

Off the Beaten Path: Violence, Women and Art

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Over several years of lecturing in courses on gender studies, feminism and sexuality, I am always astounded by students' responses to the lectures. In general, the students share a postfeminist sentiment towards the lectures (Gill 2007). The responses from the male students follow the standard 'crisis of masculinity' rhetoric in which feminism is blamed for the problems, pains and quandaries of contemporary living. However, even more perturbing is that the female students are equally sceptical of feminism and dismiss it as now holding regressive ideals. Even when discussions move towards the gains achieved by second-wave feminism, the common retort is apathy or ambivalence regarding the need for feminism to address contemporary problems. Moreover, the negative evaluations of feminism are coupled with only a small number of students ever identifying as feminists or supporting feminist causes.

Such negative sentiments towards feminism remain intact, even when I outline the persistent and pervasive problems of violence against women in South Africa, which include rape, sexual violence, gender-based violence and domestic abuse. When confronted with the South African context, the students respond in an apolitical and objective manner by dislocating and disassociating themselves from the debates. To elucidate further, the students continually describe violence against women as something that takes place outside their local setting (dislocation) and beyond their own culture and community (disassociation). In these tactics of dislocation and disassociation, I am met by replies from the students that include: 'Violence against women does not happen in my household', 'I do not abuse women', 'I respect women', 'Sexual violence does not occur in my community'. By making such claims, the students express a depoliticised attitude towards gender-based

violence which does not require their individual action or the collective engagement and orientation of feminism.

As a counterpoise to such claims, beliefs and attitudes, the exhibition 'Off the Beaten Path: Violence, Women and Art'¹ offers a significant exploration of violence against women, with the goal of enriching the audience 'with a better understanding of the roots of abuse, a feeling of empathy, and an awareness of choice in their actions and beliefs' ('Art Works for Change' [sa]). Underscored throughout the exhibition is the deleterious wide range of gender-based violence that occurs in every society, race, class, ethnicity and culture. The audience is not only confronted with the realisation that no woman is invulnerable and unaffected by violence, but also the understanding that such acts of violence are indeed gender based. This is a significant act of recognition, as in most instances violence against women is denied any relation to gender, and disavowed from the need to address it within specifically targeted interventions towards the sources of such violence. For example, domestic abuse is still regarded as a marital problem that requires no intervention from outside parties. Consequently, we are blinded to the gendered dimensions of violence and disregard any need for public attention and social change.

A noteworthy feature of the exhibition is that the artworks avoid tabloid and sensational imagery. Instead, they represent and explore a full range of diverse visions, voices and views. Participating artists included, amongst others, Marina Abramovic, Jane Alexander, Louise Bourgeois, Lise Bjorne Linnert, Maria Campos-Pons, Patricia Evans, Maimuna Feroze-Nana, Mona Hatoum, Kim Myung Jin, Amal Kenawy, Hung Liu, Almagul Menlibayeva, Gabriela Morawetz, Wangechi Mutu, Miri Nishri, Yoko Ono, Lucy Orta, Cecilia Paredes, Cima Rahmankhah, Joyce J. Scott, Masami Teraoka, Hank Willis Thomas and Miwa Yanagi.

In Gabriela Morawetz's works from *The Sleeping Self* (2009) series, the viewer is confronted by a metal bed frame on top of which a frail mattress lies. The mattress does not offer respite and relief from the forbidding metal bed frame, but is only an embellishment that offers an illusion of comfort. Morawetz's bed is not a place of comfort, rest and sanctuary; rather, the bed is reconfigured as a

threatening space in which the body is violated through various acts of sexual violence, while the mind seems to be imprisoned behind the bars of the bed's headboard. The bed is no longer a space for dreams and desires, or an opportunity to contemplate and muse over future prospects and aspirations. In this formation, the work may point to domestic violence as occurring in the intimate spaces of the bedroom, which de-sanctifies the bed from any association with shelter and safety. The bed now entombs the acts of violence to silence and shame, while the woman's dreams surrender and give way to a reality of violence, abuse and suffering.

