

Intersectionality by Other Means

Jeannine Tang in Conversation with Maria Bremer and Isabelle Lindermann

Maria Bremer/Isabelle Lindermann: As a contemporary art scholar specializing in exhibition and curatorial histories, with a focus on Asian and diasporic feminist, queer, and trans* artistic and curatorial practices, you have long engaged with the politics of public exposure embedded in various exhibition formats and genres within the globalized art field. To begin with, a perhaps all-too general question: How relevant have intersectional curatorial practices and institutional policies been for the development of theoretical debates on intersectionality – within art history but also beyond the discipline?

Jeannine Tang: «Intersectionality» was famously coined by legal scholar Kimberly Crenshaw in 1989 to describe those axes where forces of power collide.¹ Against single-issue analyses that would separate race and sex discrimination, and obscure racial and gender discrimination experienced by Black women, Crenshaw coined «intersectionality» as a multi-issue analytic of how power moves in multiple directions – rather like the movement of traffic at an intersection, stressing issues of legal discrimination and the importance of Black liberation struggles. Her work has been influential for critical race art history that would seek redress within canons of art and analytics of history. I do not see exhibitions as historically transforming the legal or activist grounds upon which Crenshaw was theorizing (exhibitions are not changing the jurisprudence of anti-discrimination law in the U. S., for instance). However, curatorial practice is certainly impactful for transforming the intersectional ways in which art history and contemporary art practices are enacted and understood; and curatorial practice crucially works upon changing broader cultural attitudes regarding what lives and identities are seen as belonging within a society, and the differential vectors of how power is lived.

I think of the deeply caring organization and programming by which the Speed Museum in Louisville, Kentucky presented Amy Sherald's portrait of Breonna Taylor; or the way Bisi Silva's 2009 exhibition *Like a Virgin* (2009) was a flashpoint in African sexual politics.² Often curatorial practice (across exhibitions or projects both large and small) has seeded grounds for such thought and practice. Internationally, very often curatorial practice has foregrounded issues of race, gender, and sexuality before more official art histories – and widespread acceptance in the academy – have embraced practices and analytics of intersectionality.

Artists themselves have often carried out this work. Vital queer work has happened in Singapore through almost two decades of curating and programming by Jason Wee at Grey Projects (founded in 2008); and I also think of Amanda Heng organizing a women artists' slide registry in Singapore in the 1990s, in ways similar

to how Lucy R. Lippard organized one in the U.S.: as a curatorial intervention into how exhibition curators would produce all-male exhibitions under the guise of there being no women artists working in specific genres, geographies, mediums, etc.³ Heng's slide registry, and her role in organizing performances and programs in the 1990s for Asian women, was an important curatorial intervention, and predates later thematic shows in Asia that would think across gender and race (e.g. Binghui Huangfu, *Text and Subtext*, 2000, or the *Spectrosynthesis* exhibition series in East and Southeast Asia) – curatorial efforts that predate major historical monographs, as well as major museums and Asian research initiatives taking up questions of gender.⁴

I appreciate that the question is posed around curatorial rather than exhibition practice – because to my mind, curatorial practice is not limited to solo or group exhibitions. Curatorial practice also means forms of collection-building, interpretation, and research; organizing and making available aesthetic experience in the form of commissions or work-in-progress, providing support for artistic processes, and programming and organizing opportunities to gather and facilitate the appearance of cultural (counter) public spheres; the creation and support for infrastructures and resourcing forms of ideation, education, and sociality. Such curatorial endeavors might take the form of commissions, residencies, programs, festivals, structured forms of convening, assembly gathering, publishing, and other kinds of projects or work that do not culminate in an exhibition, or something easily discerned as display. Which is to say: intersectionality is never just the work of the curator: it requires a great many people working across many links and roles that make up curatorial practice and assemblages of power that constitute culture and public life.

Maria Bremer/Isabelle Lindermann: In your 2013 essay *The Problem of Equality, or Translating «Woman» in the Age of Global Exhibition*, you examine how claims of equality are formulated in survey exhibitions.⁵ You critically address the limitations of these claims when they are reduced to questions of representation – particularly in terms of headcounts – rather than focusing on systemic transformation, or when the social categories they rely on are singularized, stabilized, and hierarchized. However, instead of dismissing these claims, as conservative pressures, neoliberal diversity rhetorics, and the reservations stemming from a certain «left melancholy» (a term coined by Wendy Brown after Walter Benjamin) may urge, you compellingly argue for continuing the engagement with inequality. You insist, instead, on the destabilizing potential of transnational and queer feminism, which «intersects issues of war, law, immigration, human rights, antiracist, economic, urban and rural justice projects, propelled toward uncoercive rearrangements of masculinity and femininity beyond the limits of woman, as a project of decolonizing feminism».⁶ A translation of transnational and queer feminism into art exhibitions might suggest a shift from «existing definitions of experience or subject» toward, as you propose, «a mode of curating other forms of relationality between the works in question».⁷ What specific understanding of intersectionality has emerged from transnational and queer feminism since then? And how do you think this understanding is being translated into curatorial practice today?

