

The Shouts and Murmurs of Women—Did the Vulnerable Collective Change the World?

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The *egó eímai* collective held the show *The Shouts and Murmurs of Women—The Vulnerable Collective Will Change the World* (June 9 – 30, 2019) via applying to and being accepted into the open-call exhibition *Group Show of Contemporary Artists 2019*, organized by the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. This exhibition that is held annually around June consists of three group shows, using Galleries A, B and C of the museum. (i) My participation in the collective is to assist in the curation. Thus, although this essay is not the objective critique of an external voice, I would like to reflect on the meanings behind our exhibition by including perspectives made only possible from being on the inside.

The *egó eímai* collective, which consists of eight artists who are all women, is not the type of group with many years of combined activities, based on a strong bond among its members. Rather, it was hastily formed so that we could participate in the exhibition at the museum. The phrase “egó eímai” is Greek, meaning “I am...,” which encompasses the question, “What is ‘I’?” (ii) The eight women artists, whose ages widely range from their thirties to their sixties, have gathered with their own individual ideas that are slightly different from one another. Our exhibition was organized under the idea that we can change the outdated world through delivering art that is based on the common awareness on the subjects of women, minorities and gender. We aspire that the viewers, even if to a small extent, harbor doubts toward or feel uncomfortable about their present selves and change in a way in which they can cast doubts on conventional common senses. Beyond our initial expectation, over ten-thousand visitors viewed our exhibition, partly because the museum is in central Tokyo and free of admission. From this perspective, our exhibition was a success. We were also pleased to have two reviews written by two women curators who understood our aims. One of these appeared immediately after the opening, with the other appearing in a web magazine after the show closed. (iii) The representative member of the *egó eímai* collective is Matsushita Seiko, and the other core member is Ichijo Miyuki, who Matsushita met in Germany. The two artists have been friends ever since they collaboratively created the video work *Meal* in 2000. Matsushita also asked Karin Pisarikova (who lives in the Czech Republic and has participated in a same group show with her) and Hirai Yu (who has held a solo show at a same gallery as her) to join the collective. Furthermore, I asked Ito Tari and Watabiki Nobuko for their participation. I invited these two artists to a very memorable exhibition, *Women In-Between: Asian Women Artists* (2012-13; traveled to the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and others), which I curated while I was the curator of the Tochigi Prefectural Museum of Fine Arts. In addition, I also asked Usui Yui and Kishi Kaoru to join us, both of whom I met after I retired from the museum. In such a way, the eight members of varying ages gathered: from the youngest members, Pisarikova and Usui, in their thirties, to Matsushita and Ito, both in the latter half of their sixties.

Within her long artistic career that began in the mid-1980s, Matsushita Seiko has adopted unique items that are embedded with symbolic meanings. These items include wax, feathers, a beak, and a paraffin-paper dress. Utilizing those

items, she has shown contemporary artworks in the forms of installation and performance pieces. Her themes cover people who are exposed to distressful situations in various parts of the world, and women who are burdened with painful situations in their daily lives. One of her works, *The eve of a revolution*, in this exhibition was first shown at her solo show in 2017. In that work, the photo of a woman's face with a large, sharp beak that is casting a hard stare at the viewers was confined inside a thick layer of transparent paraffin wax that was divided into blocks. Moreover, after that solo show ended, Matsushita added more blocks to the work, resulting in an image that was segmented into as many as 383 blocks. In this exhibition, those blocks that were laid out on the floor were partially falling apart, which created an unsettling feeling as if pavement stones had been removed in order to build a barricade for a revolution. In another work, she arranged a blanket covered with countless feathers dyed in pink, a paraffin-paper pillow, and a large beak, all displayed inside one of the museum's old exhibition cases. Matsushita explained that the blanket was to wrap and protect people who were exposed to distressful situations, and that the inner side of the pillow was seen as a "forgiven garden" that had deviated from the system. She added that the offensive-looking beak was conversely an object of "affection," representing people's spirits to confront the world through being armed with that beak. Her works gently enwrap women and vulnerable people, while also never forgetting to encourage them—as if to say "Let's fight this together."

Matsushita's performance *Security Blanket*, which was held as a related event of this exhibition, was composed of two sections, based on the theme "What can we mentally rely on in the unsettling age we live in?" She and eight others performed in the first section, and in the second, she interviewed the audience. Via her form of questioning in a two-way communication style, she aimed to create a motive for the participants to face their own inner feelings.