In an installation of 25 black-and-white photographs, Patricia Evans' *Hidden in the radiant green, a man waits. In hate-blinded hands, darkness waits* (late 1990s) consists of a vast array of seemingly unrelated images of an innocuous and indistinct landscape, interspersed with close-ups of the bludgeoned and bandaged face of woman lying motionless. The ambiguity of the work soon ceases when one reads the text accompanying the work. The text describes that Evans was sexually assaulted and brutally beaten while running on a Chicago lakefront. The photographs that constitute the installation are of the landscape in which the assault took place. The landscape

is neither intimidating nor indicative of any impending peril. Instead, it is clearly meant to be a safe and secure setting. On one level the artwork acts to undermine the myths of rape and sexual assault in which the offense is blamed on the victim being in the 'wrong place'. On another level, the work may expose that lurking beneath the most tranquil and serene settings are narratives of abuse and violence that befall women. When we begin to quilt together the narratives of abuse within supposedly safe places it becomes increasingly apparent for a public lament concerning the depravities that perniciously encircle women.

Over my dead body (2006) (1) by Mona Hatoum depicts the artist's face in profile with a toy soldier placed on her nose. In a manner indicative of Barbara Kruger, bold text is placed on the left side of the image which reads 'over my dead body'. The insertion of the toy soldier serves as a symbol for violence in all its forms – from domestic abuse to global warfare. Such a symbolism is inherently sarcastic, and expresses ridicule and scorn for the perpetrators of violence. Furthermore, by placing the miniscule toy on a face blazing with confidence and strength, makes violence appear small in the face of women's resolute determination to end gender-based aggression ('Art Works for Change' [sa]). However, multiple



1 Mona Hatoum, *Over my dead body* (2006). Heliogravure 27.5 inches x 39 inches. Reproduced with the permission of Art Works for Change.



2 Miri Nishri, *Esther – Queen of the swamp* (2009). Video [9:20 minutes]. Reproduced with the permission of Art Works for Change.

interpretations are offered when we account for the wording of the text. 'Over my dead body' is ambiguous and allows for the artwork to be understood in ways that depart from a unitary reading of triumphs over gender-based violence. The wording accounts for the <costs sustained, suffered and experienced> by the women who have questioned and contested the status quo. It serves as a call for us to meditate on the sacrifices made by individuals who stood their ground or fought against unjust principles and practices. Such reflections need to consider recent and historical figures as well as specific groups that may have even been martyred for their beliefs. A recent figure who first and foremost deserves consideration is the Pakistani teenager, Malala Yousafzai, who was shot in the head by the Taliban for speaking up for the rights of girls to be educated.

Hank Willis Thomas' work *Are you the right kind of woman for it?* (1974/2007) is part of his *Unbranded Series* in which the artist appropriated a number of print advertisements from 1968 to 2008. Thomas removed all the text and logos from the original advertisements which estranged the figures and objects from the intended meaning or message encoded by the advertiser. In the process, Thomas' artworks reveal the limited gamut of conventions, poses and props that are used in the marketing and

promotion of capitalist goods and services. One reverberating feature is the use of the female body as a prop, backdrop or stage on which the specific product is platformed. Moreover, Thomas' artworks also expose stereotypical conceptions of the female body which is always represented as young, slender, and befitting dominant cultural descriptions of beauty, sex-appeal and attractiveness. Such findings are a mainstay of feminist readings of popular and visual culture that delineate the sexual objectification of women in advertisements.

Thomas' artwork depicts two women beside a seated man. The image is arranged to make the explicit association with a king on his throne, with his female servants/concubines at his side. The sexualised poise and pose of the women are coded within an exotic tableau replete with fruit basket, tropical plants and flowers in the women's hair. The women function purely to connote the success of the male figure. In other words, they are mere objects that constitute an appropriate *mise-en-scène* for the coding of the male figure as rich and living an affluent lifestyle, with the financial means to satisfy his every whim. Thomas' artwork functions not only to make apparent sexism in advertisements, but also to induce the audience to critically reflect on such acts. Thomas evokes this critical reflection

by posing a provocative title, followed by a question mark. The title, which is addressed to the audience, asks them to problematise, query and critique the representational tropes of women within the media. Thus the artist calls on the audience to critically engage with popular culture and its construction of gendered stereotypes, in order to challenge or oppose sexist representations in the media.

