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# TIME IS A FEMINIST MEDIUM: A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

*The shock of form-breaking newness, the familiarity of ancient patterns of knowledge: colliding temporalities animate feminist artworks by the visual artist CHITRA GANESH, the writer-storyteller ADITI SRIRAM, and the spoken-word poet KELLY TSAI. Time itself serves as a malleable, expressive medium for these artists, whose wide-ranging and globally lauded feminisms uphold an ethos of art-as-advocacy. GANESH's oversized installation *The Eyes of Time* (2014), for example, features a three-breasted, clock-faced, six-armed goddess spread over a museum wall, counterposing the Hindu deity Kali's cycles of creative-destructive energy against the impersonal time of industrial production (Fig. 1). SRIRAM's collaborative performance piece *The Girl with the Sideways Bun* (2013) celebrates the transgressiveness of a village girl's love for a god through playful alternations between contemporary spoken English and classical Tamil lyrics (Fig. 2). In TSAI's *Say You Heard My Echo* (2012), a *New York City* play-poem blending the words of female survivors of 9/11 with the speech of three female saints, lived history and pre-modern myth conjoin in a feminist vision of safety and solidarity (Fig. 3).<sup>1</sup> Each work combines the steeliness of a manifesto with the elasticity of a dialogue, and it is this combination that shaped my conversation about creative process with the artists at New York University's Asian/Pacific/American Institute in December 2016. As practitioners of complex feminist aesthetics, GANESH, TSAI, and SRIRAM aspire to untrammel human authenticity from*

constraining cultural categories. Their oeuvres variously reveal the “beauty, dread, power” that James Baldwin, in his 1949 writings about literary and political truths, deemed art’s highest calling.<sup>2</sup> Channeling Baldwin’s famed objections to the conventions of protest art, KELLY TSAI voices a collective credo: “We are whole, real, important, and relevant, not in relationship to, but just in essence as ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>

What are the aesthetic manifestations, and the affective registers, of that essence? Chitra Ganesh’s figurations of dismembered or monstrous bodies explore the corporeal-material basis of identity. Her paintings, self-portraits, digital collages, and multimedia installations engage the legacies of Louise Bourgeois, Cindy Sherman, and the Indian comics called *Amar Chitra Katha*.<sup>4</sup> Ganesh



**Figure 1.**

Chitra Ganesh, detail from *Eyes of Time* (2014). Mixed-media wall mural, 4.5 × 12 m. Installed at Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum, 2014-2015. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco.



**Figure 2.**  
*Urban Harikatha performance still. Left to right: Aparajit Sriram, Aditi Sriram, Shiv Subramaniam. Photo by Anusha Sriram, 2013.*

creates art about the scale of culture, locating composite mythologies and histories in the twenty-first-century plight of Bangladeshi garment-factory workers as well as in small mass-produced objects (toilet paper, barrettes, tinfoil). Her dialectical images reimagine and thereby politicize the terms of classical myth. In contrast, Aditi Sriram restores to sacred texts the contradictions and provocations that have been silenced over time. Sriram's *Urban Harikatha* troupe mobilizes the Hindu oral tradition of *harikatha* (or god stories) for contemporary secular audiences, breathing feminist life into classical as well as original texts. Radicalizing the achievements of C. Saraswati Bai



**Figure 3.**  
*Kelly Tsai, Say You Heard My Echo (2012). Left to right: YaliniDream, Kelly Tsai, Adeeba Rana. Photographed at Locating the Sacred Festival by Asian American Arts Alliance, HERE Arts Center, New York, NY, September 2012.*

and Padmasini Bai—early twentieth-century women who first stepped into *harikatha*'s male-dominated performance arenas—Sriram conjoins her storyteller's freedom to the improvisatory possibilities of Carnatic music's *ragam* and *talam*.<sup>5</sup> And Kelly Tsai's poetry, film, and solo and collaborative performances multiply the formal possibilities of feminist auto/biography and history. Tsai traces her spoken-word roots to the multicultural worlds of Chicago and New York City slam poetry clubs in the mid-1990s through the early 2000s. Early influences on her work and approach to the artform include Patricia Smith, Marc Kelly Smith, and Tyehimba Jess. She conveys compassion and critique by exploring the pulse of poetic forms in everyday life: folk songs and prayer, military chants, and protest songs.<sup>6</sup> Collage and assemblage, resonance and dissonance: these paired impulses, inherent in each artist's work, forge what Chitra Ganesh calls the vital link between "empathy and imagination."

Working across diverse media and genres, the three New York-based artists describe their practice in the language of time. Whether through the immediate time of political event (as in Ganesh's archival collaboration with Mariam Ghani, *Index of the Disappeared* [2004- ]), the finite time of biography (as in Tsai's mixed-media play, *Ai Weiwei: The Seed* [2014]) (Fig.4), or the immeasurable time of myth (as in Sriram's collaborative song-and-story cycle, *The Spirals of*



**Figure 4.**

Kelly Tsai, *Ai Weiwei: The Seed* (2014). Brooklyn Museum, *Art Off the Wall* series, July 2014.

*Shiva* [2015]), the artists anchor their feminism in explicitly temporal conceptions of bodies and objects, violence and beauty.<sup>7</sup> Their art finds focal points in the uneasy, mutually constitutive boundaries between tradition and invention. And if such boundaries are a mainstay of any avant-garde, then they hold especial potency for the utopian ambitions of feminist artists working toward an aesthetics of equality. Each artist's career, and her commitments to multiple communities, affirm the enduring constancy of what the artist-activist Sabra Moore writes about feminist art in 1970: "We came together because we needed each other, and we created forms, theories, organizations, shows, and actions out of that need."<sup>8</sup>

The porous boundary where tradition meets invention accrues meaning through the artists' manipulations of genre and history. That boundary can be conjured through language, when, for example, Sriram rewrites a sacred text into feminist discourse. The ancient-contemporary tenor of Urban Harikatha's script for "Goddess Devi" brings out a fruitful tension among manifold aspects of the tiger-riding Hindu deity Durga, whom Sriram celebrates "as a demon slayer, as a life-giver, as a strategist . . . as a presidential candidate." Equally, lines between tradition and invention can be powerfully embodied, literalized in object form. For *The Awakening* (2004), Ganesh's self-portrait as the dying Rani of Jhansi, the artist fashioned body armor from foil, wire, and cardboard to signal the improvised strengths of

a nineteenth-century Indian warrior woman battling British forces (Fig. 5).<sup>9</sup> Tsai bursts through linguistic, psychological, and material boundaries in her 2013 spoken-word ensemble 360-degree short film, *#SelfCentered*, which features four female performers tearing off identical jumpsuits and duct-tape gags, wrestling themselves free of robotic



**Figure 5.** Chitra Ganesh, *The Awakening* (2004). Digital print, 15 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 6.**

*Shruti Parekh, #SelfCentered (2013). 360-degree video promo still.*

captors to imagine a new world run by “5’2” tattooed Asian females” (Fig. 6). Such artforms rupture time to open new spaces for feminist articulation, speaking with a self-assurance that never hollows itself into irony.