Jeannine Tang: One example might be the assemblage models of thought – by theorists such as Jasbir Puar – that would link not only race, class, and gender, but also state power, coloniality, migration, disability, sexuality, race, and gender, the

extraction and control of the world's resources.⁸ This work has been impactful in transnational feminist and queer studies today. It is itself rooted in a long pre-history of earlier feminisms involving women of color, even if they use different terminology that is not the language of intersectionality or assemblage. I think of the Combahee River Collective, critical and/or activist scholars such as Gayatri Spivak, bell hooks, Audra Simpson, Angela Davis, and Grace Lee Boggs as impacting curatorial practice over the decades. For practice today, more recently, we can see the influence of Denise Ferreira da Silva's work on the 2023 Bienal de São Paulo *Choreographies of the Impossible*; and curators across the world have rethought their approaches to archives, sources and narrative because of Saidiya Hartman's work.⁹ More locally, Edinburgh-based arts organization Arika's work has been surely influenced by feminist, queer, and trans anti-colonial and abolitionist approaches; and I remember being deeply moved by the performance program presented at the Performance Space in New York as *I wanna be with you everywhere*, for disabled artists and those who would be in their company.¹⁰

Maria Bremer/Isabelle Lindermann: In your 2017 essay *Into the Arena: Notes on Exhibitions and Identity Politics*, you engage with the limitations of exhibitions that draw upon artists' identities, despite these being necessitated by the structural inequalities within the art field and art history.¹¹ When historically revisiting the exhibitions *Issues: Social Strategies by Women Artists* (Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1980), *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New Museum, Studio Museum Harlem, Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, New York, 1990), and *Black Male* (Whitney Museum, New York, 1994–95), in this essay, you value these exhibitions' shared attempts not to «examine the impact of artists' identities on their art», but rather to «address the issues that affect the unfolding and engendering of identity in society».¹² Moving to the context of a globally expanding exhibition history, we have recently witnessed the emergence of corrective «area studies», guided by a single axis of discrimination such as race, geography, gender, or sexuality, which revisit historical exhibitions centered on marginalized artists.¹³ As art historians who study exhibitions – and thereby engage with a social art history – our goal with this issue is to discuss the incorporation of intersectionality into the history of art exhibitions. We believe this concept could help us move beyond the reproduction of established canons of exhibition history, on the one hand, and the scholarly particularization and isolation caused by a narrow focus on categories of identity or identification, on the other. We would like to ask you how, in your opinion, the integration of intersectionality as a framework for writing and rewriting exhibition history – beyond contemporary analysis – has already begun, perhaps implicitly, and to what extent this development has unfolded.

Jeannine Tang: Actually, I wrote *Into the Arena* for the catalogue for the exhibition *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and as a Weapon* (2017) at the New Museum in New York, because the curator Johanna Burton invited me to write a text on identity politics and the exhibition. While doing so, I came to think that the *Trigger* exhibition – presented across all floors of the New Museum's galleries – might become one of the biggest gender-expansive curatorial projects of its time, potentially attacked by an increasingly conservative culture for its focus on gender as a lens into contemporary art. At the time, I would myself encounter critics and curators who would

dismiss certain kinds of art, curating, and history as «just identity politics», rhetorically pitting these against work with form, aesthetics and theory. Such binary oppositions do not actually hold up when we look at history; uncritical divisions between aesthetics and politics, theoretical or social approaches, identity and form can be rooted in outmoded and conservative strands of modernist criticism. Such modes of critique can have the nefarious result of discrediting significant bodies of curatorial and artistic work by women, people of color, people from non-Western countries, and queer and gender-expansive people. In writing the essay, I wanted to invite readers to consider why curators might need or want to take up issues of identity in their shows, and to slow down knee-jerk reactions.

