



Anita Mitra, "Mother releasing a hawk cry" from "Origin, In Honour of Those Lost," a performance/installation at The Garage Theatre in Blyth, Ontario, 1993. Photo: Penelope Stewart

Anita Mitra is an interdisciplinary performance artist, drawing the elements of visual art, theatre, dance, poetry, music, and video into her inspiring works. The motivation for her performances stems from investigations of her Hindu/Celtic roots, her socio-political views as a feminist, and her interest in spiritual studies.

Messages from Huairou

Notes for a Redefinition of the Spaces of Politics

by Paola Melchiori

L'auteure présente une nouvelle vision des milieux politiques avec des implications pertinentes vis-à-vis l'environnement politique. Elle donne des exemples pertinents pour les féministes du Nord et du Sud.

The renewed attacks by fundamentalist forces against women's bodies "for the salvation of civil society values," with alternating demonizing or redeeming visions of women, clearly demonstrate the extent to which women are "at stake" in "men's bargaining."

In the '90s, the United Nations' conferences have provided an opportunity to observe the development of official history, of far-sighted perspectives, and of great ideals as well as to compare them with different perspectives and historical points of view.

On one hand there is a formal unifying hypothesis of history and of a work method based on an exchange of opinions and negotiation in spite of differences. On the other hand, there is increasing fragmentation and conflict which dispels any illusions about the ability of human beings to avoid resorting to the war archetype as a way to express collective identities and to solve conflicts.

Women, as movements and individuals, as imaginary entities, contracting parties, primary victims, and unavoidable as well as desired partners, have played a fundamental role.

Women's specificity, recognized in many forms, and in different degrees and at different times during the '70s and '80s, has, today, achieved a visibility which enables comparison with all its (more or less structurally hostile or extraneous) opposites. This comparison—which has been recognized and claimed as an aspect of women's history—cannot be ignored. At the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 women's changing awareness of the externally imposed categories underlying fundamental rights represented a creative challenge for women from North and South. It thus becomes essential to trace, maintain, and explore the continuity of women's vision by means of the key concepts which have emerged over the last few years and to point out the implications, contradictions, and feasibility of the meanings of these concepts within the real historical context.

I am suggesting a thorough study of some of the fundamental issues which emerged from the Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen, and Beijing Conferences and a com-

parison of those issues with an analysis of present history, without time limits, and outside the conference framework. My aim is to focus on women's issues and on civil society's struggles, within official history and the institutional framework, which have called for compromises, decision-making, and mediation.

In relation to Rio, Vienna, Cairo, Copenhagen, and Beijing the issues can be summarized as follows:

- from "women's question" to "women's view of the world," as suggested by women in Rio;
- the notion of rights, which emerged in Vienna from the discussion of the inviolability of the female body;
- the meaning of self-determination in relation to the body management and to reproductive technologies, as emerged at the Cairo conference;
- the relationship between women's movements, (in the North and South), and civil society's movements regarding development models as emerged in Copenhagen and again in Beijing.

I would like to analyze these issues throughout history, by starting from (a) the human body as women's point of departure and perspective on the world scene; (b) the difference as diversity-stance; and (c) self-determination or autonomy at times of political regression and co-optation.

These issues allow us to re-define a space of politics which confronts the traditional spaces at many points.

Female bodies in the public scene of history

There are times in history when the normal course of events discloses the hidden structures of society. We are now going through one of those times.

Female bodies, both literal and metaphorical, are now on the world scene. "The personal is political" by others' will. The renewed attacks by fundamentalist forces against women's bodies "for the salvation of the species and of civil society values," both Christian and Islamic ones, with alternating demonizing or redeeming visions of women, clearly demonstrate the extent to which women are "at stake" in "men's bargaining." Women's bodies have become charged with metaphorical meanings, profoundly rooted in a structure outside individual physical control.

