

A Commentary on Ayako Kano’s Review of the Feminist Art History Debates

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Let me first express my sincere gratitude to Professor Ayako Kano for her thoroughly critical overview, “Women? Japan? Art?: Chino Kaori and the Feminist Art History Debates” in the *Review of Japanese Culture and Society* (vol. 15, December 2003). The following is not written as a defense by someone directly involved in these debates, but as a theoretical elucidation expressed in the hope of suggesting further possibilities for the development of this issue. To begin with, I am both honored and perplexed to be described as one of the foremost examples of an “anti-feminist art historian,” who displayed an “allergic reaction” to Chino Kaori’s talk delivered at the symposium “The Present, and the Discipline of Art History” held at the Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art in December 1997. The following will show, I hope, that my reaction was more theoretical than allergic.

According to Kano’s summary, I am supposed to have maintained in my review “A Commentary on the Symposium: ‘The Present, and the Discipline of Art History’” (‘Ima Nihon no bijutsushigaku o furikaeru’ o kiite) that: “To say that art has been dominated by men is historically and epistemologically *correct*, even though we may want to object to that domination as having been ethically and politically *wrong*” (*Aida*, no. 25 [1998]: 27-28). What I stated in the corresponding passage is not as clear-cut as Kano would like it to be. It may instead be translated as follows: “If Art History as a discourse and discipline has heretofore uncritically credentialed male-heterosexual values, it simply proves that male domination has been taking a ‘dominant’ position in the public hierarchy (whether this be judged as good or bad). To judge this domination as ‘wrong’ may be ‘wrong’ in terms of historical understanding (though it may be ‘politically’ ‘correct’)” (*Aida*, no. 25 [1998]: 12-13). This passage is inevitably awkward as it attempts to address the logical ambiguities in Chino’s usage of such terms as “dominant” or “wrong.”

It is not my intention to complain about the distortion that occurred in the process of translation and summary by Kano. Rather, I would like to analyze the theoretical implications that are revealed in the gap between the original and the translation. Three remarks are necessary. First, I will discuss the distinction between the “performative” and the “constative.” Second, I question the gap between epistemology and axiology. Third, I will examine the “blind spot” of an alternative discourse. These three considerations will lead to a general conclusion in the form of questions to the commentator.

First, in the above passage, I point out as the minimum prerequisite the necessity of avoiding “the confusion between political correctness and epistemological judgment” (13), which unfortunately blurs Chino’s statement. But, contrary to Kano’s assumption, it does not follow, logically speaking, that I maintained that male domination *was* epistemologically or historically correct. On the contrary, I stated earlier in the same review that such a view dangerously contributes to “universally” consolidating the belief in “male domination” as if it were an incontestable historical fact. “If one believes that a gendered point of view will overturn major errors that have been committed by the discipline, this belief leads to another error of mistaking a partial (be it male dominated or otherwise) value judgment for one that is ‘universal’” (12). One should be clever enough not to be entangled in the ‘performative’ effect of a ‘constative’ statement (to use J-L. Austin’s terminology), especially when this confusion works in favor of one’s own opponent.

Let us turn to the second point. Kano claims that Inaga “believes that the male domination of art history is a historically correct fact, and cannot be challenged even by feminist critique” (28). I wish I could state such an absurdity! Let me precisely say that while all I can do is to admit, in a tautological manner, that male domination has been recognized as a matter of fact by the dominant male discourse, I am criticizing the very mechanism of political domination as a questionable *status-quo*. And, as for the second half of Kano’s statement, who would dare deny that such a discourse of male domination has been challenged by feminist critique? Even declared anti-feminist male scholars would not deny this “challenge,” unless he (and not she) was completely ignorant of this “threat” (as the anti-feminists would call it).

However what seems to be crucial here is the following: by presenting this misleadingly caricature-like schematization of the debate, Kano regrettably overlooks the whole range of its epistemological foundation and reduces it mistakenly into phases that are pre-structuralist (Barthes, Foucault, de Certeau etc), pre-Positivist (the debates of Popper vs. Habermas and/or Kuhn, etc.), and pre-Orientalist (Said vs. Lewis), and gives an oversimplified overview as if I were ignorant of the early feminist debate on the “absence of great female artists” generated by Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock. An empty pedantry is not my intention here. It would simply be absurd to question the reason why female Picassos or Matisses have not been socially recognized or known as “great artists” without questioning the underlying evaluation system of the symbolic

market. In the last twenty years, as an art sociologist, I have been no less frustrated than Chino by the total lack of analysis of the market mechanism in the discipline of “conventional art history” and have agreed with Chino in various instances that “the fundamental re-examination of the notion of artistic evaluation” is needed.¹ My criticism of Chino was that she be more fundamental and coherent in her statements.

