Comparative Literature)

Right: Alma Khasawnih (Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies)