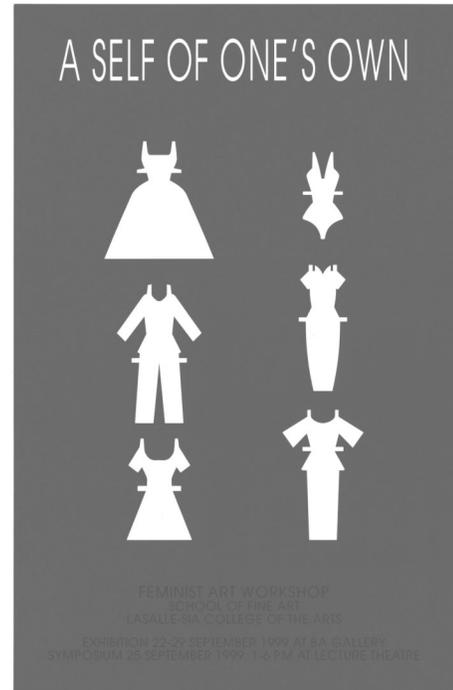


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A SELF OF ONE'S OWN

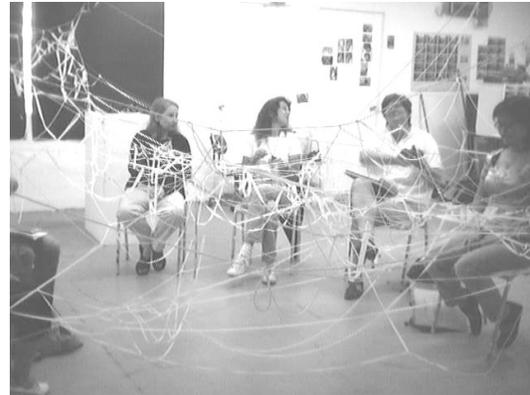
On many occasions in the past few years I have been referred to as being “not personal enough” in my approach to teaching and curating: as someone who builds up a distance rather than tries to destroy all boundaries and limits. These remarks were especially numerous when I was teaching women-students and working with women-artists. I prefer to call it not distance, but mediation, not border, but a spacing (or creating a space) - to breathe and create. Not to become like “one” group-team-circle, identifiable by its very image, not to think, speak or act in the same voice and out of the same convictions. Unfortunately this goes against the grain of what “education” has become - even in an art institution. How to make a space, to leave an opportunity, to disagree, without betraying some “code”? Some “Brotherhood” or “Sisterhood”? I strongly believe in creating and allowing distances to negotiate themselves in the process of teaching and curating. In this sense, the personal is not taken out but redefined, redistributed, transferred.



I am more interested in the effect—the *unpredictable* effect-- of *demarcated* collaboration, rather than resorting to the shelter of common beliefs, the undisputed authority of ignorance and the bliss of the closed circle of “us”, sustained by a clear definition of “them”, whoever this “them” may be: a theory, a movement, a structure, a discourse, a society, a culture, a tradition, a certain group of people. The more unified and undifferentiated “them” makes it easier to sustain “us”. In an educational institution it all comes down to *A Politics of Teaching*. That’s why studying, differentiating, knowing what we actually mean by a certain “them” and especially what “them” thinks of itself becomes a crucial point of departure if we are to create some other effect than constructing a comfortable swamp of “us”.

Usually things are much more interesting and complicated than what is presented in stereotypes or even in secondary sources. A lot of artists and thinkers have made significant contributions to each others' fields, and my job as a teacher has always been to help those who would like to find out about that: what has already been done, or, to put it in another way – how many “bicycles” have been created to ride on, to critically test, thus enabling me to understand how I can modify old ones or make the new in my own context. That's why before any personal agenda, before my own preferences and stereotypes concerning artists and thinkers, I have an obligation to try and teach only what I have a fair knowledge of, and pass that knowledge on to others, so that they can decide for themselves, especially before I have decided for them. That's why studying always comes before discussion, as a possibility for a discussion (and not conversion) to happen. Especially when it comes to such stereotyped and much lesser studied area as feminist art, histories or theories of feminisms, though every one seems to know the “F” word. Thus at the end of class the answer to the question “Are you a feminist?” from “yes, no, or do not know” becomes “First tell me what you mean by *feminist*, then only I can actually answer - to your definition”. Or, as some have already answered, this question can be seen even in a more complex way, so much so that today any question in the form of “Are you this or that” that implies a structure of “I AM” presupposes a certain ethics and politics of identity, which belongs to the so-called Western metaphysical tradition. Hence some feminist or postmodern thinkers would simply “not understand” the structure of the question. It is

obsolete, though by its very implication it indicates the current state of our discussions.