Self-conscious acts of rupture within all three oeuvres point to a desire to work through the forms of cultural memory. I use the phrase “work through” in a dual sense, invoking a doubled relationship to time: it means to negotiate a process as well as to inhabit a perspective. This working-through produces celebratory, subversive investigations of remembering and forgetting. It connects Ganesh, Sriram, and Tsai to an array of contemporary artists whose poetry, object-oriented artworks, or music are similarly marked by deliberate temporal heterogeneity: Mona Hatoum, the installation artist and sculptor envisioning pain in modes at once surrealist and minimalist; Simone Leigh, whose ceramic, fiber, stone, and steel objects embody history’s traumas through organic forms; T. M. Krishna, the innovative classical musician who liberates Carnatic music from upper-caste enclaves to find a new creative foundation for it in South

Indian slums; and Dominique Christina, the slam-poet and author-activist who gives language to bodies and psyches brutalized by history.

In the conversation that follows, Chitra Ganesh, Aditi Sriram, and Kelly Tsai speak about their authoritative temporalizations of forms and media. They offer a feminism that preserves women's art and experiences while simultaneously refusing certain longstanding modes of the feminine. And the confluent impulses of their art—whether in response to a politically urgent *now* or in an embrace of what is ahistorical or antihistorical—speak most profoundly as they measure feminism's transformative effects over time.

—Urmila Seshagiri

**US/ Each of you practices storytelling, and I'd like to start by talking about how your creative priorities have evolved. What are the terms of your art?**

**AS/** I'm interested in an oral form called *harikatha*. In Sanskrit, *Hari* is Vishnu, or god in a broader sense, and *katha* is story. So *harikatha* were typically mythological stories about the Hindu gods, told during very moving three-hour long performances with scripture, folktales, music. The narrator decides what should be sung and what should be told, what the audience should hear as a refrain—a word or a musical phrase—and what morals or messages to leave the audience with. This ancient form of storytelling was done to spread the stories, but also to inculcate a certain sense of awe for the culture. My questions in the twenty-first century are: What can we do with these cultures or these codes? How could we subvert them? And in contrast with my written work, *harikatha* allows me to ask: How does text work as song, as something

you transmit orally and receive in your ears, rather than as a page you can refer back to? And could that evolve that into a legitimately collaborative project?

My initial curiosity about freedom of the imagination evolved into Urban Harikatha, which I started in 2013 with my collaborator Shiv Subramaniam. My stories have to stay simple, so that you can follow what I'm trying to get across to you; but they're not conveying specific morals or messages, so you're still deciding for yourself how you feel. I work with the ambiguities in a story through a very specific, controlled method. One part will be sung in a particular *ragam* to express a mood; one part will be recited in English because it's a visual I don't know how to capture in Sanskrit, or that you may not catch because you don't know Sanskrit. My artistic goal is to open all the senses and invite you to listen, picture things, recognize things. It aims at interdisciplinary senses through intersensory disciplines.



CG/ I was interested in what you were saying, Aditi, about using narrative frameworks in order to suggest new meanings and ways of thinking about the social, of thinking together as artists about femininity, feminism, ethics, humanity.

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***I make the kind of work I want to see: I tell stories that are either absent or aggressively suppressed in a dominant discourse.***

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The anchor of my work is in drawing and painting, with a basis in figuration. I bring to light certain kinds of narratives and representations that we don't actually see. I make the kind of work *I* want to see: I tell stories that are either absent or aggressively suppressed in a dominant discourse. That could involve something happening in our current geopolitical moment. It could also break open an archive or canon of myth to think about how one can intervene in those stories. It could also, in regard to genres like myth and fantasy, allow us to think beyond the subjectivities, political positions, or conditions that we might feel ourselves confined by in material reality, everyday life.

I work across form, so that includes comics and large-scale monumental drawings that are done directly on the wall and that are ephemeral. It includes lots of work that integrates image and text. I also write as part of my

practice. I do site-specific work in galleries in the U.S. and in India, and the absence of white bodies and the absence of men from my work creates a distinction around what people see.

Disciplines like literature, semiotics, and social theory inform my work. So does my own involvement in a number of very rich and diverse—sometimes overlapping, sometimes distinct—artistic and political communities in New York, such as a vibrant South Asian progressive political community, a community of feminist artists, of brown and black artists, and a queer community. My work also includes collaborations with other artists and writers—Christopher Myers, Simone Leigh, Dhruvi Acharya, Mariam Ghani—and those collaborations arise organically from similar points of view about what stories need to be told, what's missing in the world, what we could contribute.

KT/ I am a writer, performer, poet, and director based here in Brooklyn. My creative beginnings came through spoken word, which I got into because I had a high school English teacher who used to sneak us into the bars in Chicago to watch the original poetry slams happen. Poetry slam actually started in Chicago at this spot called the Get Me High Lounge in Wicker Park.<sup>10</sup> Spoken word at that time was very much a people's movement and was very populist-driven, but those weren't the words that were used to describe it, because it wasn't an academic thing. There were a lot of influences you could see: from stand-up comedy to performance art to jazz,

to the black arts movement, to what was happening in hip hop at that time, to punk, to folk—all of these different cultures on this stage. And it was a space for personal narrative, in a time before the Internet and social media.

At that time, Chicago was not a very commercial environment. There was value in the idea of working hard, creating your voice, and just coming back and trying to make it better than it was the week before, and sharing that with the people in the room with you. But in New York, there were very different things happening, since the Nuyorican [Poets Café] was founded in the '80s; and then by the '90s, with the early tide of hip-hop artists and what was happening at the Nuyorican and other spaces, there was a more commercial emphasis, in terms of publishers, TV people, music people, coming and scooping people out of a scene.<sup>11</sup> So I came up in a pre-commercial environment—a pre-YouTube time period and also a pre-HBO Def Poetry time period<sup>12</sup>—and then I saw a more commercial environment, and then saw that turn into what's happening across all the worlds of art in terms of a self-driven entrepreneurship that's being driven by online culture. Because spoken word doesn't really live in venues anymore. It lives online. Technology's very exciting to me, and something that, I think, touches on the pulse of that early ethos of populism around spoken word, because it's about how we connect with people in a different way: how do we try to connect what's inside of me to something inside of you?

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*Technology's very exciting to me, and something that [...] touches on the pulse of that early ethos of populism around spoken word, because it's about how we connect with people in a different way.*

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**CG/** The kinds of forces that you talk about it are definitely at play in visual art because it's object-oriented, and there is a sector of the field that is highly commodity-oriented and runs in a way that is not that different from a luxury goods consumption format. Artists should be able to support themselves through their work, but I think those other factors make a difference, and how people think about money or fame would affect a scene.

