Contemporary feminist voices

Leonor Veiga
Centro de Investigação e Estudos em Belas Artes
Faculdade de Belas Artes - Universidade de Lisboa
Abstract

Nowadays women deal with different challenges, and many of these are conveyed through activism. Some of the most effective forms of activism can be found in the realm of the arts, where a multitude of media are available to transmit messages.

In this essay, I aim to present feminist manifestations from outside European locations as unconventional: even if ideological claims are the same worldwide, the methodology applied and episodes narrated vary according to region. Through observation, I have reached the opinion that, as in other things, these producers employ aspects related to their local environments in the making, delivering and discussing around gender quests. This perception makes me propose a 'glocal' feminism.

Gendered spaces

Nowadays, women still occupy various spaces of femininity: on one hand, the household and the kitchen are signifiers of women as the providers for and keepers of the nuclear family, and, on the other hand, the hairdresser, the nightclub, the dancer, etc., all symbolise an objectification and production of a type of feminine beauty valued by the gaze of men. Thus, women live confined to a dichotomy between the realm of family and their image as objects of desire.

These spaces, felt in society's collective memory, regulate women's lives: women struggle to enter spaces that have been open to them – the public space, which includes
work and politics – and many times access to freedom in the crowd is still denied. This constant way of things has kept social structures untouched and explains why women find themselves as objectified and kept within the private space of domesticity.

The positive side of the situation is that the ongoing effort to be present on the public space has permitted women to develop alternative models for negotiating modernity (modern life) – a place of leisure, consumption, spectacle and money. This opened public space has, in many ways, been denied to women, and still is in many parts of the world. To maintain respectability – closely identified with femininity – still means to not expose oneself in public. Thus, women have to act in a climate of a biased truth: they must expose in public, and equally keep their privacy intact.

When showing the impracticalities of the situation, the clashes and disparate events this dichotomy provokes, in many cases, feminist artists and feminists have adopted tactics that strongly parallel those employed by conservatives and fundamentalists. Their strategies include usage of shocking messages – the Guerrilla Girls constitute a major example –, or the shutting down exhibitions with pornographic contents, with the argument that the art shown perpetuates a historical objectification of women. They assume, like conservatives and fundamentalists, that all viewers, especially women, read images identically. The solution for this lies in expanding and in increasing women's power and autonomy in art as well as in sex.

Notes from Brazil

Fernanda Lago (Rio de Janeiro, 1986) is a multimedia artist that explores various feminine concerns, from breast surgery to the ongoing violence felt by women in everyday life. In Eu com, você sem, e até? (2009) series, Lago explores the terror of ‘the lost breast’. The white element (skin) is contaminated with a black line referring to the suture. One might think Fernanda is reporting the depletion due to breast cancer – and the artist welcomes the viewer to complete her work –, but in fact she is referring to a local event in her homeland, Brazil.

In this country, notable for the growing interest in plastic surgery – Brazil comes in 3rd position globally2 – women are urged to look beautiful, aspiring to high and often unattainable standards. This situation invites many females to lie on a plastic surgeon bed, in the hope of getting the ‘perfect breast’. These operations result in several tragic occurrences; women appear with their once healthy breasts deformed, and in many cases lost. The work revisits the myth of the Amazon warriors, who had their left breast cut off (or burnt out) in order to use the arms more freely. The artist asks her female counterparts to be warriors of women's causes, to keep fighting for their right to proper treatment and to speak the horrors of manipulation of women suffering from complexes about their bodies. Her call also commands the attention of an estimated 30,000 European women who have awakened from the terror of having been inserted industrial silicone implants – instead of medical-grade fillers – produced by French company Poly Implant Protheses which reportedly caused the death of one woman.
Figura 1
Eu com, você sem, e ai?
2009, 170 x 120 cm
Photograph
Once again asking her female counterparts to react against their oppressors, Fernanda made the performance Bus Protection (2009)\(^3\). In this provocative event, the artist enters a public bus wearing a felt costume displaying male genitalia in the buttock’s area, as well as fake breasts. The artist explains that “when in a crowded bus, men tend to abusively rub women. They don’t admit their abuse. In this performance I empower women, by giving them the possibility of rubbing men as well.”\(^4\) Through provocation – an ongoing strategy in the realm of feminist practice – Fernanda Lago addresses a local concern, one that annoys women on a regular basis. Personifying the abuser seemed for the artist the most effective way to transmit the offense felt by anonymous women.

This local event has parallel to a more international one: even if it is less abusive, oral offenses from men are an ongoing fact in the public space – the same one that has been opened to women in recent decades. Femme de la rue (2012), a documentary made by Sofie Peeters, a student obtaining her film degree in Brussels, addresses this problem. This movie has triggered a public debate about what is known as a universal problem.

**Iranian Diaspora**

In an Iranian city, the presence of a woman in the public space without the chador is not accepted, leading to arrest. Similarly, in the Arab world, women are often required to cover with a *hejab* when on the streets. An artist from Iranian descent, Nasrin Saadat (Tehran, 1980), has, after leaving her natal country to Malaysia, started reflecting on her former situation.