In the video installation *Esther – Queen of the swamp* (2009) (2), Miri Nishri depicts Esther as two women – a young prostitute and an old homeless woman – who alternate on-screen. Both walk through a wooded area filled with poems that are aggressive and obsessive in nature. The male author of the poems recites them as an off-camera voice-over. The author's recitation replaces what would otherwise be an overwhelmingly soundless narrative of Esther being stalked by the poet. The camera takes on the viewpoint of the poet/stalker, thus the viewer is forced to adopt the voyeuristic gaze of the poet that haunts and shadows Esther from behind trees and other objects. The viewer is left unsettled by the crazed gaze of the stalker who pursues Esther like a predator perilously tracking its next victim.

The artwork arguably makes a direct reference to women being killed by their spouses or intimate partners ('Artworks for Change' [sa]). An element that has not been touched upon in reviews of the artwork is the location of the video. Nishri explains that the work documents a forgotten forest dedicated to the biblical Esther on the outskirts of Hadera, Israel ('Miri Nishri' [sa]). What is disturbing and unsettling in this regard is that the area is derelict and polluted, and appears more like an illegal dump-site. The only users of the space at present are truck drivers who callously lay further waste to the landscape, while simultaneously marking the space as devalued, desecrated, de-sanctified and devoid of any venerated value.

The neglect and disregard of the site can be argued to relate to patriarchal culture and traditions that venerate the achievements and contributions of men. In doing so, patriarchy establishes a genealogy based on the exaltation and adulation of men, while wiping out acts of devotion to women of honour. As a consequence, patriarchy has constructed an impoverished female genealogy that is subordinate to that of the male (Irigaray

2007:9). The importance of addressing this devalorised and denigrated construction of a female genealogy is that it disavows women from obtaining a subjective status equivalent to that of men (Irigaray 2007:41, 72). In this way, the artwork can be read as making visible patriarchy's acts of renouncing, rejecting and forsaking the dedicatory sites of women, in order to deny affirmative female genealogies.

A distinctive aspect of the exhibition is the inclusion of artworks that envisage an alternative future in which women are uninhibited by violence and unconstrained by patriarchy. The exhibition includes three photographs from Miwa Yanagi's *Grandmother Series* (1999-). For the series, Yanagi interviewed a number of young Japanese women, aged between fourteen and twenty, and asked them to forecast how their life will be fifty years from now. Yanagi proceeded to represent a selection of the predicted futures by using costumes, make-up and digital editing ('Art Works for Change' [sa]). The final photographs capture aged women who exude dignity and strength.

By depicting the women as independent and strong, the *Grandmother Series* is at odds with the dominant gendered conventions of aging. It is usually accepted that aging, for women, is seen as a shutting down of new possibilities and the ceasing of further opportunities for self-expression. The dominant role for elderly women is figured in terms of caring for their grandchildren and requiring the support of their children. Instead of following such standard portrayals of the elderly, the *Grandmother Series* presents older women with alternative expressions of self-identity. The women in the artworks present a self-image which is liberated from ascribed cultural and family roles, while enjoying new adventures and exploring a plethora of avenues for personal enrichment and growth.

'Off the Beaten Path' presents works from artists who are from diverse national, ethnic and racial backgrounds. These contributions help to underscore that violence against women is a global scourge. The acts of violence addressed in the exhibition are wide-ranging and include physical and domestic women abuse, as well as more symbolic acts such as the denial of a revered female genealogy. Moreover, the exhibition provides a platform for women artists to share their personal

experiences of surviving acts of gender-based violence. This proves to be an engaging hallmark of the exhibition in that it does not aim to provide a universal symbol of women's experience, but rather a multitude of symbols representative of the artists' own experiences and personal testimonies.

The exhibition demonstrates the continued need for feminism to address the inequalities, oppression and violence that women face globally in myriad forms and manifestations. Although women have achieved notable strides in gaining equality, a postfeminist present or future is marred by incessant and unwavering violence against women (see Von Veh 2006:29). Yet, the exhibition does not leave the visitor feeling despair and dejection, but enlarges our understanding and consciousness of the multiple issues requiring both individual and collective attention.

Note

- 1 'Off the Beaten Path: Violence, Women and Art' was organised by Art Works For Change, Inc., with generous support from the Oak Foundation and the Nathan Cummings Foundation.

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