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Gender, artWork and the global imperative

A materialist feminist critique

Angela Dimitrakaki



rethinking art's histories

'Angela Dimitrakaki is a writer and researcher who is not afraid to ask challenging questions and grapple with difficult and important issues in contemporary culture. Based on extensive and probing research, her work prompts us to join her inquiring mind in investigating areas beyond the usual well-trodden paths and familiar names.'

Gen Doy, Professor Emerita, Faculty of Art and Design at De Montfort University

'Dimitrakaki's study reinvigorates and tests the theoretical and moral articulation of Marxism and Feminism most vividly developed in Griselda Pollock's writings of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Critically acute, persistent in its interrogations and varied in its discussions of art by women, and some men, the book combines a "pessimism of the intellect" with an "optimism of the will" (and good humour) that ameliorates the social and political crisis at the centre of her concerns.'

Jonathan Harris, Professor of Global Art and Design Studies at Winchester School of Art,
author of *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* and editor of *Globalization and Contemporary Art*

Is gender implicated in how art does its work, or is defined as work, in global space? Is a global imperative exclusive to capitalism's planetary expansion or does it also animate oppositional practices in art and curating? And what is new in the gendered paradigms of art after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in a persistently divided Europe and elsewhere?

Angela Dimitrakaki addresses these questions in an insightful and highly original analysis of travel as artistic labour, the sexualisation of migration as a relationship between Eastern and Western Europe, the post-documentary aesthetic of the feminist video essay, the rise of female art and curatorial collectives, the spectral re-appearance of the male working class in the museum and globalisation's 'bad boys'. A central aspiration of the book is to demonstrate that contemporary art and theory's turn to labour and economic relations, around 2000, compels a reviewing of feminism's attachment to the cultural subject, practices and methodologies privileged by postmodernism. Artists and collectives discussed in the book include, among others, Marina Abramovic, Ursula Biemann, Tracey Emin, Andrea Fraser, Kuratorisk Action, Lin+Lam, Malmö Free University for Women (MFK), Jenny Marketou, Renzo Martens, Dani Marti, Steve McQueen, Mujeres Públicas, Tanja Ostojić, Ann-Sofi Sidén, Mare Tralla, WHW and Artur Żmijewski.

This is a theoretically astute overview of key developments in art and its contexts since the 1990s and the first study to attempt a critical refocusing of feminist politics in art history in the wake of globalisation as capitalism's biopolitical arena. It will be essential reading in art history, gender, feminist and globalisation studies, curatorial theory, cultural studies and beyond.

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Cover image—

Mujeres Públicas Collective, Buenos Aires, profile picture on website, 2013.
Photograph by Gabriela Bacin, 2005. Courtesy of Mujeres Públicas

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method. The artWork discussed in this chapter highlights the relational aspirations of the journey as much as it directs attention to the journey's gendered specificity.

Beyond the global flâneuse? En(gendering) the journey as collaborative production

The value of female teamwork when it comes to travel as a work method is also asserted in Lin+Lam's project *Departure* (2004–6). Lin+Lam is a moniker assumed by collaborating artists H. Lan Thao Lam and Lana Lin, both of Asian background but resident in New York City. Having worked together for well over a decade, they embarked on *Departure* as a labour-intensive project that involved them personally and politically. Politically, in the sense that *Departure* would be about the transformation of Asian urban space as postcolonial realities fade into the world of global capital; personally, because the artists are displaced subjects where Asian geographies are concerned. Both Lam and Lin found themselves in North America when their families migrated from Asia in the 1960s and 1980s – Lam's family escaped Vietnam when she was 12 years old while Lin is of Taiwanese descent.³⁶ *Departure* was the first collaboration between the two artists for which they had to travel extensively to Asia, where they had not been since their childhood (Lin was born in Canada and had not visited Asia until her teenage years.). This can perhaps help explain the evocative title given to the video essay: departure – alluding both



3.1 Lin+Lam, *Departure* (2004–6). 48', single-channel video and three-channel video installation. Still.

to the language habitually framing contemporary travel (mostly air travel) where distance is typically compressed and the act of leaving behind (in this case, a land of assumed 'origin').