It all started in April 1999. I was supposed to teach in Singapore, but was held back in Moscow by other projects. In the end, I could only teach 5 weeks instead of 8. Thinking about what to offer, I decided to put in the title of the course the “F” word, to see the reaction of students. In order for an elective course to run, a minimum number of students have to sign up. Not only did I have the minimum number of students – I had much more. And practically no one left the class. And this was after 5 intensive weeks that instead of *Feminist Theory* could be easily and justifiably called “Post-Lacanian Theory”, “Theories of Sexual Difference” or “Contemporary Psychoanalytic Theory”. After only 5 weeks to *systematically* read original texts by Lacan, Kristeva, Cixous, Zizek & Irigaray, with an introduction to Freud (for how can one teach Lacan without Freud?), post-structuralism & Foucault. These were our “women's issues”. Those texts were our “personal discussions”. I was simply doing my job – teaching what is actually a very small portion of what “Feminist Theory” is today.

5 weeks. 5 classes. No complaints about loads of readings, no complaints about “heavy theory”, no complaints about boring classes (Lacan sometimes does sound very boring). I remember that Kristeva was very popular. Then students asked for more. For a workshop. A workshop where I could not only give them knowledge of current theoretical issues, but also where they could make works that would be informed by and in-tune with international feminist aesthetic discourses, and we could discuss both, we could collaborate on both. One of the main points of the collaboration was the notion of **woman** and its redefinition that has been extensively explored in the past few decades by feminist thinkers and artists.



Woman

It is possible to identify at least two ways by which “woman” and “feminine” has been derived from “man” and “masculine”. First, through symmetrical negation or opposition, for example: chaos (woman) = not-order, as non-active, that is, passive and cold element (woman) opposite to active and hot element cosmos (man) = order; according to some ancient Greek & Chinese philosophies, and also in early linguistic anthropology, structuralist theory and semiotics. Second, through residual complementarity: woman as a caring, domestic, underdeveloped state,

that sustains the function of the social, symbolic and cultural orders and systems (Hegel, among others). Woman serves as a cementing matter that complements and provides basic nourishment and reproduction for men - the citizens, and active participants of the political and governmental realm. In both of these definitions the only “essential quality” of woman is understood through what man cannot be – life-giver. Hence so much discourse has been generated about motherhood in relation to the notion of “woman”. The rest men can do, therefore there is no difference except for this. According to such a definition, the only specific form that the feminine takes is the maternal one. The rest can be reduced to the mimicry of the masculine, or reaction to “her destiny”. Woman’s specific role in the creative process has hence been understood as a derivative and residue of man’s creativity, that which enables limits and supposed “neutrality”. Often we hear that women refuse to call themselves “women-artists” because when they create a painting or an installation without reference to the so-called “women’s issues” (that is, what men do not do) their specificity as women – the maternal function - is being left at home, in the realm of domesticity. When they are painting, they are “like men”, they are “artists” in general – neutrally “men”- without being *narrowed* to the notion of “women”. Why narrowed? This is the way they feel – to be called “women” is to be “narrowed”, be “reduced”, be “lesser than an artist”.

Of course the awareness of this derivative definition of “woman”, fixed as “non-man”, has its own privileges, developed culturally and historically.

Resorting to “re-claiming” the “maternal” and “feminine” *without* a simultaneous redefinition of these notions produces some striking but well-known effects, usually referred to in theory as the position of the “phallic mother”. This position is usually characterized by claims to hold special powers as “mother”, to elevate instead of redefining existing notions of the maternal. For example, a few have claimed that all creativity mimics the maternal – as if the simple reversal of maternal-paternal is going to help in redefinition. It simply exchanges positions leaving the main structure of the production of meaning itself untouched. Celebratory practices in the art of many women often naively reproduce the very notion of the woman and the maternal that leaves women to be defined as non-men. That is, again – not to exist at all.