**KT/** Absolutely. What you're also talking about, Chitra, is that poetry's one of the most native things to all human beings, and it's really been taken from people and put in this hierarchy of “This is poetry, this isn't poetry.” I'm interested in a functional poetry that's happening in people's lives all the time. And I'm not saying commercialism versus non-commercialism. What I am saying is, it takes a certain kind of level of sophistication to be able to keep your spiritual self intact and your cultural self intact, in addition to doing all of these fairly complex functions around commerce and marketing and branding and being able to talk to people. You have to come to the table and listen for the words and try

to work with the words, touch the words, and see what's there.

**US/** *These opening remarks suggest that your artforms respond to a primal creative need. How does that that primacy, that authenticity, play out in specific works of art?*

**AS/** There are certain stories—classic, timeless stories—that no matter how many times you tell them are still as rich, as promising, as energized as the first time you heard them. In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy has a passage about two main characters meeting in the forest where a *kathakali* performance is taking place. This dance-drama is reenacting the epic *The Mahabharata*, and Roy describes how wherever you enter the story, it's exciting.<sup>13</sup> No matter how many times you've heard that the kingdom is lost, that the heroes are in exile and almost going to die, and that they're waging war, you just become a part of that, and you live it again and it's still wonderful.

I've seen this happen with Vishaka Hari, the woman whose *harikatha* performances I followed in Chennai, and we try to do it in our own storytellings.<sup>14</sup> We'll start telling a classic story, or Shiv will sing a well-known song, and the whole audience sighs collectively, or titters, to say, "We're going to hear that story we all love!" It's so native. It starts from sitting around in the most casual, comfortable settings. And you start to disorient from that a little, to bring out nuances you didn't even know you were thinking about, and suddenly

everyone is listening and wants to share the experience, and then that becomes a performance. It reminds me of *The Moth*, where story slam began and is now a huge podcast network.<sup>15</sup>

But we are also throwing familiar stories back at our audiences, in an untraditional setting such as a club rather than a temple, and we're trying to change how we frame the story: who's a good guy and who's a bad guy.

**US/** *Your performing group is called Urban Harikatha, and this seems to be the right moment to explain why it is "urban," in contrast with more traditional forms of harikatha. Does this influence how you rearrange or reframe your stories?*

**AS/** We wanted to be conscious of the fact that we were not doing what had been done before. We were not reciting in Indian languages. We're in New York or Chicago, we're in a bar drinking alcohol, and we're not invoking morals to remind a traditional audience, "Yes, this is why I must worship and love God. I've been to the temple, I've been cleansed." But rather than disrespect an ancient tradition that lives in hallowed spaces in India, we wanted to challenge some listeners who have assumptions about *harikatha*. Shiv and I come up with original material, and the audience may not necessarily like or agree with it, or have heard this version before (Fig. 7).

We did a performance, *The Spirals of Shiva*, about one of the most contradictory Hindu



**Figure 7.**  
*Urban Harikatha promotional poster. Photo by Cherry Inthalangsy, 2015.*

gods. Shiva is violent, but he's also austere. He's stern, but he's an amazing lover; there are epic sex scenes with his wife that go on for years, and when they're interrupted, Shiva curses all of humanity because his orgasm wasn't completed. We told Shiva's story through the tales of how he treats five of his major devotees who have made sacrifices in order to worship or appease him, or to receive boons from him. We examined how this all-knowing, all-powerful androgynous personality is also impulsive and inconsistent. It wasn't a straightforward story about how to celebrate one of the three major Hindu deities, but rather about having to question why he is questionable himself.

**US/ Chitra, how does your art intervene in mythology?**

**CG/** In a lot of these grand narratives and epic myths, female characters serve a technical function. They're not necessarily protagonists in their own right, but there's a way female characters are used efficiently to move a story forward. This idea is something that I draw upon from epic Hindu and Greek myths, but there's a lot of it in popular and mainstream culture as well. These narrative techniques transcend different forms. How many detective shows open with the rape and murder of an underage girl?

In *The Ramayana*, Shurpanakha is a Rakshasi, which means she's a demoness. Part and parcel of being an embodied Rakshasi is that she's fat and dark. She disguises herself in an attempt to seduce one of the main protagonists, and when this ruse is discovered, he chops off her nose and her ears in anger.<sup>16</sup> This is in part what catalyzes the much larger narrative conflict. The fact that the violent mutilation of this woman is what pushes forward this entire juggernaut of conflict and story was interesting and disturbing to me. So I was thinking about how to reframe those subjectivities

that are marginalized, that have a function or functionality.<sup>17</sup>

I created a sculpture, a twenty-five-foot pair of panties that have these lace frills with an iconic look for a young girl's underwear that, at least in the '70s when I was growing up, were very popular. I took these and made them extremely monumental, and they had two crotches—so for a person who had three legs, just indicating the possibility of another body—and it was hanging from a tree, because in a lot of these stories the context is



**Figure 8.**

*Chitra Ganesh, Her Hanging Remains (2004). Dimensions variable. From Broken Spell, a two-part mixed media installation at Wave Hill, New York. Courtesy of the artist.*

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***If we're sitting [...] in the Bowery Poetry Club, performing harikatha, no one knows these songs or understands Sanskrit. So my story-telling needs to make that happen for you.***

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the jungle. There was a *kolam* at the bottom of the piece that kind of flew out of her crotch.<sup>18</sup> It was called *Her Hanging Remains*, and I combined different signifiers of things that are very everyday and related: the kind of labor or the kind of femininity they represent is automatically gendered (Fig. 8).

There are all these assumptions around what that sculpture means: like am I supposed to know some esoteric mythological thing to understand this? I thought a lot about what I had access to, and what is considered classical, and what is considered populist, and how much violence goes into making great art like the Taj Mahal or the Pyramids. Growing up, I learned Carnatic music and *Bharatanatyam* dance and then realized that this, in a way, is the pinnacle of perpetuating a caste-based violence.<sup>19</sup> For there are certain people who will never be able to access such artforms, other people who would never be able to enter a temple.

AS/ Exactly. As classic as the stories and mythology that we do may be, as traditional as that musical form is, it's barricaded from a large number of audiences. The Carnatic form has become a very elitist, upper-caste form in south India. So what we've also tried to do is

compose music within that genre, based on the texts we've written. We performed one *harikatha*, called *Story of a Ragam*, where rather than have it be story-based. . . .

CG/ The *ragam*, the scale, was a character?