In the 48-minute video essay, five women narrate in their languages (Mandarin Chinese, Taiwanese, English, Shanghainese and Vietnamese) tales of the modernisation process of three Asian cities, Taipei, Shanghai and Hanoi. Once defined through their colonial relations to Europe, these cities are now recalibrating their positions in a global economy. Beyond the narrative voices (as detached as a voice-over), human presence is far from prominent. What is prominent is movement and 'activity' performed mostly by various types of machines – transportation machines, cranes, moveable bridges, even the camera. The contrast between the inclination to constant movement – horizontally because of means of transport, vertically because of construction – and the desire to stay still (permeating the narrative voices) is a defining feature of *Departure*: departure is in fact a slice of time where the inertia keeping one in place fails to stop one's body being propelled forward. And movement does not necessarily entail liberation for the women who offer bits and pieces of their (gendered) experience of modernisation as partly an effect of colonialism. The female narrators do not always, or necessarily, place modernisation in gendered terms – although they were chosen, by the two women artists, specifically because they are women. There was at least an implicit expectation that even without inhabiting a specifically female consciousness, the female narrators would provide a composite, 'stitched', yet situated and experiential account.

The video essay does in fact open with an image of two young women seen from afar. They are literally 'set' in an impressive urban landscape, much like they would appear as diminutive figures in an architectural maquette. The young women move across a space defined – or better, contained – by perspective, continually being observed (by the camera/the artists) from a distance. What must in reality be a horizontal bridge appears as a phallic vertical mass dominating and dwarfing everything else. Stretching to the sky, the bridge appears pathetically stiff and immobile, unlike the two young women's energetic movement on the ground. Later on we are told about a woman who never crossed the massive bridge having been built for years across from her house. She becomes the stuff of legend as her refusal to move blends into imagined opposition to capital's global imperative. And yet, as the artists admit, the Asian societies they visited were 'demythified' – to their disappointment – as paradigmatically patriarchal. The postcolonial Asian cities, vital economies in globalisation threatening to shift the development axis eastwards in the early twenty-first century, are condensed into images captured by a hand-held camera – always 'held' by someone using a means of transport: a moving car, a 'cyclo', trains. The journey itself is a survey mechanism of classed

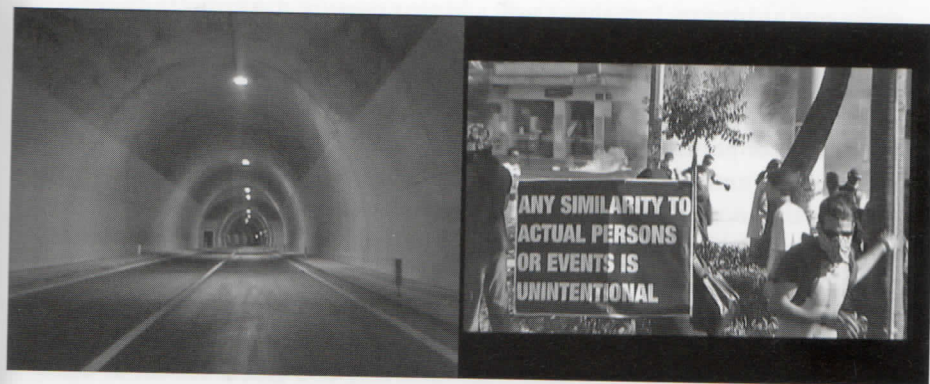
urbanscapes, the poor and the affluent ones. The five stories narrated never criss-cross each other, never connect, never become politically relevant in an explicit way. Shot well before 2008 and the global economic crisis, the video essay closes with yet another 'construction & development' scene, full of light and noise.