This non-existence became especially fashionable and strategic in a time when “margin” started to be seen as a “privileged site” opposed to “center”. Subaltern, and on the domestic fringes of the social, “woman” suddenly became an attractive “position” to appropriate or claim. For example, Jean-Christoff Ammann, former director of Basel Kunsthalle, said approximately the following: “Modern consciousness strives to overcome logocentrism, and hence the future of art belongs to woman. Men have simply lost an ability to critically approach reality. Female power is a healing power, that has a homeopathic effect, a power of the marginal, a power of the periphery.” (Quoted by Victor Kirkhiemer in *Moscow Art Magazine*, 2001. Translation mine). For many, “woman” becomes *an instrument*, by means of

which “contemporary consciousness” represented by men – artists, philosophers, intellectuals – reconstructs, renews and regenerates itself. For example, the concept of avant-garde, particularly important in the art, fully incorporates this “female” marginality as an outsider. Especially since avant-garde and woman culturally seem to share elements of definitive transgression. “Considered as a discursive system, rather than a history of designated movements”, writes Mary Kelly, “the avant-garde could be said to construct the category of creative subjectivity as essentially transgressive and metaphorically feminine. In this respect, it cuts across the discourses of both modernism and postmodernism, appearing as a divergence from the norm when it poses as oppositional practice, but converging with it on the issue of originality. In fact the notion of transgression constitutes one of the foremost rules of recognition for originality within the institution of fine art; so much so that the creative subject, presumed to be male, could be said to *assume the masquerade of transgressive femininity as a form of virile display.*” (Mary Kelly “Imaging Desire” 1996, p.217).

Julia Kristeva likewise stated that avant-garde (she referred to literature and poetry) is always “feminine” so far as it breaks the rules of language, its grammar and traditional style. But male writers, not female, are the ones who are better suited to embody such transgressive feminine gestures, for they are capable of *keeping a distance* towards fractures and fissures within their own selves. Precisely because they are *not* women they are capable of handling the “feminine” position without

losing themselves in the feminine, but effectively using it to the advantage of their art. Women get dissolved within femininity and never come back. They cannot maintain the distance. They *are* distance for someone else. What is left for a woman-artist? A double-negative: first, she is the “other” to the concept of creativity, she is the creator’s (who can be a god or an artist) “Other” – “Woman” (represents not the creator, but his dream, his *subject-matter*). Second, she is not the one with the idea of the woman that she represents – she is always the “Other” to that notion of the “woman” that is under scrutiny, that representation of “Mother/Woman” known throughout art history. Recently in feminist thought such a position has been elevated to one of the most strategic ones, for example Susan Suleiman called it “perfect avant-garde”. The position itself – simply *to be a woman* – seems to be so strategic and subversive following this logic, that woman’s actions and works themselves are even redundant. Her creativity as an artist is “excessive” and not essential at all, since her essence is already proclaimed as marginal and avant-garde. If she is subversive by definition, then she – again – does not need to act. She is fulfilled without any creation. She is a woman. As if it is even *preferable* for her just to be around, without complicating things with her own actions.

It is not coincidental that this notion of woman remains unchanged in the periods of cultural transformation. It *must* remain static, so that logocentrism can be in constant productive flux, using woman as a springboard. Otherwise there is no action that it generates. Or this action might take unpredictable and

therefore potentially undesirable cultural forms. Transformation of the social and cultural foundations is triggered by “Woman” who is understood as an outsider of the social and the symbolic. The function of the Woman, her “destiny”, remains unchanged. And this poses the major problem of any cultural transformation. If woman is positioned on the margin, as outsider, if she is associated with the void and nothingness opposed to logos and modernity, as much as this looks really like a revolutionary gesture, it does not represent something different from the primordial positioning of the woman as a non-man, as a complementary residue or a direct derivative based on oppositional logic. It is still the system in which “feminine” simply has never existed, and by being one of the most fundamental characteristics, it is time and again reproduced in the so-called “revolutionary transformations” of our thought and imaginary. “Woman” is still the function, without anything of her own. This situation of fundamental homelessness was expressed by Rozanov, a Russian writer and thinker, contemporary of Tolstoy and a champion of “sexual relations”: “We indicated woman’s devotion, the full rejection of her own self, we noticed that incomparable poetry with which she is warming us. In fact, it is the woman that is the symbol of unity of humankind, its very connection. Without having a self of her own, she comes as a cementing link between all human selves” (Rozanov “Collection of Works”, 1990, p. 138. Translation mine).

