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“Locating Cyberfeminism in Singapore: A Dialogue”
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In 2001 Cyberfeminist Art Collective from America, SubRosa, came to Singapore to collaborate with three Singapore-based researchers, one also an artist: Adeline Kueh, Margaret Tan and Irina Aristarkhova, on a project for the Next Five Minutes tactical media festival in Amsterdam. Singaporean node was about mapping stem lines (especially in how it effects women through embryonic stem cell research) and other types of global trade in the life sciences sector, where Singapore is one of the leading players. While we hosted our American guests (later in the year we were hosted by them in Chicago and had a meeting in Amsterdam), we did not really have an opportunity to reflect upon this project from the point of view of such feminist solidarity model. This dialogue today is an attempt to map our experience using comparative feminist studies / feminist solidarity model that Chandra Mohanty suggests as a useful strategy for feminist pedagogy. We hope to extend it to cyberfeminist practice and theory.

Marge: Who is feminism for?

Irina: When SubRosa came to Singapore, differences among the members (in terms of class, race, etc.) seemed often leveled off by the way in which Singapore was approached as a location, from the point of view of an American tourist. For me the idea of an American expectation of Singapore became associated with one phrase that I heard rather often, and I felt that it was hard to work with it or against it. This phrase, allegedly attributed to William Gibson, the author of noted cyberpunk novels, is that Singapore is “Disneyland with death penalty”.

Marge: This is very typical.

Irina: Your question: who is feminism for? Should it be discussed every time even before we cross borders?

Marge: Let’s start in the beginning. Feminism is very varied, and we each take different attitude and position.

Irina: So, is feminism for oneself then, depending on who one is?

Marge: I feel it has to begin with oneself. In relation to collaboration the challenge is to negotiate each other’s forms of feminism and our expectations of each other, our feminist strategy, methodology, and practice.

Irina: Why to collaborate with “other” women to start with? What is it for - To spread the “message”? In this case, Singapore was chosen as a biotechnological hub plus as a place to meet and share knowledge.

Marge: We looked specifically at embryonic technology, stem cell research, Singapore as a supplier to America.

Irina: Let’s see what this means. Rather than being a cheaper supplier, Singapore is a sophisticated producer and seller of bio-technological materials to America and other countries that often do not develop sufficient amounts of stem cell lines due to regulation and legal limitations. For Singapore it is a strategic niche, and of course, we feel it is important to analyze this in terms of gender and technology.

Singapore, South Korea, and other countries in the region are, arguably, as technologically advanced as or superior to our collaborators’ home country, and potentially it might become a point of tension. Do you think that often our Western collaborators find it difficult to acknowledge this technical advancement? After all, speaking in terms of gender and technology, Singapore has more women in technological sector, more female students, more female employees, and more computer literacy across various economic classes of population than the US.

Marge: There might be acknowledgment of the technical advancement but always with a “but”. This “but” can take many forms – what is the digital divide, the loss of freedom of expression, surveillance. They tend to skip over these advancements without a second look at how it is achieved by the people, women included. So they are more interested in looking for and at the negative aspects.

Irina: And I think, furthermore, when we pointed out the ways in which women benefited from these advancements (especially here where science and technology are privileged disciplines for both genders – this is a fact, even with many “ifs” and “buts”), we are often looked down upon as not understanding enough about issues of class, race and our own position of privilege. Therefore we are naïve and uncritical, not versed in ideas superior to our understanding and experience. While many of these ideas were actually developed by women of color and non-Western women (whom I mentioned in my introduction), and adopted by white feminists! Or let’s go further and suggest that probably there is a problem in dealing with the Other who says she is happy? How do I deal with the Other who might not need my type of feminism? Is it a false consciousness? Is she simply stupid or has not visited enough smart conferences, read smart books or seen important shows?

Marge: This is a question I ask myself. In my own research and art work I deal with this. As a practice, I need to keep this in mind. It is a difficult process.

Irina: What are some of your strategies in addressing this question?

Marge: I need to address my own limitations of my understanding of the Other. The first step is to be aware that I can be presumptuous and catch myself being like that.

Irina: What might be helpful, especially in collaboration, is to follow your advice and as much as possible analyze why we even have an urge to collaborate with this or that specific group of people. What is it that attracts me to this collaboration, apart from available funding or supposed goodness of all forms of collaboration. I find that we often repress problems within such collaborations just to see what can happen next.

Marge: Yes, we avoid the pain.

Irina: Do you think we tried to play “nice” in our collaboration with SubRosa?

Marge: I tend to hold back to see what potentials are and what can result. It is very fragile.

Irina: Have you ever felt skeptical about predominantly white women’s desire to spread a specifically framed “developmental” framework for “gender agenda” around the world, especially in the so-called developing countries?

Marge: For me, it’s more the issue of how it is done. Agendas can change and/or be made flexible, therefore the methodology for me is very important, whether people push their ways of doing things. For example, women here have already been negotiating with the government here. And they engage with the government differently to get things done, compared to the US. It is slow and painful, it is a frustrating oftentimes, but things do change and get done. Sometimes I do observe that certain forms of feminism take on a more oppositional strategy to the state, while claiming periphery and marginal position. How useful is this strategy in the context of Singapore? I see the different strategies developed by women here, the negotiation process and I witness their long term effects because of the nature of the local political system. So to me, methodology is important – one that doesn’t impose one particular method but is sensitive to local context.

Irina: Only after living in the US I understand that indeed American feminisms are local in the way in which they lobby or operate within that cultural and political setting. It is ironic that what was developed there, often being transported to other countries using private money, George Soros and his foundation is one example (like I observed in Eastern Europe through direct translations of textbooks in Gender Studies as a ‘feminist canon’). I think we can actually look for solidarities if we give ourselves time and space to practice this comparative feminist studies model.

Marge: One interesting thing about strategy and methodology is appropriation. It is very common, and it is not about good or bad, right or wrong. For me what is important is appropriation with acknowledgment. I appropriate many Western feminists thoughts but I try to do it in a way that is my own. Plus I acknowledge them.

Irina: I still want to go back to talk about technological advancement in Singapore, and the way in which in a few of the countries in this region women seem to benefit from this advancement. What ways, from your point of view, without denying negative aspects, women benefit from technology now?

Marge: Immediate benefit is networking. And definitely, if you look at the larger context of survival, it certainly places me in the labour demographic that is needed. Someone who knows a little bit on how to use the computer, IT issues, mobility, access.

Irina: What did you feel was the most productive part of SubRosa's visit to Singapore and your collaboration in this bio-technological research?

Marge: They came with a topic in mind, with which at that time I was not so engaged, in the first place. But I felt that after going through research and discussion together it made me more curious. And of course, I would call what we have established, friendship.