*Feminist art groups come out of a necessity, and for many art is only the starting point for their activities.* Charlotte Jansen *talks to the new generation of Guerrilla Girls in Japan, South Africa, the* UK *and the* US *to find out how women are working together to build a whole new ecosystem guided by feminine energy. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote: "The point is not for women simply to take power out of men's hands, since that wouldn't change anything about the world. It's a question precisely of destroying that notion of power."*

## The New Female

# Front

I sat down with Yoshiko Shimada in Ueno Park, Tokyo. Shimada was perhaps the first Japanese artist to admit to being feminist. I say "admit" because feminism in Japan is still very much the "f-word", jealously guarded by a secretive few stalwarts. "You seldom hear the word 'feminism' these days in Japan," she tells me. "And, by the way, there is no Japanese word for feminism." (Indeed, I tried talking to a male Japanese friend about feminism, and he thought it was a kind of food.)

Shimada went to Scripps, a women's college in California, "the best decision of my life," she says. When she returned to Japan in the mid-1980s, inspired by her American women professors, she began to make work about the role of Japanese women in the Second World War, and later to tackle entrenched attitudes to sex work and Japan's "comfort women"—women who were forced to become sexual slaves by the Imperial Japanese Army in occupied territories during the war.

In February 2016, Shimada exhibited her video *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman* (2012) at the Youkobo Art Space, Tokyo. It was part of a rare exhibition that publicly declared itself as feminist—featuring artists from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Australia. Also in the show were works by a new feminist coalition, Tomorrow Girls Troop, a thirty-strong group of women in their twenties and thirties, based all over Japan, as well as in Korea and the US, founded in spring 2015 by Midori Ozaki (not her real name)—a Japanese artist now based in Los Angeles. They go by pseudonyms to avoid being trolled and remain "anonymous to misogynists". The Guerrilla Girls, Ozaki says, inspired their group anonymity, and it helps. Shimada's words still echo in my mind when I meet two members of Tomorrow Girls Troop in a Shibuya café a few days later. "I'm really trying to avoid this idea that feminism is an imported idea, another thing white people 'gave us'," says twenty-seven-year-old artist Natsu Kawasaki (also not her real name). She joined the Tomorrow Girls Troop collective in August 2015.

The group began on Facebook, and they still use the social media platform to discuss issues, share information and plan their projects, such as the installation they presented at Youkobo, made up of posters, placards and videos created as part of a campaign to allow married couples the right to keep their individual surnames. A court denied the motion to amend the legislation in December 2015—which was discouraging, but at times of disappointment the support of the group becomes vital.

Tomorrow Girls Troop isn't an orthodox artist group as they prioritize their aims as activists over their art. Artist members consult with other members who are experts in politics and academia, to help them create informed visual materials for lobbying government, raising awareness and encouraging other women—and men—to take an interest. When we speak, Ozaki agrees that the feminist movement in Japan has been schismatic—something that has prevented it from having an enduring impact. With Tomorrow Girls Troop, she tells me, she wanted to "create a wave, so that the younger generation could change the idea of feminism and its effectiveness in Japan". Though they operate underground day-to-day, they come out onto the streets at tactical moments: currently, they're working towards an event that will take place in early 2017 in the form of an exhibition at 331 Chiyoda Gallery, Tokyo, and a public campaign to change a hundred-year-old law on sexual assault.

In South Africa, all-female art collective iQhiya formed out of a need to encourage and empower one another as young black women working in the arts in Johannesburg and Cape Town. "We formed the collective because as female artists we felt marginalized. So we felt the need to create a safe space amongst ourselves where we could support each other and be able to be heard and have a voice." They didn't expect that the force of their presence as a group would bring them more attention, but

**Opposite page:** Go! Push Pops, Bushwick, Brooklyn, NY, 2014
**This page:** Go! Push Pops, *Push Palmistry*, 2014, ritual performance at Body Actualized Center, Bushwick Open Studios, Bushwick, Brooklyn, NY

the arts scene began to take notice and they presented their first solo exhibition as a collective in 2016.