AS/ The *ragam* was a character. It wasn't a story that had a protagonist or a message. We made up a story about the major scales, and how they came to be this family of modes. But hang on a second: the modes that we're using are familiar in only, say, eight out of fifty houses, or communities, in South India. And again, in New York, not everybody knows these forms. If we're sitting, as we did, in the Bowery Poetry Club, performing *harikatha*, no one knows these songs or understands Sanskrit. So my story-telling needs to make that happen for you.

US/ *So one of Urban Harikatha's goals is to make Carnatic music or Hindu mythology available to and meaningful for nontraditional audiences. Your writings and your performances seem to reach across caste boundaries, or languages, or other kinds of cultural difference, so that you're changing who can appreciate these artforms.*

CG/ You can create multiple layers of meaning, interpretation, and points of entry, whereby people can come in through the different moment in the story, which, as Aditi says, are always exciting, or through the different media, as Kelly has been describing. And it brings me back to this question of populism, which can be just as coded and censored as any other space if it's being controlled by people who shore up their power to align with certain hierarchies that are already in place. Within institutions, the idea of putting on art for "the people," unfortunately, can be condescending, a way of dumbing down what's happening, because otherwise the people won't be interested. Which is bullshit. The people actually have a lot of skill and power both to be affectively transformed by something, but also to analyze it. In storytelling or comics, there are certain forms that a lot of people feel they have access to. And I think part of all of our work, too, is providing that access.

KT/ Hearing you both speak reminds me, again, about those early days in the spoken word community, when *nobody* was coming from the same page. And you had no idea what was going to happen. You didn't know what

poems people were going to bring, you didn't know what was going on in their lives, you didn't know what they were drawing from. And this is true today. On a slam team, you can have an upper-middle-class white female doing a poem about eating disorders. A young black male talking about incarceration and police brutality. A young Latinx person who is talking about the experience of being undocumented and talking about immigration. More often than not, the tradition in spoken word and slam poetry is to draw directly from your own experiences. As much as it's about content and aesthetics, it's also about the spirit of why you come to the work (Fig. 9).

There was one poet I met after I had moved here to New York. He was working in fine dining, and had been hooked on drugs in such a bad way that he was sure he was going to OD pretty soon. But then a friend brought him the DVDs of [HBO's] Def Poetry. And he named for me, "I heard your poems. I heard Marty's poems. I heard Roger's poems."<sup>20</sup> And the next day, he went to the Nuyorican, and he started writing poems, . . . sorry, I'm getting weepy. He saw in it what I saw in it: that even though the people that I grew up watching,

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like Kent Foreman or Mama Maria McCray, didn't necessarily reflect my own experience, they were trying to understand something about themselves. And I saw how they put their language together in their own rhythm, their own vocabulary, their own sense. When you're talking about form, it's about your inner logic.

**CG/** And even if a thing seems esoteric, if it has an internal logic that is really strong, people will gravitate towards it.

**KT/** Yes, and people will feel what it is to have certain cadences, structures, rhythm patterns. I would be a different person if I hadn't seen hundreds, if not thousands, of poets over the years, taking in their lives. Poets from Shanghai to Nairobi, to Trinidad, to London, to Paris, to Vancouver, to San Francisco, to Albuquerque, to Boston, to Denver. It has taught me so much about language: the words, the idioms people use, the connective tissue between them. Through the strength of seeing that person, hearing that person, listening even to the literal rhythm of their city, you become a part of their world. We became a part of each other's worlds.

I love Daniel Goleman's books *Emotional Intelligence* and *Social Intelligence*, which talk about studies revealing that when people feel understood, their body temperatures start to come to the same temperature, their breathing patterns go to the same rhythm, and their heart rates modulate to each other.<sup>21</sup> That's very real: understanding is not solely

an intellectual process, or an emotional process.

**CG/** It's super embodied. And it's artist-as-translator, or medium.



**Figure 9.**  
*Kelly Tsai performing at Columbia University culture-SHOCK (2013). Courtesy of the artist.*



KT/ It's a physical process. When we listen to each other, we subtly mimic each other's faces—these ideas are in Goleman's books—and when we read language, our vocal cords actually make very subtle movements as though it were speech. Being immersed in environments where people are giving you all of that resonance from different parts of the world: no matter what exact forms my works take in the future, that spirit is always inside what I'm doing.

**US/ *Part of your art prioritizes self-expression, or fosters mutual understanding by vocalizing personal experiences. But you also create original characters, and perform collaboratively. And that may not necessarily line up with that inner logic of who you are, at that moment. What does it mean to adopt or inhabit different artistic personas?***

KT/ That's a good question that I've never talked about before. There is something to say, even as I drop into another voice, about the fact of each poem. I bring to life what is happening inside of that poem, and even if it's all technically Kelly, there are different shades of how it's being performed, and those even change depending on the audience that I'm performing for. And in my writing process for the ensemble pieces, which are more theatrically driven and character-based, I use a lot of what I've been talking about in terms of empathy and thinking about voice.

For *Say You Heard My Echo*, which was a spoken-word theater show about three Asian

American women in New York ten years after September 11, one character was an artist-activist, another was a soldier returning home, and the third was a librarian whose family was dealing with issues around surveillance and Islamophobia. Each one is from a different faith, and so we dealt with Mary Magdalene, Guan Yin, and Aisha. When I sat down to write those characters, I did ten twenty-page free-writes from the characters' perspectives, trying to listen for their language. What is the poetry they would write?

With that piece in particular I was interested in a larger question: how does poetry show up in people's everyday lives? For example, I was in Army ROTC for a year and a half, and you use cadence to keep your spirit up, to keep your air flowing, to know where the rest of your corps is—in front of you or behind you—to feel like you're a part of something when you're doing something difficult. Or protest chants, or activist chants. Or prayer, when you think about how certain metaphors can help us understand what's happening to us. You see where poetry is living in each person's life and in their culture, and also that there's a functional reason for it.

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***If you ask most people about poetry, they would probably say it's not a part of their lives, but it's everywhere.***

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CG/ And I feel like it sometimes happens when people aren't even realizing it. I was in South Africa last fall during the Fees Must Fall student protest movements, and many people who were more my age—say, between their early forties to early fifties—were surprised that college students knew the songs from the anti-Apartheid movement.<sup>22</sup> They just started singing them, even if parents hadn't talked about it, even if kids hadn't heard it on the radio. Somehow it was just transmitted. It's really powerful.

KT/ Yeah, you know it without knowing it. If you ask most people about poetry, they would probably say it's not a part of their lives, but it's everywhere.