Within different contexts and under different forms, be it the rules and regulations of procreation and sexuality in relation to reproductive technologies, or women's bodies during the Bosnia war, or young women's bodies in Algeria who "could tell too much," women's bodies become carriers of messages between different ethnic groups or bodies to be controlled in the population boom. Female bodies become a symbol of a deeper order whose

disorder threatens the tenets themselves of the so-called—or so perceived—civil and social order. This reproduces women's original role: "a general exchange coin," the concealed basis of social bond. One should not be astonished, therefore, if women today are alternatively regarded as "irresponsible" people who need to be controlled or the

Think of recent events in Algeria, where both veiled and unveiled women are more frequently attacked or killed; of reports indicating an increasing rate of female genital mutilations; or, of increasing cases of sexual violence, both inside and outside families.

"source of salvation" for a civilization which is sinking in on itself.

But something has changed. Women today are aware of the burden of their work and role, both literal and figurative. This awareness has resulted in a resistance to the perception of the female self as adaptable and flexible. On the other hand, capitalism's global restructuring crisis literally needs women's malleability.

In this crisis characterized by the collapse of patriarchy the collective consciousness of the world is being transformed. In this context women are asked (by both rulers and victims for quite different reasons) to increase their participation, their literal and figurative role, as well as their "shock absorption" capability at social and symbolic levels. In a world which is perceived as without future, they are asked to "confirm" a staggering order: an ever more violent new order and an ever more threatened ancient order.

Hence, women's independent and personal refusal to be bound by socially prescribed female roles is seen as an unacceptable attempt to shirk their duty, thus disrupting the traditional shock-absorbing mechanisms of the society.

The need to exploit female resources is added to the traditional lack of recognition of women as equal partners. Society's higher degree of violence further exacerbates the opposition to women's autonomy and war is, therefore, waged against even those simple movements advocating for change in the relationship between men and women. It is a reaction against what women represent in the entire structure, even by their mere presence: namely, that their "flexibility"—their social use value—is not "given by nature" but rather has developed by necessity. Such opposition is a reaction against the fact that today, perhaps for the first time on such a large scale, male values and masculinity are under scrutiny.

We have so far underestimated the level of violence that women's shirking of duty can unleash in both social and personal power relations. The increase in violence towards or against women, both in the North and in the South of the world, demonstrates the significance of these fragile balances.

We must, therefore, seriously tackle both the emergence of a new awareness which seems to be "progressive" for mankind as a whole and, at the same time, the increase of an ancient violence which comes both from the world which has declared itself as bearer of civilization and from its opponents. This violence comes from an obscure aspects of men/women relationships. Even as extremely modern metaphorical figures for women emerge, such as Donna Haraway's concept of women as cyborgs, a step backward is made in social life.

A high degree of barbarism, both in the private lives in northern cityscapes and in southern communities, characterizes our time. One needs only to think of the recent upsurge in India of "barbarian" rites; of recent events in Algeria, where both veiled and unveiled young women are more and more frequently attacked or killed; of World Health Organization reports indicating an increasing rate of female genital mutilations; or, of increasing cases across all our societies of sexual violence, both inside and outside families. One should stop interpreting these events as "remainders of barbarism" which are bound to disappear with democracy, or remain as isolated pathological cases. As long as we do not understand the deep meaning of these practices (the private, social, and imaginary uses of sexuality), we will not understand the deep meaning of the recovery of the sexual order on the basis of *this* civil order. We will not understand why our Pope, our modern doctors and politicians are suddenly united, beyond any ideology, with the same crusaders' spirit, around reproductive control. Once they have lost control over sexuality, "family" becomes the centre of debate for our rulers, both from the right and the left. This hidden umbilical cord of enforced political values and meanings links the world's fragmented "modernity" to this new surge of barbarism.

We can talk about a "new patriarchy." One of the crucial aspects of this problem is the utter silence with which even the most civil and thoughtful men have responded to women's visions. Over the past few years there has been a very wide gap between men's silence and women's words. When we say "words" we mean true words, able to express deep self-identities, rather than simply a paternalistic external recognition of our importance. As long as we do not trace the origins of men's silence, of their almost incomprehensible deafness—mixed

with ambivalence, embarrassment, and hostility—our attempts to create an acceptable future which assures and protects everyone's freedom and right to self-expression, will be defeated.

On this uncertain border, where love and possession take up a tinge of violence, oscillating between the escape from/ and the control of/ the female subject, something can be found which the human species has not yet figured out in a civil way: thinking through the meanings of birth, procreation, and sexuality and the link of such experiences with the original structure taken by the "polis."

