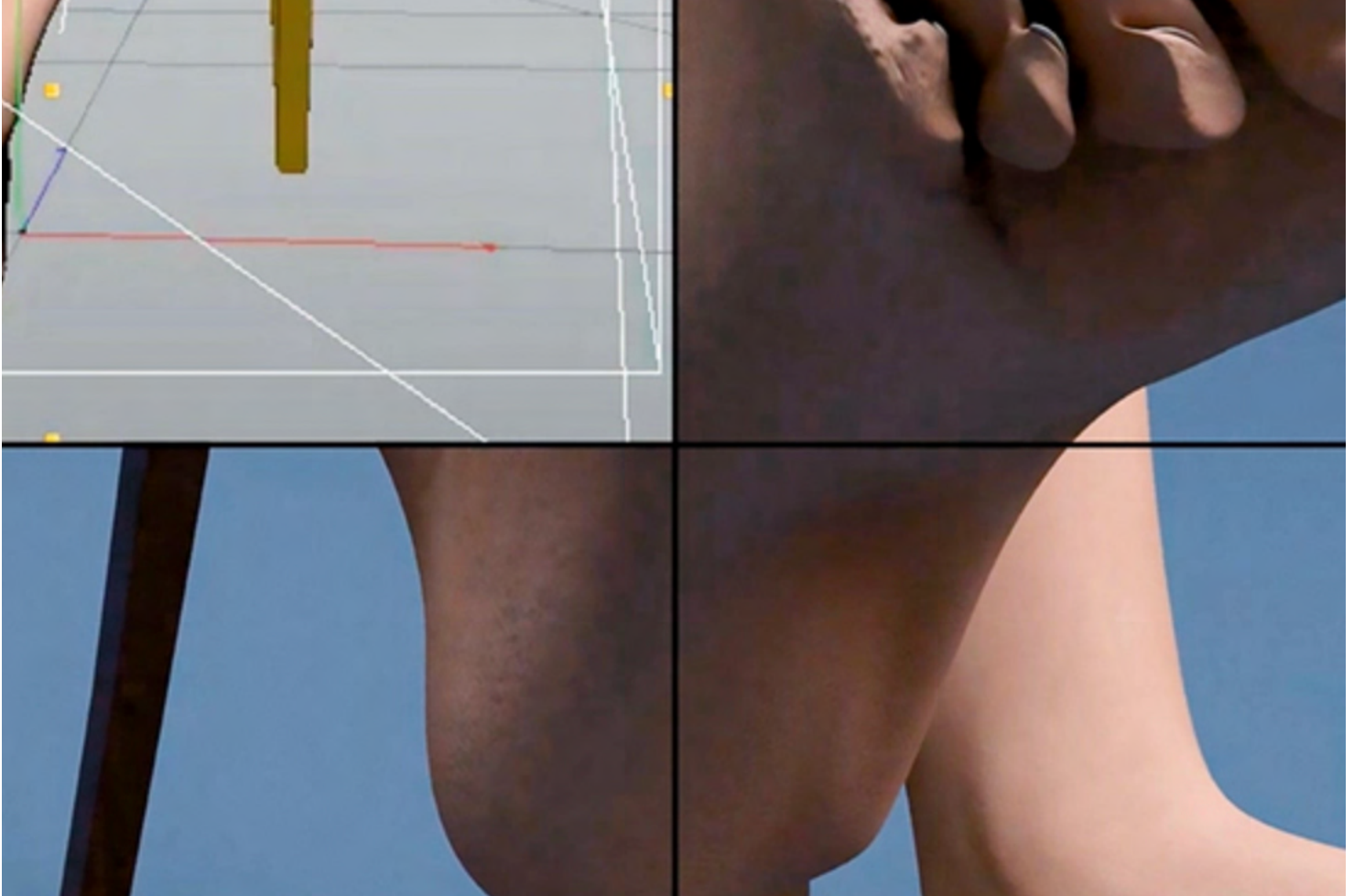


Art in America

Critical Eye: Now, Not When

BY Diane Ahn, Henry Zhang
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LAST SPRING, United Motion took part in the group exhibition “Genders Engender” at the nonprofit Talkang Space in Beijing. The show reflected the tenuous relationship between the Chinese art world and feminism. Potentially troublesome, for example, was the seeming contradiction between the curatorial text for “Genders Engender,” which states that the show did not present “feminist art,”¹⁰ and the fact that the great majority of the eleven individual artists and groups selected were Chinese women dealing with issues of representation, social justice, and gender bias.

Rather than dismiss this disavowal as false consciousness—or fear of political backlash—and thereby resort to the stereotypes that Shih has identified, it is much more productive to look at the history of Chinese feminism, as refracted through the works of three of the participating artists: Huang Jingyuan, Ma Qiusha, and Li Shuang.

LI SHUANG is keenly aware of the perils of Western legibility. Her video *T* (2017–18), which was shown in “Genders Engender” and then in the solo show “If Only the Cloud Knows” at New York’s SLEEPCENTER,

PERES PROJECTS

expresses the ironies and difficulties of the translingual journey of the modern, liberal notion of “she” into Chinese. The four-channel T intersperses CGI with live-action footage, its title letter orphaned and overdetermined: taboo, transgress, transgender, text, tool, twink—these are just some of the relevant English words that “T” conjures up.