US/ *It occurs to me that this is about creating cultural memory. You ensure that it's not falsified by a master narrative, or by religious morality, or by voices being silenced. And to this end, your work engages with the effects of shock or violence. There are several violent evocations in your work, Chitra, and there is endless brutality in the mythology that Urban Harikatha transmits, Aditi. And then in the collective memory of 9/11, of course, which is a launching point for many of Kelly's and Chitra's projects. Do you regard shock as a feminist idiom or technique?*

*Let me explain what drives my question. In July, I attended a massive exhibit titled Picasso: The Artist and His Muses at the Vancouver Art Gallery, which told the history of Picasso's artistic development*

*through his intimate involvements with six different women.<sup>23</sup> In room after room, you could see canvases and photographs of these "muses," these women—many of whom were also artists—who had nervous breakdowns or committed suicide or were discarded by Picasso. At the end of the exhibit, there was a tiny gallery housing an ancillary exhibit called Notes on the Nude, and it contained art by contemporary women artists such as Cindy Sherman and Nancy Spero. The accompanying exhibition text was a bland statement about "alternate readings of gender."<sup>24</sup> It was meant to suggest that the woman is not just Picasso's nude muse; she can be an artist in her own right.*

CG/ But only in the size of a room the size of a postage stamp.

US/ *Yes; the disproportion was extraordinary. And what I found outrageous was a warning sign at the entrance: "Please note: some of the artworks on view here contain explicit depictions of the female body" (Fig. 10). There had been, of course, no parallel warning about any of Picasso's equally explicit nudes.*

*So the idea persists: what Rebecca Schneider calls the "explosive literality" of women's bodies produces discomfort, anxiety, when its authors are women.<sup>25</sup> This is why I ask if you encounter certain kinds of resistance when your art is explicit or graphic.*

CG/ I think about the anthropologist Mary Douglas and her theories about matter being

Please note some  
of the artworks on  
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of the female body

**Figure 10.**  
*Exhibition text, Picasso: The Artist and His Muses. Vancouver Art Gallery, June 11–October 2, 2016. Photo by Urmila Seshagiri, 2016.*

out of place.<sup>26</sup> It's not a question of whether there is violence, but of the context in which we see it. There's an extraordinary amount of violence on television, in the news, but there's also an equal suppression of, say, not showing coffins on TV when we're having a war. Or living in certain kinds of extremely sanitized and protected environments when the rest of the world is dealing with blood and fecal matter on a daily basis. So when people were constantly shocked and felt my work was very violent, I was initially surprised—I'm just a person who grew up reading comics subculture, reading Anaïs Nin, and David Wojnarowicz, and looking at Courbet, and looking at Chinnamasta, these extremely sexual or violent images that inhabit lots of art and classical forms and nudes.

In my work—and I'm not alone in this—the body is a metaphor or a form onto which we

map society and social order and social structures. We see this in how the caste system is mapped out from the head to the feet. This is not an uncommon idea. For me, the violence is more symbolic, and is also connected to a psychic violence. Or the violence of erasure. Or either actual physical annihilation, or symbolic, representational annihilation.

**US/ Here's a deliberately problematic question: would you thus say that you don't try to disturb your viewer, or seek a tension between the sacred and the profane? I'm thinking of your 2011 work, *The Wipe*, which depicts an androgynous Ganesha-derived figure with a roll of toilet paper [laughter] (Fig. 11).**

**CG/** No, because Hinduism (and a lot of polytheisms or various Indigenous practices, syncretic practices) is about polymorphism. I feel like the idea of Devi is actually both singular and endlessly multipliable, and all of those different iterations are part of femininity. So yes, there's a very fair-skinned Saraswati on a glossy wall calendar that sits in our house, but there's also a ghoulish Kali that was on an equal plane.<sup>27</sup>

**AS/** Urban Harikatha hasn't dealt with too much "violence," per se. But we look at characters who break norms. One of our

best-received pieces, *The Girl with the Sideways Bun*, is about Andal, the daughter of a gardener, who composes love poetry to Vishnu and attains sainthood.<sup>28</sup> When we translate Andal's poetry for Urban Harikatha—because our medium is mostly English—the audience sees that Andal is intoxicated by Vishnu.<sup>29</sup>

**US/** *So the performance emphasizes her sensuality? It refuses to subordinate what is erotic to what is saintly.*

**AS/** In the story, the gardener picks flowers every day that Andal then threads together to make into a garland for the statue of Vishnu in the temple. And these are pure, sacred objects: you mustn't taint them with your touch or your body. But Andal secretly wears the garlands at home, and when they are then put on the deity, Andal has, in a sense, married Vishnu, because mutual garlanding is part of the Hindu wedding ritual. One day, the temple priest is outraged to see a hair on one of the garlands, and Andal's father rushes to take

back the garland and make a new one. Andal is punished, and terrified that the whole village will now know of her secret love. But when the new garland is about to be placed on the statue of Vishnu, there's a voice from the heavens: "That's the wrong garland. I want the first garland." The priest is forced to consent. A few days later, a strange glowing man—Vishnu—shows up at the gardener's house and says, "I'd like to marry your daughter." Andal's father, now, is forced to consent. Together, Andal and Vishnu step into the temple shrine, and disappear from human sight.



**Figure 11.**  
Chitra Ganesh, *The Wipe* (2011). 22 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist.

And so Andal is a goddess who began as a human with

very natural ambitions and feelings. (She is always depicted with her hair in a bun, and in our version, *The Story of the Sideways Bun*, we decided that since she was rushing to yank the garland off her head before her father saw it, a clump of her hair came untied, and she re-tied it so hastily that her bun ended up on the side of her head. [laughter])

When we look at some of the jarring human tendencies of these characters and how they become driving actions, *then* we can learn a lot about what these characters are actually doing, what they are saying. You were saying earlier, Kelly, that what stuck in your head from different cities and different poets had an earworm quality to it. We created a *harkatha* around Andal's "inappropriate" poetry, which has the same earworm quality, because that's what you want to go home and tell your friends or tell your parents about: Did you know this person was in love with that person, and that they cheated, or that they went to a war that was eighteen days long?

**CG/** Similarly, there are certain images that stick in one's head, and I think a lot of times they have to do with transgression. One that has stayed with me is the image of Bree Newsome, who climbed up the flagpole in South Carolina and physically removed the Confederate flag.<sup>30</sup> And it was just incredibly beautiful, and she looks like a superhero up there. And there's been a lot of art done about it. Another image that stayed with me from when I was really young was from Stephen King's *Carrie*.<sup>31</sup> The moment that Carrie

gets the pig's blood dumped on her head: she awakens. A lot of these moments are symbolic, like the fruit vendor whose livelihood was destroyed, which was part of the beginning of the Arab Spring.<sup>32</sup> There are certain kinds of violence or transgression that are often extraordinarily transformative, whether it's about the body or between spaces of power when people enter certain spaces they're not meant to be in.