The shadow of dependence violently refused/rejected

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by men-children continues to emerge from the "economy of survival" which lays, hidden and denied, at the foundation of society. Here love and war, the female/maternal subject and the son-warrior subject support each other. This is the story that Chechnya's mothers or Russian mothers and their sons tell us: tragic characters, such little old women embracing their big son soldiers covered with weapons. They show us a liminal aspect of the social order.

A thorough analysis of the concealed structures of sexuality and of primeval relations among and between the private and public spheres, where "barbarism" and "civilization" are still confused, remains essential in our work to cross extremely different cultural borders.

Women everywhere are part of this complex order in many different ways, as objects, stakes, distorted protagonists, and potential subjects of alternative proposals. At the same time, women have tried to understand the deep mechanisms characterizing this crisis, and to collaborate in a civil solution without becoming trapped in a collapsing civilization.

By doing this, women have defined a whole new set of questions, creating the private sphere as a new space of political thinking and action. The unexpected emergence of violence against women as a huge issue in Beijing resulted not just from women denouncing an injustice but from their opening the window to redefinition of, research into, and intervention in the political space of our times.

Equality, differences: women's practices and the limits of democracy

In northern societies women's access to political society has been unable to secure significant change. It is not a problem of insufficient "critical mass" as women who have representation in politics and the workplace have experi-

enced continuous attempts at marginalization and distortions of their words and work as merely "female" support or care-giving to political parties or systems in difficulty. They have found a mixture of segregation and co-optation, the "glass ceiling," and the conflict between public achievement and intangible private patriarchal attitudes.

"Critical mass" never seems to be sufficient for women. There is a consistent internal blindspot towards diversity in the mechanisms of traditional policy. The classic "representation" model within the political democratic system, for example, has not been deeply analyzed nor challenged by women.

Moreover, in the name of alliances between women, there has been a tendency towards erasing internal differences among women. These denied differences which subsequently emerge in "the public sphere" on the basis of more ancient belongings and little understood newly rediscovered fundamental cultural bonds, have not yet been thoroughly understood. Compared to these bonds, gender bonds become fragile or deceiving when it comes to political decision-making on various issues. For example, our Italian electoral law has allowed one out of three women in electoral lists to flood our Parliament with right-wing women, who are simply there "as" women.

Although it is necessary to claim the strategic importance of the struggle for equality and fundamental rights—boundaries which have nevertheless been theoretically established by democracy—we cannot think that women's struggles have been for mere inclusion or the extension of citizenship and democracy. Indeed experience shows that, as such, these struggles do not fully succeed. They once again become trapped in new hierarchies and segregation, or worse, reproduce the existing reality. Democracy seems to "resist" radical women and women who really want "to make a difference" cannot be included in the democratic conceptual framework.

Equality is nevertheless a strategic tool in relation to a world based on the social, economic, and cultural control by one sex only. However, it is clear that qualitative outputs should be more considered when speaking of achieving a critical mass of women in political decision-making.

Differences, on the other hand, should be tackled more often as political tools. As women in Beijing have shown, differences have been a useful tool in women's research and politics. It is crucial to show our differences vis-à-vis men in our political practice: namely our ability to translate alternative visions and values into different management and relationship structures.

But there are other differences. Namely, what divides us from our wills in our deepest desires, in our complicity with the existent system, in our close belonging to the male universe? Identities and belongings whose roots are often deeper than any gender belonging and whose dark sides we must face, even if with some bitterness we must face those "dark sides" of our identities and belongings—is necessary to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past and to make real changes.

There are finally differences among ourselves: in our cultural, racial, economic, and religious positionings, which occasionally turn into real conflicts over the diversity of visions, positions, and strategies. The analyses of all these differences among women at Huairou, however, showed the strength to be gained from them.

The complexity which emerges in the analysis of differentiation among women lets us move beyond the easy and boastful identification of being “women,” yet at the same time helps us have alternative understandings of the ways in which we develop different positions and also complicities within the existent system. This keeps us free from ideological rigidities, which are so omnipresent even in feminisms. It helps us see how our history as women becomes intertwined with the specificity of our culture of origin, with the obscure roots of homeland, place, and culture, to create images of femininity and masculinity, certain visions of nature and knowledge. In other words, the fertile background of thoughts, values, and faiths which have contributed to our various and historically defined feminine identities.