One of the great results of this exhibition was that Ito Tari resumed her performance art. She began to hold performances after moving to the Netherlands in 1982. After she returned to Japan, Ito came out publicly as a lesbian in a performance she held in 1996, which became the turning point of her career. From that time onward, she continued to produce performance works that visualized not only her own self but also about matters and people that society had turned a blind eye to. Her themes were those of the physical body, genders, sexual assaults under military regimes, and nuclear power-plant accidents. Unfortunately, she was struck by an incurable disease in 2011, and her lower limbs gradually became immobilized; thus, she stopped her performance activity in 2015. I cannot begin to imagine the deep inner struggle she must have gone through during those four years. In this exhibition, she broke her silence and performed a new work, *Before the 37 Trillion Pieces Get to Sleep*, which we had all been waiting for. As I expected, the theme was Fukushima. That is to say, Yamakiya, Kawamata-machi, Fukushima Prefecture was the town she visited many times between 2011 to 2015. It was also where a friend of one of Ito's friends lived. Thus, in order for Ito to resume her performance work, it was inevitable that she began from the theme of Fukushima. Ito stated, "Memories do not fade easily. If I were to push away my memories, I would also be negating the existences of the people." In her performance, Ito faced her own immobilized lower limbs, while also tracing the contour of her stagnant body. She will "not forget" her memories, and she will never again be silent.

Both Matsushita and Ito showed the outcomes that demonstrated the

impressive expressions of established artists, each having a thirty-year-plus career. In the closing talk session of this exhibition, one of the guests, Mayumi Kagawa (Professor, Musashi University), referred to the German artist Hannah Höch (1889–1978) as an example in proposing how we should possess the perspective to proactively appraise the expressions of middle-aged and older women artists. Such artists tend to be overlooked within the life course of women artists from the time they are young to their later years. (iv) This exhibition of *egó eímai* is indeed a good, practical example of Kagawa’s proposal.

Despite being advanced in age, Ichijo Miyuki, who had halted her artistic career mid-way, and Kishi Kaoru, who began her artistic activity in her fifties, have both demonstrated practical examples of artists who have continued to create after their middle-aged period. After she worked as an illustrator in Japan, Ichijo moved to Germany in her mid-thirties. She studied under the German conceptual artist Rosemarie Trockel at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf from 1994 to 2001. She is a painter who has thoroughly pursued expressing her own inner self. After her activities in Germany, Ichijo returned to Japan. She married and halted her artistic production for seventeen years, due to such life events as undergoing fertility treatments. She resumed her activities as an artist in her fifties. Nonetheless, once she began, she continued to produce works at a remarkable pace. She has depicted drawings not only on paper, but also freely uses charcoal on thin, translucent pieces of cloth and acrylic panels. In her drawings and oil paintings, she expresses the present state of people who are torn between reason and instinct, while also being tormented by anxiety and fear. In those works, “incomplete” human figures and animals have their torsos or heads cut off, or else have overstretched or partially missing hands and legs. They intermingle with one another while looking calm and not particularly in distress, with some drifting about solitarily. In this exhibition, Ichijo combined the frames of the museum’s sculpture pedestals, on which she wrapped pieces of translucent organdy cloth to which she had depicted drawings. Inside those pedestals she placed acrylic boxes in such forms as a nesting structure. This was the first occasion in which Ichijo’s illogical world took the form of a three-dimensional installation. The center-less world that seemed to continue endlessly revealed an oddly dry ambience and a mysterious humor in the air, while also allowing one to feel an easy-going calmness, as if one was laughing off the seriousness of a situation. This expression is what is so profoundly appealing about the artist Ichijo Miyuki.

Taking a different path, Kishi Kaoru studied industrial design at the Kyoto Institute of Technology. She married soon after graduation, and raised three children. After she sent them off into society, while in her fifties, she resumed her studies at the Graduate School of Hiroshima City University in 2009, in the city in which she lived. This marked the start of her artistic activities; thus, the inception of her career was exceptionally late. Nonetheless, Kishi has opened her horizons to a variety of social issues, including how society expects women to act and to live; the four inevitable elements in life (birth, aging, sickness and death); nationhood; ideological differences; warfare; nuclear development; and the environment. In her works, she has adopted methods that fully utilize the skills involved in such tasks as cooking and sewing, which she cultivated during the many years she was a housewife. In this exhibition, she aimed to visualize the problems involving the advanced medical treatment of heart transplantation in regard to the weight and value of a human life. Namely, she exhibited ten beautiful, life-sized, heart-shaped

objects, each adorned with a variety of colors and patterns, through using the elaborate techniques of *kimekomi* (traditional method of tucking fabric into grooves) and bead embroidery. Many of them were new works she created for this exhibition. In addition, she showed *Ren*, a set of three works for which also adopted the motif of a heart. Kishi created these works from kimonos, sashes, and strings used to hold up the sashes, which were originally made for celebrations. That is, the kimonos were for the *Shichi-go-san* festival for girls who had turned three and seven, and for the Coming-of-Age-Day ceremony for those who had turned twenty. In Japan, the ages of three, seven and twenty are considered traditional rites of passage for women. Kishi placed each of the three works on a pedestal, which was made to be at the height of the heart at those respective ages. These works also raised an objection to the rituals that have been forced on the lives of Japanese women by tradition (and to the oppression Kishi felt for half of her lifetime serving as a housewife). We must not be deceived by the beautiful appearances of her works and overlook the severe social criticism and sense of distress that exist in their depths.