**US/ Kelly, how does transgression work for you? Your art can balance confrontational qualities with very affirming humor. I'm thinking of your striking 360-degree ensemble film #SelfCentered, or your solo multidisciplinary performance piece White Men's Brains. But it can also go to a darker, more resistant zone, like the poem from your solo show, Formosa: "GIVE NO FUX BARBIE," which imagines a new doll:**

GIVE NO FUX BARBIE comes  
complete  
with fingers that can be positioned  
with the  
middle digit up, clothes that fit in five  
different  
sizes because her body changes, you  
know,  
and small vibrator that she carries in  
her military  
backpack whenever and wherever she  
goes.<sup>33</sup>

**KT/** All three of those works come from a creative place that's curious to ask, "Why

not?” I absolutely don’t sit down to think about what would be transgressive when I create. I just see concepts that are adhered to in larger culture like the centering of certain identities in mainstream media (“#selfcentered”), the pathological nature of colonialism and the historical erasure of its pathologies (*White Men’s Brains*), or the totally outdated idea of the Barbie doll (*Formosa*), and am curious why those ideas gained and maintained traction. What would the world look like if they didn’t? So often, our representations and recording of life fall short of its strangeness and beauty. In my work, I try to bring some of that back to life with a fresh perspective and humor.

In addition to my early influences in the spoken word community, I used to tour nationally with two feminist spoken-word hip-hop theater collectives that could have been seen as transgressive by the sheer fact that we were just being ourselves. Mango Tribe was an Asian American Pacific Islander women’s and genderqueer performance collective that focused a lot on issues of violence, from the interpersonal to the global. *We Got Issues!* was a young women’s hip-hop theater project that activated people in communities across the country to renegotiate their relationships with electoral politics and power, which also dealt at times with surviving violence.

In more recent years, I’ve performed at a number of Take Back the Night events on college campuses across the country.<sup>34</sup> I perform pieces, but then I also listen to the Speak

Outs, which invite survivors of violence to share their own stories in a confidential vigil environment. I don’t know if there’s a single person in the world who doesn’t have an intimate experience with violence that they’re not talking about. I’ve been very honored to help other people identify through art and voice and expression. You know, when they’ve said, “I didn’t realize that was what was happening to me until I heard your poem, and I didn’t know to call that rape, I didn’t know to call that abuse.” My goal’s not so much to make something catchy as much as to render a complex idea into a very simple language that can really resonate.

**CG/** And make that space through your art, through the way you construct the story and language.

**KT/** Absolutely. And to let people know that language can be your companion in this. No matter what you’ve been through, what people have told you in the past, language can be your companion through this difficulty. I performed for documentary filmmakers doing a piece about the repression of LGBTQ communities under Franco in Spain. The documentary [*Bones of Contention*, dir. Andrea Weiss (2017)] focuses on Federico García Lorca, who was killed under Franco, but also on the many survivors who were repressed and who are still alive today. So I wrote poems to honor Lorca, and the survivors, and the work that documentary filmmakers are doing to reclaim this history. It’s not just about reactivity: it’s how poetry can activate and help

touch this tremendous experience that they've had. In that space, I could use my poetry to help reflect back, to consolidate, to not only create a sense of memory, but to capture their sense of visionary projection as well.

The last instance I'll bring up was a program I participated in last year, the Police Empathy Training Project, which was about trying to expand the emotional intelligence base for police officers and those training to work in law enforcement. What kind of human being can sustain the level of trauma they see on a daily basis? The lieutenant facilitating the sessions, who had been involved in the NYPD hostage negotiation unit for twenty years, started to tell stories about how the vast majority of their actual work is talking down people from suicides. When people have locked themselves in a bathroom, or climbed to a rooftop, or the GW Bridge, these cops have to save their lives by helping them think, "What are your emotional resources?" And so I facilitated a creative writing exercise with them to imagine their perfect police academy. What would be involved to prepare them to serve people and handle what is an extremely emotionally damaging job? In those ways, the goals of my work are the spirit of empathy and listening, and trying to pare down the language enough to put something complex into a very simple entry point.

**US/** *Would you each speak, in conclusion, about your relationships to your audiences, your viewers, your patrons, your students? What you might want anybody who comes*

*in contact with your art, your artistry, to take away?*

**KT/** At a live performance, sometimes, you can see in someone's face that they felt something, that they felt transformed.

**CG/** That is amazing. . . . [laughter] It is amazing to actually feel that.

**KT/** I don't know if I could survive as an artist without having that feedback or touch, at least momentarily. In my early days of spoken word, when I would write, my editing process *was* the audience. It's the feeling of confidence, the feeling of presence, the feeling of clarity. So even though my artistic process is very different now, there is a certain element of connection that's always there for me.

**AS/** As a creator, I have to be accountable for my words, because I have a precious amount of time with you, my audience. Whether it's a story you've heard before or a story you've never heard before, whether it's the fact that I've made up why this woman has a bun on the side of her head, or the decision to sing at this moment in the story: I'm accountable. I'm accountable, and you are receptive, and I can gauge that. The second you look distracted, I might lose you. So I'm careful with paring down the story, telling it to you as simply as I can, because that is the most powerful way I can tell it to you. And you will feel the story's beauty because I have thought clearly about how I articulate this to you. And that is a joy.

**CG/** As a visual artist, it's very rare that you actually watch people reacting to your work, and if you are, you're almost like a voyeur. Ideally, that would be a sustained engagement, but even a momentary engagement with ten people is as important as millions of people listening to my work or watching. Kelly has talked, and you also, Aditi, have talked about cultivating empathy, and that link between empathy and imagination is very important. There's a reason that we all do what we do, that we work in the forms that we work in. To allow a space where someone can imagine something outside of the constraints in which we are living right now, is amazing.

It reminds me of teaching. I've been teaching since 1996, communicating age-old ideas anew. One of my mentors said to me, "Teaching is like planting a time bomb. You actually don't know when it will go off." It's the same way images or words get lodged in our heads, or in our systems, and the affective response could happen at some other time. One of my goals is to teach in very clear, distilled ways to allow people to reconsider something that they thought they understood. I feel like that's one thing. To provide a place where they really feel, even for a moment, that something outside this world is possible.

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/ **Notes** /

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<sup>1</sup> Ganesh's *The Eyes of Time* was a site-specific installation mounted at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum from December 12, 2014 to July 12, 2015. Sriram

and Shiv Subramaniam's *The Girl with the Sideways Bun* was part of Urban Harikatha's premiere performance at the Bowery Poetry Club in New York City in 2013. Tsai's *Say You Heard My Echo* had its first run at the HERE Theater in New York City from September 12-16, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," 1949, in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Tsai, email to the author, December 14, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> We can situate Ganesh's work in relation to the cultural and institutional genealogies traced in Maura Reilly, "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms," in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (London: Merrell, 2007), 14-45; Gabriele Schor, *The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Art from the 1970s in the SAMMLUNG VERBUND Collection, Vienna* (London: Prestel, 2016); and Nandini Chandra, *The Classic Popular Amar Chitra Katha, 1967-2007* (St Albans, UK: Motilal Books of India, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> V. Sriram offers a history of *harikatha* as an artform reserved for men: Brahmin women aspiring to be storytellers encountered "the teeth of great opposition to an upper caste woman taking to a performing artiste's career." *The Devadasi and the Saint: The Life and Times of Bangalore Nagarathamma* (Madras: EastWest Books, 2007), 35. On the related challenges that faced South Indian women classical musicians, see Indira Menon, *Madras Quartet: Women in Karnatak Music* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1999). Carnatic music is the dominant classical musical tradition of southern India, in which *ragam* refers to a scale or mode that determines melodic structure and *talam* refers to the rhythmic or metrical pattern of a musical composition.