I would say that intersectionality – even if it does not use the name or language – has been assiduously at work, if not always in academic art histories, then certainly in practice and lived for a very long time now: whether at the 1977 Festac Festival in Nigeria, whose many African/diasporic women artists and performers were documented by Marilyn Nance, or some of the examples I have provided above.¹⁴ And it has a strong life ahead in projects such as the curatorial year of Queer Histories at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) in São Paulo, Brazil, that culminated in the remarkable exhibition *The LGBTQIA+ Histories* (2024), that looked capaciously across periods and features numerous work, artists, collectives, and activists from the Global South, to tell an expanding history of queer and gender-expansive people, their cultures, the differential subalternities, and circumstances of their lives and work.¹⁵

Maria Bremer/Isabelle Lindermann: «Intersectionality» is an ambivalent term, as it refers both to the phenomenon of overlapping discriminations and to the perspective on, or practice against, such discrimination. Art exhibitions, we argue, can be intersectional in at least two senses: as manifestations of entangled discrimination and as acts of resistance against it. Furthermore, they can occupy these positions simultaneously, depending on the perspective taken. This assumption enables us to examine historical instances – even those predating the coining of the term «intersectionality» – through an intersectional lens. However, how can we methodologically account for the intersectional dimension of art exhibitions? To what extent does applying intersectionality as an analytical lens compel us to rethink established methodological approaches within an art-historical exhibition history? And do approaches of intersectional theory offer transformative methodologies in this respect?

Jeannine Tang: I do appreciate that in her 1989 text Crenshaw not only addressed discrimination in the law, but also Black liberation struggles, practices, and cultures more widely; this was a text not only tackling the injuries of discrimination, but a text that was aimed at a greater reorganization of society, towards a society that could maximize the choices of those disenfranchised (and not only offer them some minimal, reduced versions of choice, and choice for a few but not others). If we recall Crenshaw's point that «The goal of this activity should be to facilitate the inclusion of marginalized groups for whom it can be said: «When they enter, we all enter»» – that society should not only be for the exclusive few but instead for the multitude and the many – we should consider that the exhibition is not only about the artists in it but it is often part of systems and infrastructures of many people working together under specific, often unfair economic conditions that reflect the neoliberal capitalism of the society in which the exhibition is made.¹⁶

And so to think intersectionality methodologically means thinking widely and infrastructurally about what makes the exhibition of a select number of artists and artworks possible. Artists have been increasingly speaking out about their labor conditions and workers at museums have been unionizing to improve conditions of work – not only for curators and artists, but also editors, assistants, those working in security, visitor services, installation, conservation, programs, transforming how people are hired into their roles and supported within them.

On another note: a critical aspect of curatorial work is ensuring and resourcing the artist to imagine things otherwise – and this might culminate in results that do not immediately look like redress, liberation, intersectionality, e.g. artists might privilege their own private spiritual practices in a work, or do something extremely abstract or focus on materials in a way that does not lead easily to a social analytic, but offers other powerful, affective or aesthetic kinds of work. Resistance then, is sometimes a willingness to work against what is expected of a historical subject, to deviate and to stray. And so an intersectional method, for the curator walking into a studio visit or an art historian researching a work – might be not to prescribe in advance or assume what a person might want or think or do, not to freight the encounter with a work or practice or person with social expectation and stereotype. Intersectionality in method might also then look like an epistemological openness to alterity, difference, opacity, unfamiliarity – and being willing to adapt or change one's methods accordingly – without trying to resolve the work or box in a person in known or familiar ways. Finally, I also want to stress the importance of work that goes beyond the framework of intersectionality – that might effect it by other means, through analytics that may afford greater complexity. For instance, black feminist thought has refuted the ways that intersectionality can be instrumentalized by states and institutions, and rigorously critiqued how current and historical conditions of subjugation are founded in racial capitalism while offering alternative paradigms for thinking our multiplicity and mutuality. I think of how Denise Ferreira da Silva theorized difference in ways that do «not presuppose *separability*, *determinacy*, and *sequentiality*», towards a more ethnically entangled world. Transformative methodologies today also mean not assuming that curatorial and cultural work stand apart other forces and concerns of society and ecology – but that the work of artists and curators is entangled in and shares a common world.¹⁷

Maria Bremer/Isabelle Lindermann: To conclude, we'd like to hear your perspective on the current moment. Across the globe, we are witnessing a shift toward authoritarianism, accompanied by a resurgence of intersectional forms of discrimination and the dismantling of anti-discrimination policies. These dynamics are increasingly visible within the cultural field – and particularly in the realm of exhibitions. From recent developments in Germany, including the introduction of a controversial resolution against antisemitism, which followed debates surrounding, notably, documenta fifteen in Kassel, to the current state of the Trump administration in the United States and mounting calls for ideological purges in American art and history museums – why do you think these cultural conflicts are crystallizing so powerfully around exhibitions?

Jeannine Tang: Exhibitions traditionally are display spaces and public spheres in which many peoples may gather around symbolic representations, in order to recognize and debate the cultures they hold in common. There are numerous kinds of

exhibitions, contexts, and practices, many of them dissimilar and not comparable; but two models that are both widespread (and targeted) include the exhibitions at national galleries and nationally-sponsored large-scale exhibitions. I am reminded of what emerged in the wake of the French Revolution: the abolition of the monarchy, and the seizure and nationalization of the royal collections to become the republic's national heritage; and some of these collections were themselves built through colonial practices including theft and contracts produced under imperial rule – by which institutions of the West and North constituted their empires, against which contemporary calls for restitution and reparation have been made in the twentieth and twenty-first century.