In my review, I pointed out Chino’s misleadingly “positivist” claim to the “correct” historical understanding that she still naively presupposed in contradiction to the theoretical apparatus she upheld concerning the anatomy of the regime of representation. In general, the righteousness of moral and political judgment tends to be guaranteed by the claims of objectivity and neutrality of supporting “historical facts.” And worse, it is political and axiological demarcation that decides the relevance of the “facts” themselves (as is often observed in lawsuits). The myth of neutrality and objectivity (in which Wakakuwa Midori still seems to believe (if we are to follow note 14 of Kano’s review), has been repeatedly contested in the last half century of epistemological discussions. In his classical *Poverty of Historicism* (1959), Karl Popper showed that it is possible to refute an error, but it is impossible to prove the ultimate correctness of the historical explanation of causality. As a former student of the Gombrichean approach, Chino should have at least been aware of this Popperian notion of refutability, which E. H. Gombrich relied upon. I wonder if I am wrong in believing that Kano’s reformulation of my statement simply omits even this rudimentary theoretical framework.

My third and final point concerns the notion of “an alternative art history” proposed by Kano. In her note, Kano quotes Inaga asking, “Is there any guarantee that the principle of liberation of ‘half’ of those ‘stifled’ would remain unrelated to some other form of oppression” (*Aida*, 13) and comments that “this is an often-heard complaint against feminism as potentially leading to a kind of reverse discrimination of men” (note 15, 35). It is unfortunate that Kano took my observation of “some other form of repression” (“*yokuatsu*” in psychoanalytic terms) in Japanese to be the equivalent of “oppression” (in terms of political violence) and (mis-)interprets it as a precaution against “reverse discrimination,” which I have kept a theoretical distance from. The alternative and binary opposition between “male” and “female” tends to repress other possible categories that are made invisible by the very alternative (as trans-sexuality, homosexuality, and queer studies have typically, if not exhaustively shown). This preemptive exclusion of the virtual third party from consideration clearly reveals Kano’s dichotomized thinking. She thus misses the danger that I was trying to indicate as a theoretical blind-spot (in an anatomical sense) which, in my opinion, should not be overlooked.

In a declaration during her talk, which I quoted in my review, Chino made it clear that the gendered point of view does not aim at adding one more dimension to the hierarchy of the discipline of art history but rather invalidates the hierarchy itself. As far as I presume, this is an intentional avoidance, on Chino’s part, of hegemonic dichotomy—

a clever avoidance that I much appreciate. If an alternative means a solution for the replacement of mutually exclusive choices, it follows that Chino was intending to invalidate such alternative thinking so as to “deconstruct” or undermine the initial dichotomy itself. Is there, then, any discrepancy between Chino’s original statement and that of those who try to defend her by proposing that she intended to establish “an alternative art history”? I have already posed this crucial question to Wakakuwa Midori when she criticized me in her “defense” of Chino. I have to again ask Kano the same question, which has remained unanswered until now (and of which I myself do not yet have any definitive answer).

As Chino declared, it may be said that the discipline of art history is, to a certain extent, mainly based on a “set of value judgments made by a portion of heterosexual men” relatively small in number and occupying privileged positions (though one should not overlook the fact that some homosexual men and heterosexual or homosexual women have been and still are involved in the consolidation of the discipline).² For my part, I have been questioning the very mechanism and dynamics of canon formation, which has made the partial judgment of the Western male dominant and seemingly universal. However, it is pure logic that even the feminist contestation against male domination is not free of the power mechanisms of jurisdiction. And it would be superfluous to cite the names of Walter Benjamin or Pierre Bourdieu in stating that the accomplishments of a symbolic revolution consists in the repressive effacing of the historical discontinuity that it initiates (I will return to this later).

En passant, I have to repeat that the Japanese term “*iseiai-dansei*” that Chino used as a ready-made translation of “heterosexual male” is more than misleading. From a feminist point of view, with which even many non-feminists willingly concur, male domination in the Japanese social and legal system even nowadays (especially through the family registry system) can hardly be described as a form of *iseiai*, or “heterosexual love,” but must be defined as a form of discrimination and female subordination. One must also add that academic debates continue to question whether the notion of “love” was alien to the East Asian cultural sphere until the Westernization of the late-nineteenth century. In recent years many studies have elucidated the complex process of cultural confrontations and painful adaptations. Among them, I have the pleasure of counting Kano’s *Acting like a Woman in Modern Japan: Theatre, Gender and Nationalism* (2001), which I greatly admire. This being said, it must be emphasized that to use the term “*iseiai-dansei*” is uselessly condescending and flatters non-gender-conscious Japanese males (like me).

There is no denying that I am counted as being among the “anti-feminist male art historians,” yet it is rather frustrating that a member of the Image and Gender Research Association (Imēji to Gendā Kenkyūkai) would be indexed as being anti-feminist. It is true that not only my critical stance toward representatives of the so-called “Society for the Creation of A New History Textbook” (Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru Kai),”

but also my frontal opposition to Sino-centric Japanese scholarship, as well as to museum curatorial policy (which finds it to be its mission to worship the “Fine Arts”) were not integrated in the review in question.³ And yet, a quick look would be enough to see that my review as a whole was not solely aimed at criticizing feminist approaches. Rather, it questions the social recognition of the entity called “art,” and is mainly comprised of a critical assessment of the discipline of art history (without excluding feminist approaches).