It is not hard to see how *Departure* may be seen to constitute an investigation into the economic, political and psychic contexts that, via a displacement, led to Lin's and Lam's unstable identification with the contemporary American 'woman artist'. The opening image of the two young women on the move, defiant of the phallic bridge (which, nevertheless, signifies engineering and progress in late nineteenth-century terms) points strongly to the artists' partnership as a necessary condition for realising the durational work, much of it consisting in learning to inhabit the very conditions visualised in, and by, the video essay. The two young women filmed symbolically articulate the two women artists' vital cooperation, emotional togetherness and the sharing of responsibility with regard to how they are positioned in territories defying a sense of the familiar and the unfamiliar alike – territories where they felt 'culturally disoriented' and occasionally limited by their knowledge of language. The experience of travelling *as women* unavoidably informs *Departure* – but as a more temporary, or even transient, identification rather than an inalienable right to an identity from which to organise experience securely.³⁷ Lin+Lam's intimation of the road movie formula is perhaps slightly ironic. Here, the woman artist's refusal to be contained to/by the domestic is scripted not as a return to lost homelands but as a visual fetishisation of the materiality of global 'development': bulldozers, construction sites and motorways populate the video, sure signs of finance capital's material remaking the world and, not least, of masculinity at work. The five female voices commenting on the modernisation of Asian urban space are counterpoised to the masculine principle organising this space, demonstrating its already gendered process of transformation. That Lam and Lin could 'pass' (for local/Asian women) because of their physical appearance put them in a difficult position: they were often told that they 'should know' how to behave as local, non-Western women and what to make of their surroundings. *Departure* thus ended up as the record of an unlearning: of letting go of the myth of belonging 'somewhere', of discovering places of irreducible difference (rather than cultural disorientation and the predictability of capitalist ventures). The visual marginalisation of the human figure in the video essay was a choice very much connected with such an unlearning and with the artists' ambivalence towards the possibility and need for an art paradigm tied to representation.

The mobility sustaining such projects is hardly reducible to vague 'flows' of disembodied subjects, so strongly associated with postmodernism. The exodus of women artists from the domestic does not (necessarily) begin in

loss but connects them to a space of global friction, one of acute and conflicting materialities. At the same time, this dis-identification with the domestic does not occur within an art or social movement and neither is it protected by something akin to a collective consciousness, which suggests that it does not operate strategically within a feminist politics – unless of course we accept a perversion of ‘the personal is political’ as ‘the political is personal’. Yet such journeys further challenge the centrality of a global flâneuse, a solitary creature celebrating a new-found freedom and loosely surveying a territory with her meaning-making gaze. Whereas the global flâneuse, often associated in the 1990s with a digital existence and cyberspace, believed in connectivity, the women artists for whom the ground of global space becomes a terrain of labour expect disconnectedness. Travelling here is performative, a form of bridging spaces that the empire of capital has every interest in keeping apart outside the tourist industry or economies of conflict (often organised around ‘resources’). In some cases, such bridging requires concerted action, collaborative research and establishes models of shared learning.

Generating a number of projects, *Transcultural Geographies* (2003–4) was the umbrella title given to a collaborative research programme, initiated by Ursula Biemann, Angela Melitopoulos and Lisa Parks, three women whose complex forms of cultural production cross through, and engage art, while disrupting any notions of the latter as a singular, safely isolated apparatus of aesthetic concerns. Developed through ‘work sessions’ and studies realised and distributed across multiple sites, *Transcultural Geographies* constitutes an exemplary case study with regard to the new links between art and interdisciplinary knowledge production in the twenty-first century. *Transcultural Geographies* comprised three core projects, *The Black Sea Files* by Biemann, *Timescapes/Corridor X* by Melitopoulos and *Postwar Footprints* by Parks, and



3.2 Angela Melitopoulos, *CORRIDOR X* (2006), DVD (still), double projection, colour, sound, ca. 130’.