The analysis of these differences, rather than a mere tolerance or praise of them, is now essential to understand how “blood bonds” with one’s land, homeland, nation—deeply rooted in the “mud” of primeval links—emerge

“out of the blue” in nationalism and in other events closely linked to primeval forms of belonging.

Our different visions can only be the product of a mediation between our discovery of a (common) gender and (different) deep roots which are “newly interpreted.” This is what has happened, for instance, during meetings of women coming from war areas: tracing back women’s histories of nationalism and belonging has led to the redefinition of the notions of nationality itself. Each woman, while working out the redefinition of one’s notion of friend/foe, has been obliged to reposition herself in relation to her society. In doing so, she has been obliged to unveil the invisible violence which can often be found in a society, as well as the existing female bonds which support it. Today, women from Belgrade, Bosnia, and Gaza provide different interpretations of one’s bonds with one’s “homeland,” peace, and war, starting from their own daily lives, where peace and war are made and destroyed.

Women immigrants are doing the same. They use their own personal histories and experiences to describe the meaning of citizenship and belonging, the meaning of being “rooted.” This explosion of the world of categories that are so “normal” to these women demonstrates the need to re-conceive the basic notions implied in the



Anita Mitra, “Excavating Lost Origins,” Live Art Space, Oxford Mills, Ontario, 1996. Photo: Tim Mitra

concept of citizenship, the ties of an individual with a particular land, blood, and nation.

This "work of differences" sets a question mark on the whole conceptual democratic frame. It is a new way to look at things; what finally changes are not the answers but the questions themselves. It is a new way to look at oneself and reality, one which is likely to change the "gaze" itself and to re-define the priorities for research and intervention.

This kind of dialogue-confrontation among women was one of the many acts of political imagination made more visible by women at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and at the NGO Forum in Huairou.

In spite of the recognition of women's "specificity" their practices have become almost invisible in the formal democratic political spaces. Even in women's meetings they are sometimes considered "private" or "social" in contrast to the "true" politics of the political institutions. In this situation it is important to rediscover the meaning of our earlier political practices.

The first most effective political action of women was consciousness-raising. It was able to travel the world as a contagious disease without militants, parties, money, or structures. It was able to change patterns in accordance with the needs of different countries and cultures. It had a kind of universality, albeit different from the one we know as the "enlightenment project" now collapsing on itself both in its liberal and Marxist version. It was a collective action comprising the complexity of individuals, able to continuously readjust and relocate itself: feminism became many different feminisms and many different women's movements. It felt just as powerful but was far from the ambiguity allowed for in the "empowerment" definitions.

We should not forget the spaces that political actions come from: the bodies and the private rooms; the dreams and the hysterical "words" that cannot be uttered in any language; the spaces of physical and moral violence against women which are alternatively places of protection or imprisonment; the spaces of families, nests, and cages; the spaces where care and love are difficult to separate from violence; and the spaces exiled from politics as well as those essential to its existence.

We should not forget the core of those actions and the questioning of power, sovereignty, authority, and the ways in which decisions are made, priorities established, and representation is appointed.

Consciousness-raising was a practice whose truths and whose questions laid in that "liminal" threshold where private and political are still obscurely confused—a very different positioning of the public and the private.

Today we are at a different stage. But before (or together with) entering Parliaments and Ministries and seeing that nothing changes, we should not forget our prior inventions and their spaces: those hidden places of history that are as much implied as well as excluded from the "polis," the invisible social fabric.

It is at that level that politics is made today. It is at that

level that our practices have "bitten" when effective: the whole organization of life, the boundary between natural life to social life.

This is perhaps the main reason for both the power and the relative failure of these actions, for the strange contradiction between their effectiveness and their capacity to disappear. From this perspective we can perhaps look at the relationship between women's struggles and the struggles of a so-called civil society.