In this exhibition, Watabiki Nobuko, who resides in Germany, presented a new theme of coexistence among all inhabitants, including immigrants and native residents. Before she settled in Paris, Hirai Yu lived in different parts of Europe, while also continuing her artistic activities based on the theme of “boundaries.” Karin Pisarikova questions the relationship between nature and humans in the Czech Republic and Japan. Although Usui Yui is based in Japan, she reexamines the problems involved within genders and history from a broad perspective. The works of these four artists all demonstrated that beyond the framework of Japan, the same issues—genders, minorities and boundaries—could be shared in all parts of the world.

After she had established her career as an artist in Japan, Watabiki Nobuko was selected by the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan to participate in the Program of Overseas Study for Upcoming Artists; thus, in 2008, at the age of fifty, she moved to Hamburg, Germany. After completing the one-year program, she stayed on and has continued to produce works in Hamburg for over eleven years. From the period she created her works in Japan, she depicted the sense of isolation and anger felt by alienated people, through her method of oil pastel on Japanese washi paper. The theme of her works has focused on the discrepancies and frictions that occur when a socially awkward person (which is also her alter ego) becomes involved in society or with other people. The fundamental ideas behind her works have not changed, but from the time she moved to Germany, her mind began to focus on the problems in society when people of various races live together, which is different from Japanese society that expects people to be homogeneous. Immediately after Watabiki moved to Germany, she became attracted to the colors she saw in German society, which were different from those common in Japan. Hence, she began to purchase used clothes and created huge-size fabric works through stitching those clothes together. She adopted that same method for the works in this exhibition, except she had several couples of different nationalities supply their old clothes. She combined the clothes of each couple and created the series *Family Portrait*. The theme was the current worldwide problems involving the influx of immigrants and refugees, which she saw from the point of view that she herself is an immigrant in German society. Based on this theme, she created huge cloth patchworks, seen as the various “portraits” of the different couples who

respectively lived together, while also maintaining their own individualities and cultures. In some works, the clothes of one couple merged together without any discord, while in others, the cloths of a different couple clashed, due to the two conflicting characteristics. Watabiki exquisitely visualized the possibilities inherent in the diverse state of society that is created by human beings.

In 1983, Hirai Yu left Japan at the very early age of twenty. She first studied at the Ecole nationale superieure des arts visuels de La Cambre in Brussels, Belgium. After living in Barcelona, she moved to Berlin where she began to work with photography. Furthermore, she studied the printing techniques of color-film photography in the United States, and began to fully focus on taking photos. Following that period, she moved to Dublin, Ireland and then to Mexico. In 2002, she moved to Paris, where she has based her artistic activities up until the present day. Even though her frequent relocations were due to her participation in artist-in-residence programs and because of the grants she received, they also reveal a certain casual cosmopolitan character that makes her capable of living anywhere in the world. But at the same time, she must have experienced the nomadic feeling of not having a permanent abode. She has continued to create the series *Entre Chien et Loup—Futaakari* for over twenty years, beginning in 1997 up to the present day. This series unveils the moment when red and blue lights mingle. That is to say, Hirai turns on a red lamp inside the house at the twilight time zone—the boundary between day and night—and captures the contrast with the blue light on the outside. She does this not through digital processing but with a film camera. The red and blue combination implies the boundary between day and night. Her idea of that “boundary” also connotes the boundaries that can be found between a variety of opposing concepts, such as national borders, ethnic groups, races, languages, and genders, which have haunted her throughout her life. Hirai often dreams of the moment when the boundary between the world of red and that of blue merge together. She says that moment is when she recovers her freedom. *Entre Chien et Loup* is a series that is embedded with her aspiration toward a sense of freedom that has transcended those boundaries.