She is simultaneously herself, but also can never reach her self, which she does not have, thus she is constantly with a hole where man has a mediation, an

instrument of ability to come back to himself. She cannot come back to herself because she can only come towards someone else, and return to the idea of her own femininity selfless. The crucial point here is not that this femininity is “false” or somehow distorted. We are not interested in the discourse of truth here. There is no true “femininity” anyway, but the issue is about the politics of its definition. It is defined always “from her towards someone else”, or between someone with her in the middle and there is no point of return to her that would be actually hers, her own – not true femininity, but that which is her own, that she has and to which she has a distance. This mediator can only be the man – towards her, for her. Thus any question of the notion of “woman” and its redefinition will lead to the redefinition of Man and Human/ity (and, by implication – animal/ity).

When we called our exhibition “A Self of One’s Own” we were not referring to Rozanov’s ideas – they are just the symptom of an ocean of texts and images that exemplify the basic absence of woman herself in the notion of humankind, her intolerable incompatibility with the concept of “human” that only conceals “man”, and vice versa (“man” is a substitute for “human”). Our reference was to Virginia Woolf’s famous collection of essays “A Room of One’s Own”, devoted to the position of women within creative professions. Understanding that some women today can afford a room of their own (different from the kitchen and bathroom), being in that room - on their own - is only the beginning that sometimes becomes an end of the story. Without a redefinition of such notions as “woman” and “creativity”, women might

continue to remain selfless and homeless within cultural imaginary, even when they are always at home by themselves, waiting to serve as “cementing link” to humankind. This has become apparent in our classes.



In the course of the “Feminist Art Workshop” we discussed four major themes – *difference, sexuality, space* and *embodiment*. Correspondingly participants produced their art-works. Those themes were crucial in redefining the notion of “woman” in contemporary art, of her being a creator and a subject-matter of creation. These notions are also crucial for contemporary feminist theory and aesthetics. Unfortunately there are very few occasions on which women-artists (especially students) and feminist thinkers meet, and even fewer occasions when they collaborate. It results in a situation that many women-artists are not only unaware of art done by women before them, they are also unaware of feminist thought which has developed themes and discussions that are constitutive to their own art works. As I mentioned before, the stereotypes of “women’s issues”, still so persistent, blind many artists who are able to see only one fixed definition of those issues, thinking that they have nothing to do with them, since they are not dealing with “maternity, children or femininity”.

It still does not occur to them that not only are those notions (like maternity or femininity) profoundly connected to the foundations of art and any culture of the symbolic through such notions as creativity, good or the self, but also that for a long time now “women’s issues”, at least in feminist art and aesthetics, have encompassed notions of space, difference, sexuality and embodiment. When women artists dissociate “fundamental concerns of art” and “women’s issues” primarily in order to be seen as “general artists”, they fall back into a culture of anxiety towards the fixed notions of “woman” and “feminine”. Moreover, the very notion of art has been challenged and redefined in the process of redefinition of “woman” as “the other”, and contemporary art practice cannot be adequately addressed without learning about it. What is art, where are the criteria, how it is practiced, what is the role of art education and the art world in setting these criteria of “resolved” or “good” or “strong” art-work? These issues are directly related to the understanding of contemporary art practice, whether we discuss sexual or cultural difference, the power and politics of space, the mind/body dualism or the function of sexuality in art history and in language. And none of those notions can be taken for granted either; they are all intensely debated among artists and thinkers.

Four years have passed since our workshop and exhibition took place. The participants of the workshop, exhibition and symposium have gone in many different directions. However, the “woman question”, the question of *her self*, no matter how problematic the notions of the “self” and the “woman”

appear (and they are problematic!), still haunt art education, art practice and art theory. This publication is our modest take on it – through engagement, and through (productive?) distancing.

Irina Aristarkhova, Singapore, 2003

Participant Artists:

Marie-France Dumolié
Saraswati Gramich
Amanda Heng Liang Ngim
Ina Michaela Hussmann
Kay Kok Chung Oi
Adeline Kueh
Helen Lindon
Nancy Nan Nan
Rosamund O’Connor
Sanjot Kaur Sekhon
Irene Tan
Margaret Tan Ai Hua
Sunny Tan Kuan Lee
Christine Vesey