<sup>6</sup> Among the histories of slam poetry that abound, three that are especially helpful for



contextualizing Tsai's techniques are Meta DuEwa Jones, "A Cave Canem Continuum or a Dark Room Resistance?: From Jazz Improvisation to Hip-Hop Stylization in Contemporary Black Poetry," in *The Muse Is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 167-208; Alix Olson, introduction to *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, ed. Alix Olson (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007), xi-xviii; and Susan B. A. Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> The website of Ganesh and Ghani's *Index of the Disappeared* describes the project as "both a physical archive of post-9/11 disappearances—detentions, deportations, renditions, redactions—and a platform for public dialogue around related issues. The Index also produces visual and poetic interventions that circulate fragments of the archive in the wider world." "Documents + Documentation," *Index of the Disappeared*, <http://kabal-reconstructions.net/disappeared/>. Tsai's *Ai Weiwei: The Seed*, performed on July 24, 2014 at the Brooklyn Museum, featured three performers and two musicians to tell the story of the Chinese dissident-artist's early years in New York through his own "found poems" as the text. See "Ai Weiwei in New York City: An Interview with Kelly Tsai," *Apogee*, July 22, 2014, <http://apogeejournal.org/2014/07/22/ai-weiwei-in-new-york-city-an-interview-with-kelly-tsai/>. Urban Harikatha's *The Spirals of Shiva* was first performed at the Kalapriya Center for Indian Performing Arts in Chicago on October 25, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Sabra Moore, *Openings: A Memoir from the Women's Art Movement, New York City 1970-1992* (New York: New Village Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *The Awakening* (2004), photograph. Ganesh's text reads, "I enact the Rani at the moment of her death, where her rebellion and failure collide."

<http://www.chitraganesh.com/photo3.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Maureen McLane offers a pithy history of Marc Smith and Wicker Park slam poets in "A Night at the Slam," in "Poetry and Mass Culture," special issue, *Chicago Review* 40, nos. 2 and 3 (1994): 157-63.

<sup>11</sup> The Nuyorican Poets Café began in 1973 as a literary salon in the East Village apartment of the poet Miguel Algarín. In 1980, what had become a large collective of poets, musicians, performers, and writers moved the Café into its present-day headquarters at 236 East Third Street. See Algarín's introductory essay "The Sidewalk of High Art," in *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*, ed. Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 3-28; and Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, *Words in Your Face: A Guided Tour through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> "Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry" aired on HBO from 2002 to 2007.

<sup>13</sup> "The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover's skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don't. . . . In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn't. And yet you want to know again." Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997), 218. *The Mahabharata* is a Hindu epic composed by the poet Vyasa in the fourth century AD; *kathakali* is a tradition of Indian dance-drama that originated in Kerala in the sixteenth century.

<sup>14</sup> Vishaka Hari (b. 1980) is a leading *harikatha* performer in the South Indian *katha kalakshepa* ["stories to pass time"] tradition. She performs

in Tamil as well as in English, and sings classical Carnatic music in multiple South Indian languages.

<sup>15</sup> *The Moth* was launched in New York City in 1997 by George Dawes Green and at the time of this writing has presented close to 20,000 stories to audiences around the world. Its organizing ambition is “true stories told live.” See Neil Gaiman, introduction to *The Moth: This is a True Story*, ed. Catherine Burns (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2014), 11-16; and Catherine Burns, introduction to *The Moth Presents: All These Wonders: True Stories about Facing the Unknown*, ed. Catherine Burns (New York: Crown Archetype, 2017), xv-xvii.

<sup>16</sup> In the Hindu epic *The Ramayana*, composed by the poet Valmiki in the fourth century BC, the hero Rama encounters the demoness Shurpanakha while he is exiled in the forest: “Rama was handsome, the *raksasa* woman was ugly, he was shapely and slim of waist, she misshapen and potbellied; his eyes were large, hers were beady, his hair was jet black, and hers the color of copper; he always said just the right thing and in a sweet voice, her words were sinister and her voice struck terror; he was young, attractive, and well mannered, she ill mannered, repellent, an old hag.” *The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India, Volume III: Aranyakanda*, trans. Sheldon I. Pollock, ed. Robert P. Goldman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 123.

<sup>17</sup> Ganesh is referencing her work *Hidden Trails* (2007), a triptych self-portrait in which she casts herself as the demoness Shurpanakha. She is also referring to *Tales of Amnesia* (2002), a twenty-one-print sequence that remakes panels of female figures from Amar Chitra Katha comics, and to *The Silhouette Returns* (2009), a large-scale wall installation for MoMA PS1 in New York City that uses paint, sequins, and cut-paper to reimagine a murdered lesbian character from Alan Moore’s 1987 graphic novel *The Watchmen*.

<sup>18</sup> The *kolam* is a South Indian Hindu women’s domestic artform that consists of geometric patterns drawn in rice flour by hand on the ground, usually in front of a household or a religious shrine.

<sup>19</sup> An ancient form of classical Indian dance, *Bharatanatyam*, originated in Tamil Nadu in the first century AD.

<sup>20</sup> Marty McConnell and Roger Bonair-Agard are influential slam poets and activists who appeared on Def Poetry Jam.

<sup>21</sup> See Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam Books, 2007), and *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> The Fees Must Fall movement was a series of student-led protests against proposed tuition increases across South African universities in 2015.

<sup>23</sup> *Picasso: The Artist and His Muses*, Vancouver Art Gallery, June 11–October 2, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> The six contemporary women artists chosen “as a counterpoint to the Picasso exhibit” were Nancy Spero, Betty Goodwin, Cindy Sherman, Mina Totino, Rineke Dijkstra, and Kate Craig. The curatorial essay framing their works unwittingly contributed to women artists’ erasure from art history in its outdated narrative of modernism: “Throughout the period of art history referred to as Modernism, women have typically been represented as a nude subject, their bodies serving as the territory across which mostly male artists have developed their avant-garde approaches.” “Notes on the Nude,” exhibition text, Vancouver Art Gallery. The pseudofeminist antechamber with women’s art, accompanied by a warning note about offensive matter, was ironically complicit with what Griselda Pollock has called the “disappearing” of women that “willfully and persistently distorts knowledge of art’s histories.” “The National Gallery is erasing women from the history of art,” *The Conversation*, June 3,

2015, <http://theconversation.com/the-national-gallery-is-erasing-women-from-the-history-of-art-42505>.