The youngest *egó eímai* member in her thirties is Karin Pisarikova, who was born in Brno, Czech Republic. After graduating from an art university in that city, she went to the University of Turin in Italy. She then came to Japan in 2008 to study at Tama Art University. Until she returned to the Czech Republic in 2018, she actively held solo exhibitions at galleries in Japan and the Czech Centre Tokyo, while also participating in group exhibitions such as the Nakanajo Biennale. The main themes of her works are the connection between nature and human beings, and the subject of reality and fiction. In this exhibition she showed works in the series *Apollo and Daphne*, which she photographed while she was in Japan. Although this series consisted of eight works, with two works taken during each season, she could only exhibit the four works that were kept at Tama Art University. Inspired by the Greek mythology of Apollo and Daphne, Pisarikova produced this series through following the changes in her body during her pregnancy, which began from autumn and continued to the time she gave birth in summer. What is notable is that she told the myth from the reverse direction; that is, she visualized the story from the state of her own body that is stuck in nature/a tree, and how she runs away (or returns from a tree to human) to civilization/human. Rather than reflecting the Asian idea of merging nature with humans, Pisarikova considers nature/her own body as representing a material nature; that is, it is forever

inescapable.

Unlike the other artists, Usui Yui, who is also in her thirties, has not moved to countries outside Japan to pursue her artistic activities. Nonetheless, she has a broad perspective that goes beyond historical knowledge and national boundaries. In the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, she studied feminism through reading books on sociology. The following year, she participated in a group exhibition held at the former house of a person who had engaged in women's education prior to the Second World War. This inspired her to create the series *Shadow Work* (2012–16), based on the theme of women's labor. (v) Aside from this, she also produced series such as *empty names* (2013), in which she wrote Japanese women's names on used bottles that were not unlike perfume bottles. This series depicted how the Japanese military had once forced "comfort women" (sex slaves) from Korea, China, the Philippines, and Indonesia to use Japanese names. Her work shown in this exhibition was *speculum* (2016), which was composed of many imitation hand mirrors. Inside the respective frames were print works, with words that all employed the first-person singular in a variety of languages from around the world, all taking the form of mirror writing. The viewers were astonished by the fact that they could not read many of those words. It also forced them to realize the enormous number of languages that exist in this world, and that the society one belongs to is merely a tiny part of the world.

Some people argue the reason why women artists have difficulty being selected in museum exhibitions and international contemporary art exhibitions is because works by women artists that have a sense of social awareness are limited. But this is not the case; rather, in my view, the curators who have organized exhibitions at art museums—not only men but also women—have not viewed the works of women artists who are over forty, whose works have had little opportunity to be introduced at art museums up to the present day. (vi) But women artists over forty exist here and now. The exhibition *The Shouts and Murmurs of Women* at least created an opportunity to let the world know of the existence of women artists who deliver their messages toward society through their works.

(Translated by Nanpei Taeko)

*This essay was substantially modified and added to the article "*The Shouts and Murmurs of Women—The Vulnerable Collective Will Change the World* by the *egó eímai* collective," which appeared in *Women's Asia 21* magazine (Japan Women's Resource Center, September 2019).

Notes:

i. Refer to the below website:

https://www.tobikan.jp/exhibition/2019_groupshow.html

ii. Matsushita Seiko suggested the name "egó eímai," which derived from a line delivered by the old man (the main character) in the film *Voyage to Cythera*, directed by Theo Angelopoulos.

iii. Shoji Sachiko (Fukuoka Art Museum), "When 'I' Cry Out—*The Shouts and Murmurs of Women—The Vulnerable Collective Will Change the World* Exhibition" (only in Japanese), *artscape*, June 15, 2019 issue.

https://artscape.jp/report/curator/10155486_1634.html

Kudo Kasumi (Yokosuka Museum of Art), "Everyone Is a Minority in Some Way" (only in Japanese), Art Magazine *Bijutsu Techo* (online edition), August 25, 2019.

<https://bijutsutecho.com/magazine/review/20382>

- iv. Kagawa Mayumi, *Hannah Höch: Bildspiele hellsichtiger Perspektive* (only in Japanese), Suiseisha, 2019, pp. 234–235.
- v. Interview: Artist Usui Yui; “The Significance of Expressing Gender and Feminism in Contemporary Artworks;” ‘The Series: Is Gender-Free Possible? 4’ (only in Japanese), Art Magazine *Bijutsu Techo* (online edition), June 29, 2019.
<https://bijutsutecho.com/magazine/series/s21/20073>
- vi. The Aichi Triennale became a topic when it selected an equal number of men and women artists, but of the Japanese women artists it selected, four were in their twenties, and twelve were in their thirties. Of the women artists selected from outside Japan, six were in their thirties, and thirteen were over age forty. The age of artists is also an important factor along with gender.
- In my research, I referenced the official website below:
<https://aichitriennale.jp/artwork/index.html>