Each of the eleven members already had an individual practice, but they now come together to make collaborative works inspired by the issues that unite them as a group. This demands they approach their artistic ideas in a new way, too. "We have a system where everybody's opinion and voice is heard and explored in every project we do. We are multidisciplinary, working with a variety of means such as sculpture, painting, video, photography, performance, printmaking and new media. We mostly collaborate as a group but we don't like to limit ourselves. We are very flexible in how we work." By placing a stress on community, iQhiya have created their own place in the local art scene which doesn't conform to established hierarchies.

In the USA, the Guerrilla Girls exploded the problems facing female-identified and minority artists in the art world. Go! Push Pops, a "transnational, queer, radical feminist collective" based in New York city, led by Elisa Garcia de la Huerta and Katie Cercone, are using their collective practice to redefine existing value systems relating to art and gender. They would like to do away with binaries altogether and establish something more like a tribe. "We are gender-queer shape-shifters and trickers ushering in the new paradigm and fighting at the frontlines of an urban spiritual renaissance," they explain. "Challenging the art world's hyper-commodification of and fetishistic relationship to Otherness, we trace our work down through the lineages of shamanism, witchcraft, yoga, ayurveda, hip hop and other folk arts." This kind of terminology, combined with the group's freewheeling vibe, means Go! Push Pops are going to elicit more than raised eyebrows from some. How do they avoid turning their collective into a clique? If the aim is to be more inclusive, couldn't their approach make people feel comfortable? "We like to think our work is grounded in love and friendship, and that the collaborative or performative space is a result of live energetic exchanges, spectacles, tricks, spins and kicks that push ourselves and our audience out of normal comfort zones.

"The practical and political part of this work is learning to articulate exactly what has been undervalued in society, arriving at a place where artists are paid a living wage for their vital work in concert with, rather than despite (or removed from), community. This also means acknowledging here in the West we are all capitalizing on a First World/Third World model that is greedy and exploitative. The paradigm shift calls for us all to live and thrive more simply, more sustainably. This entails recycling resources and creating a shared, alternative economy based in trust, stewardship of the earth, compassion and equity for all."