I cannot be but pleased that I am classified among those who uncomfortably remain in the camp of conventional or “normal art history” (to use Griselda Pollock’s terminology), to which I believed myself to be one of its most outspoken opponents. As gender studies, among other approaches, has already made clear, “normal art history” is not at all normal, but highly arbitrary and partial, and I am of the opinion that the underlying political mechanism of “normalization” must be revealed. Accordingly, the mechanism of identifying my review as a product of “normal art history” could also be questioned.

The inclusion of certain artifacts and their creators in the realm of “Fine Arts” is inevitably accompanied by, as a side effect, the exclusion and disqualification of certain others art forms, named “lesser” or “applied arts.” Similarly, the exclusive admission of the “male” resulted in the categorical exclusion of the “female.” The mechanism of such eliminations advances hand in hand with the official recognition of an authorized discourse of Art History as an institution. The personal judgment of each researcher is replaced in this process by an increasing anonymity in the academic and professional community. Everyone’s voice is “sublimated” into an abstract and collective voice, which belongs to nobody but masquerades as “universal criteria” and begins to circulate as an official value judgment to be transmitted to posterity through compulsory education and other ideological means. Here, in brief, is the process of contagion by which “normal art history,” among others, has been contaminated.

This being said, let me ask if feminist art history is (or art histories are) immune from the same contagion? Are feminist art historians exempt of repeating the same kind of error by putting all that they criticize into the category of “normal art history,” separating the world into two camps: feminists and those who are not? And in the last instance, who is authorized to legitimize the authenticity of this categorical demarcation, which no more contributes to invalidate than helps consolidate the male domination?⁴

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Notes

1. This refers to a text that Chino Kaori distributed at the symposium with the title “The Significance of Gender Studies in the Japanese Discourse on Fine Art” (Nihon no bijutsushi gensetsu ni okeru gendā kenkyū no jūyōsei), which was later reproduced in *Aida* 29 (May 1998): 3, together with Wakakuwa Midori’s critique of me (2-8).

2. Ibid.

3. My criticism of Tanaki Hidemichi appears in my review of Mabuchi Akiko’s book *Illusory Japan* (Gensō no Nihon, 1997), in *Tosho Shinbun* (11 October 1997). “Japonisme: Illusional Japan” (Japonismu: Gensō no Nihon), my objection to Kitahara Megumi’s critique appears in *Impation*, no. 112 (February 1999), 170-73. My critique of Kanō Hirosachi appears in my review “Is the<Edo Period the Edo Period>?: A Small Note on the Gender Debate in Art History—On the Relationship Between the Freedom of Breaking the Rules and the Playground that Allows the Breaking” (<Edo jidai wa Edo jidai>ka? Rūru yaburi no juyū to sore o hoshō suru dohyō tonō kankei ni tsuite—bijutushi jendā ronsō no yoha heno sasayakana tekiyō) in *Tosho Shinbun* (1 April 2000). (<Edo jidai wa Edo jidai> is a citation of the title

of Kanō Hirosachi’s critique of Chino Kaori, published in *Bijutsu Forum* 21, vol. 1 [Kyoto: Daigo Shobō 2000].) My critique of Ogawa Hiromitsu appears in my paper “The Invention of a Discipline and Its Social Background” (paper written in English, prepared at the request of a British editor after the international symposium “Representing Asia in Museums,” organized by the British Museum and the Museum of Mankind in March 2000, publication forthcoming). See also my paper “Use and Abuse of Images in Japanese History Textbooks and the History Textbook Controversy 2000-2001,” originally delivered at the symposium *Historical Consciousness, Historiography, and Modern Japanese Values* (30 October-3 November 2002, Banff Center, Alberta, Canada), ed. James Baxter and published by the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2006, pp. 19-38. Another updated paper on the issue was presented as “Beyond the Political Abuse of the History Textbook: Visual Literacy Issues in the History Textbook Controversy 2000-2001,” at the Nordic Association of Japanese and Korean Studies (NAJAKS), 23 August 2003, publication forthcoming.

4. After the publication of *Women?*

Gender? Beauty? (Onna? Jendā? Bi?, 1999), I sent a reply to Chino Kaori in response to her critique. It was a private letter, as I did not have the opportunity to express my opinion in public sphere on equal footing. She immediately sent me a private letter with a sincere and reasonable response. I thought, if she would agree, that our exchange was worth publishing, but never imagined that this would become impossible due to her untimely death. Because I am left without authorization to make our exchange public, I have to refrain from touching upon her letter, which remains among my most precious memories of this distinguished and courageous scholar. Let me add, for the readers’ reference, that my obituary for Chino Kaori, “Saigo no tegami, Chino Kaori sama e,” was published in *Aida*, no. 82 (20 October 2002), 11-13.

Let me take this opportunity to express my deep regret at the passing of Wakakuwa Midori, initiator of this series of debates on feminism and art history, of which the present text is a consequence. Professor Wakakuwa’s sudden disappearance is an irremediable loss to us all.

(Shigemi Inaga, November 19, 2007)