Women's politics and the "last shore of civil society"

Women, especially in the South, have been clearly recognized as being at the "forefront" of civil society struggles. They not only consistently put up resistance but also bring forward new projects for a new and better future. They are the only historical subjects who have pointed out the need to build a new social covenant. They resent the secret deceit underlying the present society, which is nurtured by sheer will of power and destructiveness, both in the private and public spheres, with both sides affected. They are also the only subjects countering current ideologies. While they are clearly aiming at the changing their daily lives, they are also redefining the "object" of political action. Southern women's struggles have probably gone further ahead than any theories in inventing new forms of political action, and are able to impact both daily survival and the economic sphere on a global level, creating new policies. Their struggles, coming from the so-called subsistence economy which is traditionally outside the market, are clearly challenging globalization by proposing basic values for a different relationship between economic survival and social coexistence.

Nonetheless there is an insufficient conceptualization of the implications of this redefinition of political spaces, even in our own eyes.

In Copenhagen, the notion of a civil society and women as its radical force was clearly emphasized as the last bulwark against an invasive power affecting the public and private spheres. Yet, this raises a whole set of questions.

On one hand, the meanings given by women to this "cure-all" are quite different according to one's starting point, namely to the state where one lives as part of a "civil society." For example, in Algeria, in eastern countries, in Palestine, or other "democratic" countries, being actively involved in the "civil society" can have quite different meanings with respect to human rights, state intervention, participative forms of government, and the citizens' "common good." On the other hand, when understood as a gender neutral concept, "civil society" masks the recognition of women's specificity. Women's struggles and practices are far beyond that.

In particular, this gender neutral recovery of civil society reproduces the dichotomy between political society and civil society, which then leads to other grassroots dichotomies that feminists have tried to call into question: private

and public, economic and social, productive and reproductive, state and civil society. By contrast, the greatest efforts carried out by women in daily politics have raised the problem of the redefining of the space/object of politics itself, a redefinition of the separation between domains (i.e. the social and political ones), leading to an overcoming of separate spheres.

Many of us consider, therefore, the analysis of women's struggles as advanced elements of a civil society as limiting. We have wondered whether it is not preferable in terminology, and useful in practice, to let the visible public spaces which have been set up or sometimes carved out by women to "work directly as political spaces." These spaces include specific forms of women's practices and relations among themselves, the ways women reinterpret the priorities which emerge, and the forms they have invented to work, think, and survive. The characteristic of these "political spaces" is that they cannot be read according to traditional separations. Just like in economy, where the inclusion of fully-realized notion of reproduction disrupts the conceptual economic space, here domains are likewise mixed up: proposals are put forward for new forms of work, discussion, the management of money, the solution of conflicts, and new ways to be involved in culture which are outside institutional places.

We can call them "public political spaces," as a transitional description.

Conclusion

The meaning of the "new" violence against women as well as the "failure" by women to change institutional policies, or, the impossibility to use the traditionally-defined democratic political spaces, call for a redefinition of the entire political mechanism. These questions take as their focus the relationship between the human being as "natural" being and the human being as political subject, and the corresponding transition between natural life and political existence.

"Women's politics" questions yet again the origins of these concepts: it gives visibility to that threshold where the citizen is born, or carved out, of her natural/private condition. What is the functioning of the sexual politics in this process? This is the level which we can call "biopolitical," at which "women's politics" works and is perhaps one of the reasons of its "power" as well as of its "invisibility."

To make this level of invisibility once again "visible" and effective, is one of the most urgent tasks for the future.

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MARCELLINE RAZAFIMBELO

Femme,

Femme noire,
 Tu es la terre et la lumière
 Femme d'ébène,
 En toi monte une prière.
 Femme soumise,
 En toi vibre l'avenir
 Femme d'hier,
 En toi, on puise l'histoire.
 Femme d'aujourd'hui,
 En toi s'élève l'espérance.
 Femme courage,
 En toi chante la colombe.
 Femme imagination,
 En toi tout est art.
 Femme horizon,
 En toi se dessine le futur.
 Femme arc-en-ciel,
 En toi s'harmonise la joie.
 Femme de création,
 En toi est la vie.
 Femme de demain,
 Vers toi le monde s'élève.
 Femme sourire,
 Tu illumines noire route.
 Femme de révolte,
 Tu portes la liberté.
 Femme insoumise,
 Tu es notre réalité.
 Femme Amour,
 Tu es le sel de la terre.

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