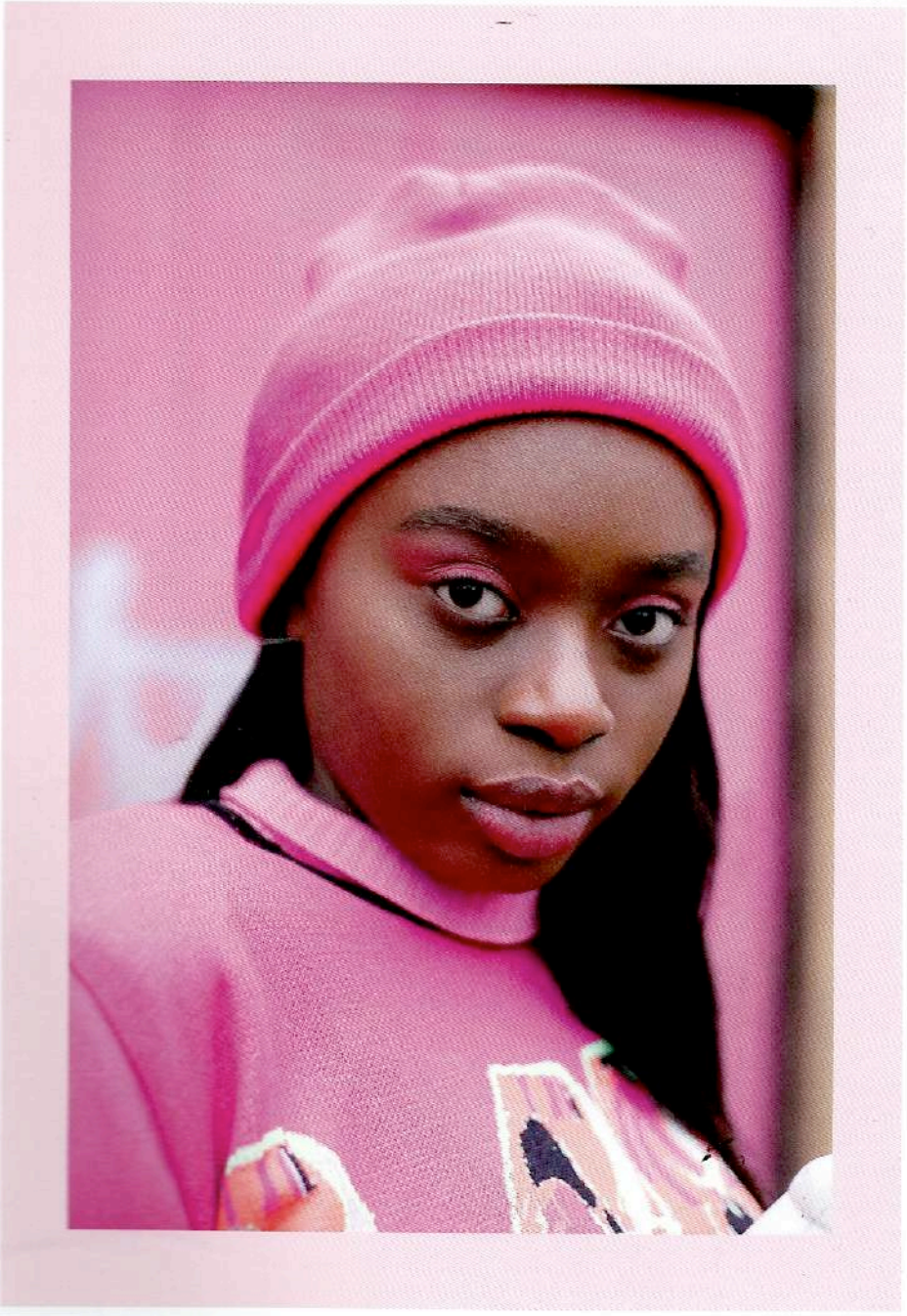
Unlike many American feminist artists working now, Go! Push Pops aren't concerned with fighting censorship or legislation. Loosely associated with the Goddess feminist movement (which began to gain popularity in the post-war US), the collective's ideas might be too radical at face value for most, but their vision is ultimately to build a community that doesn't simply repeat the same power dynamics that govern the patriarchy. I think again of de Beauvoir—it isn't simply about sticking it to the Man. "Our sacred nipples have recently been the source of a serious neo-witch hunt on social media, and our lesbian gangsta erotica 'Push Porn' has been censored from Etsy and YouTube. Even so, we ultimately feel the high-stakes battleground of the female body (and the patriarchal paradigm yoking it to shame, censorship and control) is not the essence of our work. We'd rather respond to prehistoric times in which gender-blending queer bodies and female bodies were oracles, leaders—keepers of the wise ways."

Already working outside the conventional art world means that the art of these feminist collectives also leans towards the experimental, experiential and non-commercial. Performance

*iQhiya, The Portrait*, performance at the Old Pass Office, Langa, 2016


Tomorrow Girls Troop, spring 2016

## "Our voice is female and is often of colour and of faith"



has a prominent place in the practice of feminist artists, and it continues to be an effective tool today. Using bodies as a political strategy, the possibilities of the medium have been extended by the internet—Tumblr, Facebook and Instagram allow self-representational collectives to reach wider audiences. The artists of iQhiya use performance to address their explicit demand for recognition and visibility in the art scene. Their group performances give them a direct and very real presence: *Commute Part II* (2016) was a party, for which they dressed up in high heels and miniskirts, popped bottles and played Beyoncé, a comment not only on the way women are accused of inviting sexual harassment by dressing sexily in South Africa but on the racism prevalent in Cape Town, where black people are pushed to the peripheries. At the 2016 FNB Joburg Art Fair, they climbed ladders placed around the site, looking down at visitors from the rungs, a metaphor of both their personal and political positions as artists, an act of empowerment but also a critique of the unseen structures in the arts. "The piece was a reflection of the art scene itself—as we sat above with a bird's-eye view—and it was also a self-reflection on our own individual journeys in the art world."