On a concrete criticism to restrictions concerning women in Iranian society, Nasrin covered her face with a *burka* and veiled herself to the camera. The challenging attitude captured shows a woman’s rebellion against conformity and the artist’s idea on “how she should think, act and look” within that repressive environment. The freedom desired will be obtained “through inner change, as [a woman] begins to think and act in a different way”\(^5\). The message the artist conveys represents conflicting values between the individual and the society she is inserted.

Nasrin notes that “everyone suffers in Iran”\(^6\), where societal norms trap people’s life. In the work *Outside the Box* (2010) the artist photographs herself inside the house, par excellence the place of women’s dreams. This woman seeks to break free from repressive and man-made constructs, which are “represented in the metaphor of the box” she penetrates into. Due to her ability to personify these situations, she performs, by depicting herself inside the house fridge – closely related to the sphere of domesticity –, or on top of a bed structure – the structure of coupling, where women many times lie in a position of subservience.

The stereotyped woman wears a white dress – a paradoxical element on Iranian feminism. In this society, the white dress refers simultaneously to two significant life entries related to a woman’s domestic life: marriage and death. The myth of the ‘scary bride’ emerged from these stories, of the introduction of women in married life – one
Figura 2 e 3
Bus Protection
2009, 170 x 360 cm
Photograph
Outside the Box VIII
2010, 100 x 240 cm
Photograph
where purity and faithfulness rule – and the after life. With this performance, the artist not only narrates a story, which was transmitted by her elders, but also penetrates the sphere of women’s fears and limitations. Equally, in this work, Nasrin manages to penetrate the distresses of Western women: the same white dress signifies the bride-to-be and the anxieties of not having accomplished this fantasy. The ‘scary bride’ is translatable into ‘the Cinderella’.

Three artists protect prostitutes

Even if in very different fashions, three artists from different regions – India, Indonesia and East Timor – appear talking about an ongoing degrading problem: that of prostitution. Prostitution is not exclusively a women territory – men and children are equally members of this class – but they are still the majority. On the heart of very conservative societies like the ones mentioned, prostitution is in most cases hidden from public eye, which does not allow the voices of the flagellum to be heard. Thus these artists channel their reality whilst keeping the victims safe.

Leena Kejriwal (Kolkata, 1969) is an Indian photographer with a very surprising aesthetics; the artist affirms her orthodoxy in regards to the discipline of photography. Due to manipulation of digital cameras, the artist has started producing the ‘negatives’ of her photographs – or what we would obtain from a print shop one decade ago after developing the coloured film.

With this process, Leena achieved a strategy to intrigue the viewer and developed a language that, in regards to the theme of prostitution, revealed itself as useful to remain objective. In Full Bibi (2010), real interiors of Kolkata’s districts are presented. The old and sad woman is simultaneously in front and hidden from us, and her identity is preserved, while the message is conveyed.

Lashita Situmorang (Samarinda, 1977) speaks about the flagellum of prostitution through Red District Project, a platform for communicating and exposing the problem. In her views, these women’s bodies – their working tool – constitute liberated devices, due to the empowerment acquired by the material sustainability provided.

The artist shows preoccupation for these women whose identity she carefully erases – Lashita has coated the eyes of all women in order to keep their identity sacred – and wishes to deliver a solution, a new ‘form of belief’ to this working class. Throughout time, the project became a vast set of materials, which Lashita regularly presents in the form of archives.

Maria Madeira (Gleno, 1969), a renowned visual artist from Timor Leste, also referred to the realm of prostitution in her country of origin. In Kiss and don’t tell (2007) series, the artist expresses the voices of these repressed women through the act of kissing the canvas. Maria often includes performative acts in her compositions, which in many cases refer to the realm of women in her country. Since 1997 in a ‘Pollockan’ fashion, Maria spits directly to the blank canvases the juice of a traditional fruit, the pann, which is eaten by east Timorese women. This practice is widely accepted by society at large – it
Figura 4 e 5
Outside the Box IV and X
2010, 70 x 100 cm
Photograph
constitutes an addiction similar to that of tobacco – and is tolerated as a women practice in the midst of an extremely conservative society.

Feminist artistic practices of the present day constitute an extremely valuable source to understand women's problems and challenges. Even more efficiently then writers, contemporary artists seem to be at ease with a position of mediators of women from conservative and open societies. The numerous media at their disposition enables artists to convey their message and Internet constitutes a very significant ally in the spread of these unspoken voices.

Many of the artists referred to are not seen as feminist – Fernanda Lago and Nasrin Saadat are perceived as multimedia artists, Leena Kejriwal is known as a photographer –, but their feminine dimension allows them to feel and sometimes experience issues that are further reported in their work.

The work of these artists can in the latest extent open discussion about street harassment, prostitution and the control of women's freedom; their works will hopefully serve the feminist causes. The more contact these artists establish with NGOs that work with the status of women, the more relevant and widespread their work will become.
Figura 6
Full bibi
2010, 87 x 127 cm
Hahnemulle PhotoRag paper
Notas
1) http://www.guerrillagirls.com/
3) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhJzTDma6E
4) Interview with the artist, 21 February 2012.
5) Artist statement, Outside the Box, 2010.
6) Nasrin in conversation with Leonor Veiga, 7 March 2012.
7) Artist statement, Outside the Box, 2010.

Bibliografia