Perhaps it is toe that best describes the film’s central motif: a pair of small, hairless digital feet swing from a chair, toes wagging. The work functions as a kind of audio drag show: the voiceover, which is narrated by a woman whose voice grows noticeably computerized near the end, speaks from the position of a frustrated, sexist, twenty-something male: “[Women] are nothing but narcissistic passive aggressive little bitches who push and push with their tiny little feet until they get what they want.” The narrator, a service job employee, complains of being forced by the boss to speak “in a distinctly feminine manner.” “But I’m a man,” the girlish-sounding speaker says.

Is the point here, as Western feminist Judith Butler might argue, that this narrator no more “is” the “masculinity” that has been denied by the boss than women “are” the gender roles—bitchy or otherwise—they have been assigned by others? Certainly, a radical open-endedness is part of the allure of the work, and compels Anglophone viewers to apply their own cultural referents. Yet to restrict the work’s implications to English words is a serious epistemic error. The very temptation to commit such a transgression is precisely part of the meaning of Li’s video. The specter of an old transnational encounter lurks in this title: the drastically unequal linguistic exchange, fostered by Western imperialism, that convinced Chinese intellectuals their very language had suddenly become deficient.

“T” might well stand for ta, the phonetic spelling of all three Chinese third-person singular pronouns—male, female, and neuter. A standard piety would be to celebrate the choice, popular lately among China’s youth, to romanize ta rather than use the Chinese characters, since it makes the word’s gender ambiguous, much like the English “one” or “they” (when the latter is used for a singular referent of indeterminate or fluid gender). T’s meaning depends in part on dangling, then withdrawing, that red herring.

Historically, rather than being (as some alleged) a remnant of Chinese patriarchy and feudalism coded in the very grammar of the language, ta was already gender neutral. The current male and female forms were added by Chinese translators. Noting the existence in Romance languages of three gender-specific pronouns, they decided the all-purpose ta exemplified a lack of linguistic precision—a charge echoed today in claims that there is no good Chinese translation of the term “feminism.” Two words, nüquanzhuyi and nüxingzhuyi, which mean, approximately, “women’s rights” and “womanism,” are used in mainstream Chinese discussions.

Yet how ironic that the terminology intended to help liberate queerness in China is now seen as being a poor copy of foreign models! To understand the several Chinese feminisms espoused in these two competing words requires understanding their own specific historical contexts. There have been attempts by scholars like Li Xiaojiang, Dai Jinhua, Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, Dorothy Ko, Wang Zheng, Tani Barlow, and Bo Wang to develop a Chinese feminist history that demonstrates both points of intersection with and divergence from the West.

Li Shuang’s installation *If Only the Cloud Knows* (2005-2018) offers a way of conceptualizing how one might be a Chinese feminist artist while still grappling with questions of global significance. For this work, Li uploaded to a single cloud website all the photographs and text messages she had generated between 2005 and 2015. She then allowed visitors to delete whatever they wanted.

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One might, for example, write in a claim that Li is protesting internet censorship, or—conversely—that her piece transforms the viewer into the agent of a repressive, censorious government. Yet the impetus for the creation of this piece suggests the power of Li's act of vulnerability. She was inspired by the childhood memory of her parents tearing down one of the walls of her room and erecting a glass barrier in its place. Li's earlier video performance *Marry Me for Chinese Citizenship* revealed the immense difficulty Chinese women artists face in being seen beyond the victim/dissident narrative. On Valentine's Day in 2015, Li walked around Times Square for six hours, wearing a sign with *marry me for chinese citizenship* on its front and *i don't cook* on its back. This sardonic cultural inversion ridiculed a common myth about Chinese women—that they all want to marry American men and thereby secure their passage westward. The piece gained particular relevance when, just a year later, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, prompting Americans to say, half in jest, that they felt compelled to change their citizenship. One hour after Trump's election, a tote bag bearing Li's proposition sold over five hundred copies online.

During the performance, however, many passersby were blind to the sign's implications, misreading it as a bid to obtain an American green card. A man offered to marry Li for \$10,000, and a woman admonished the artist for her desperation and low self-esteem. Later, John Barthelette—an American cultural commentator and translator in Taiwan, and author of the book *Trump Your English*—posted a picture of Li's bag on Facebook, commenting, "Miss, do you know what your bag says?" The sign, in other words, functioned as Rorschach test, disclosing the biases of its viewers. It also expressed Li's inability to fit into narratives of the genderless iron girl, ultra-feminine housewife, token Asian woman artist, bold dissident, or Western-educated feminist. Li is now collaborating with a lawyer to produce a publication on how to apply for Chinese citizenship. Her video ends by declaring: "Marry Me for Chinese Citizenship has nothing to do with being Chinese, Asian, human, woman." These words point us, ultimately, to the ongoing need for Chinese women artists to construct their own narratives.