<sup>25</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

<sup>26</sup> See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966; New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> In Sanskrit, Devi means “goddess.” Saraswati is the Hindu goddess of art and learning, and Kali is the mother of the universe as well as the source of cosmic strength. In traditional iconography, Saraswati is rendered as serene and benevolent, holding a lotus flower and musical instruments, while Kali appears accoutered for war, garlanded with the teeth of enemies she has slain, or stained with blood.

<sup>28</sup> Andal was a ninth-century poet and mystic, and the only woman to attain the status of saint in the Tamil Vaishnavite tradition. See *The Secret Garland: Antal's Tiruppavai and Nacchiar Tirumoli*, trans. Archana Venkatesan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> A representative erotic-devotional verse from Andal's *Nacchiar Tirumoli*: “Bring me his garments translucent, yellow, shimmering / as pollen through which the dark majesty of his thighs rise / glistening and drape me in his scent / so my every pore is perfumed.” *Andal: The Autobiography of a Goddess*, trans. and ed. Priya Sarukkai Chabria and Ravi Shankar (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2015), Song 13, Verse 1.

<sup>30</sup> On June 27, 2015, the civil rights activist Bree Newsome climbed a flagpole in front of the Columbia, South Carolina statehouse and took down a Confederate flag, an act for which she was arrested and jailed. Newsome discusses the historical and cinematic resonances of her act in “One Year After She Took Down the Confederate Flag, Activist Bree Newsome Looks Back,”

interview by Melissa Harris-Perry, *Elle*, June 23, 2016, <http://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/news/a37315/bree-newsome-confederate-flag/>.

<sup>31</sup> *Carrie* (dir. Brian de Palma, 1976), the story of a tormented high school girl with telekinetic powers, was adapted from Stephen King's novel *Carrie* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1974).

<sup>32</sup> Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor in Tunisia, set himself on fire in front of a government building on December 17, 2010. This act has been variously credited with initiating the revolutions in Middle Eastern and North African nations known as the Arab Spring.

<sup>33</sup> Kelly Tsai, *Formosa 3.0* (2017).

<sup>34</sup> Take Back the Night events have taken place on university campuses in the United States since 1976. Rallies, marches, protests, and performances speak against sexual abuse, incest, domestic violence, and rape.

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**CHITRA GANESH** is a Brooklyn-based artist whose drawing, installation, text-based work, and collaborations suggest and excavate buried narratives typically absent from official canons of history, literature, and art. Ganesh graduated from Brown University with a BA in Comparative Literature and Art-Semiotics, and received her MFA from Columbia University in 2002. For over a decade, Ganesh's work has been widely exhibited both locally and internationally, including at the Queens Museum, Bronx Museum of the Arts, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Baltimore Museum of Art. International venues include Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Turin), the Saatchi Gallery (London), MOCA Shanghai, Kunsthalle Exnergasse (Vienna), and Kunstverein Göttingen (Germany), with solo presentations at MoMA PS1, the Andy Warhol Museum, Brooklyn Museum, and

Göthenburg Konsthall (Sweden). Ganesh's work is widely recognized in South Asia, and has been shown at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (New Delhi), Prince of Wales Museum (Mumbai), and the Dhaka Art Summit at Shilpakala Academy (Bangladesh). Ganesh has received numerous grants including a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in the Creative Arts (2012), and awards from the Art Matters Foundation (2010), Joan Mitchell Foundation (2010), and New York Foundation for the Arts (2009), among others. Ganesh currently holds a Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University's Lewis Center for the Arts.

**URMILA SESHAGIRI** is Associate Professor of English at the University of Tennessee, where she specializes in modernism, postcolonial studies, and contemporary narrative fiction. She is the author of *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (Cornell UP, 2010), and her work has appeared in numerous academic journals, including *PMLA*, *Modernism/modernity*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, and *Cultural Critique*. She is writing a book about modernism's complex cultural legacy in 21st-century fiction; she is also producing the first scholarly textual edition of Virginia Woolf's memoir, "Sketch of the Past." Her research and teaching have been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, and the National Humanities Center. She is a contributor to *The Los Angeles Review of Books* and *to Public Books*.

**ADITI SRIRAM** is a writer, teacher, and oral storyteller. She is currently writing a nonfiction book about Pondicherry, a coastal town in South India, which will be published by Aleph Books in Delhi as part of their *Cities* series in 2018. She has reviewed books for publications including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, and *The Atlantic*. Her essays have appeared in *Narratively* and *Guernica Magazine*, in which she has also published interviews with Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Ayad Akhtar and nonfiction bestseller Helen Macdonald. An Assistant Professor of Writing at Ashoka University near Delhi, Aditi teaches critical thinking to first-year students. She has been performing "Urban Harikatha" for the past four years, mostly in New York City and Chicago. Harikatha, or katha kalakshepa, is an Indian storytelling artform: the raconteur enlivens the text with song, philosophy, scripture, and humor, creating a world of story around the audience. Her latest *Urban Harikatha* project, "Ahimsa: An End to Violence," premiered at the University of Chicago in May 2017.

**KELLY TSAI** is an award-winning writer, performer, and filmmaker based in Brooklyn. In 2017, she was profiled for her work as an artist-entrepreneur on *Forbes.com*, named a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow in Non-Fiction/Memoir, and served as poet-in-residence for the Taipei Poetry Festival. Her work as a performance poet has been featured at over 700 performances worldwide, including the White House, Lincoln Center, Kennedy Center, Apollo Theater, BAM, HBO's "East of Main Street: Asians Aloud" and three seasons of HBO's "Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry." She has performed at events featuring leading thought leaders like Bill Clinton, Gloria Steinem, and Donna Brazile, and entertainers like Tyra Banks, Harry Belafonte, and Drake. Her theatrical work has been developed and presented by *Ars Nova*, *Downtown Urban Theater Festival*, *Museum of Chinese in America*, *Brooklyn Museum*, *BRIC*, *El Museo del Barrio*, *Culture Project*, and the *University of California-Santa Cruz Rainbow Theater*, among others. Kelly holds a double BA with High Honors from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) in *Urban Planning and Comparative Literature*. She was recognized with the UIUC Outstanding Asian American Alumni Award in 2010. She was also a teen movie critic for the *Chicago Tribune* and PBS's "Sneak Previews" ([kellytsai.com](http://kellytsai.com), [@kellytsai\\_nyc](http://@kellytsai_nyc), [youtube.com/kztsai](http://youtube.com/kztsai)).