At stake then and now, is the control of wealth and heritage, the image of what a country is, and the values it stands for, who belongs to it, what ideas and forms of life are possible therein. Large-scale exhibitions in national galleries and biennial exhibitions – along with national funds for the arts – not only command budgets and resources in the millions or billions of dollars; they act as representations of the people, and the wide range of cultures, collections, values, ideas, and practices that constitute notions of who we the people are. Consequently, national exhibitions are understandably important sites of power and conflict. History tells us that the field of representation has always been a site of struggle, and that social movements that have made a difference did so through broad-based learning, understanding, coalitions, and solidarity. Exhibitions are an occasion for this work. They are not the only place for it, but they are a crucial one, and it is not a ground to be ceded.

Notes

- 1 See Kimberlé Crenshaw: Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex. A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, in: University of Chicago Legal Forum 1, 1989, Art. 8, pp. 139–167, <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>, last accessed on 8 April 2025.
- 2 See Roberta Smith: How a Museum Show Honoring Breonna Taylor Is Trying to 'Get It Right', in: The New York Times, 7 April 2021; Bisi Silva (ed.): Like A Virgin..., exhib. cat., Lagos, Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos 2009.
- 3 See <https://jasonwee.com/grey-projects>, last accessed on 19 May 2025; Eliza Tan: Revisiting Art, Feminism and Memory in Singapore and Japan since the 1990s: Amanda Heng and Yoshiko Shimada, in: n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal 39, January 2017, pp. 5–17.
- 4 See Binghui Huangfu (ed.): Text & Subtext: International Contemporary Asian Women Artists, exhib. cat., Singapore, Earl Lu Gallery, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, Singapore 2000; <https://sunpride.hk/>, last accessed on 19 May 2025.
- 5 Jeannine Tang: The Problem of Equality, or Translating 'Woman' in the Age of Global Exhibition, in: Angela Dimitrakaki/Lara Perry (eds.): Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions, Liverpool 2013, pp. 244–259.
- 6 Ibid., p. 253.
- 7 Ibid., p. 254.
- 8 See Jasbir K. Puar: Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times, Durham 2007; idem: Posthumanism and Queer Theory: Beyond Homonationalism, in: Journal of Posthuman Studies 1, 2021, no. 1, pp. 77–90.
- 9 See Diane Lima/Grada Kilomba/Hélio Menezes/Manuel Borja-Villel (eds.): Choreographies of the Impossible: 35th Bienal de São Paulo, exhib. cat. São Paulo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo 2023.
- 10 See Saidiya Hartman/Canisia Lubrin/Nat Raha/Christina Sharpe/Nydia A. Swaby: Poetry Is Not a Luxury: The Poetics of Abolition, in: Silver Press, 2 September 2020, <https://www.silverpress.org/blogs/news/poetry-is-not-a-luxury-the-poetics-of-abolition>; see <https://performancespacenewyork.org/shows/i-wanna-be-with-you-everywhere/>, last accessed on 12 May 2025.
- 11 Jeannine Tang: Into the Arena: Notes on Exhibitions and Identity Politics, in: Johanna Burton/Natalie Bell (eds.): Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon, exhib. cat. New York, NY, New Museum, New York 2017, pp. 204–215.

12 Ibid., p. 206.

13 See Catherine Dossin/Hanna Alkema: Women Artists Shows·Salons·Societies. Towards a Global History of All-Women Exhibitions, in: *Artl@s Bulletin* 8, 2019, no. 1, Article 19, pp. 5–13, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol8/iss1/19/>, last accessed on 4 April 2025; John Tain (ed.): *Uncooperative Contemporaries. Art Exhibitions in Shanghai in 2000, Cologne/London 2020 (Exhibition Histories)*; Nana Adusei-Poku (ed.): *Reshaping the Field. Arts of the African Diasporas on Display, Cologne/London 2022 (Exhibition Histories)*; Bas Hendriks (ed.): *Queer Exhibition Histories*, Amsterdam 2023.

14 See Oluremi C. Onabanjo (ed.): *Marilyn Nance: Last Day in Lagos*, Johannesburg/New York 2022.

15 See <https://www.masp.org.br/en/exhibitions/the-lgbtqia-histories>, last accessed on 19 May 2025.

16 Crenshaw 1989 (as note 1), p. 167.

17 Denise Ferreira da Silva: *On Difference Without Separability*, in: Jochen Volz/Júlia Rebouças/Isabella Rjeille (eds.): *Incerteza viva: 32nd Bienal de São Paulo*, exhib. cat., São Paulo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo 2016, pp. 57–65, here p. 64.