A gallerist in Tokyo told me that one of the reasons people don't like feminist art is that it isn't fun. But for these groups, enjoyment and spontaneity are part of the artwork. "We rarely have the time or resources to iron out a perfectly choreographed performance, and this is certainly not where our power comes from," Go! Push Pops say. They have been planning a retreat in Jamaica with yoga and ayurvedic healing therapies; workshops are also an essential part of their practice. "Workshops are a way we connect with children, female-identified folks, queers, communities at risk and all sorts of communities outside of the art world. It's a way we bring our practice out of the white box and share it with people who might not feel they have the permission to create in a certain elite art-world context." This is something that resonates with the work of the other female art fronts I've spoken to. "We are routinely attacked for acting too black or not black enough, too white or not white enough, too sexy or not sexy enough, too gay or not gay enough, showing a sacred nipple and objectifying women; with knee-jerk cries of 'cultural appropriation' peppering the peanut gallery pot. We continue to make our work whether or not we are paid, appreciated, or understood," they tell me. "Any kind of response only validates the necessity for the work in this world."

In London, OOMK (One Of My Kind) are pushing for change in the discourse on feminism with a small-press zine of the same name.

OOMK, *Black Girls Love Pink*, concept and creative direction by Joy Matashi, photography by Holly Cato, styling by Peju Obasa, words by Alice Kemp-Habib

**"The practical and political part of this work is learning to articulate exactly what has been undervalued in society"**

OOMK, *Collecting Cuba*

Founded and run by Rose Nordin, Sofia Niazi and Heiba Lamara, who form part of a larger network of twenty young activists, writers, artists and thinkers, they are united by a common cause: to change the way people see Muslim women. In the West, this mission is particularly urgent. "Our particular interest in Muslim women stems from the constant belittling Islamophobia toward Muslim women in the media, which makes assumptions on their autonomy, freedom and humanity." They point out that "Muslim women are spoken about constantly" yet their voices are absent from the conversation.

Their initial area of interest was the self-publishing field. "We were interested in cataloguing the creative work of women from diverse backgrounds, with an emphasis on the work and activism of Muslim girls and women, as this is something we never saw in zines or magazines, and the feminist zine voice was very distinct and particular at this point." But their activities have since broadened and they now co-organize the DIY Cultures festival with Other Asias, run workshops, reading rooms, fairs and a design studio. "This is so important to the work we do because the act of self-publishing enables so much more in activism, skill sharing, self-education, etc." Leafing through pages of past issues of the zine, I come across articles on Islamic feminism, colonialism and museums, as well as suggestions about veil puns the media could use. "The dominant white male narrative is the neutral voice and thus implicitly the prioritized audience. The dominant white male narrative in society and in the arts is destructive to those it excludes," OOMK tell me in an email. "Our voice is female and is often of colour and of faith. It always comes back to subverting or challenging a dominant narrative, and creating a safe and supportive space for others to do so too."

In what has become my ultimate feminist manifesto, *Escape from "Oneself"*, Yoshiko Shimada writes: "oneself is connected to others in many different, conflicting and organic ways. I imagine this multi-directional and multi-layered way of connecting oneself to others and to society as the ideal of feminism, as opposed to the rigid, vertically structured social system. It may be different to what most people imagine as the feminist ideal." Autonomy and solidarity among women who share experiences, opinions and struggles is an important first step, but clearly, it can't end there. Connecting with others, who have different values and attitudes, will be the beginning of genuine change in the order of things; only then can we start to imagine a feminist utopia, as Go! Push Pups describe it: "a world without borders, without binaries, without war, without hate."