

## \* What Does a Woman Want?

Work by Phoebe Man

by ELSA HSIANG-CHUN CHEN

The exhibit *Rati* (8mins, Mini DV PAL, version 3.2, 2001)<sup>1</sup> by Phoebe Ching-ying Man poses many fundamental questions concerning women's existence and representation in both physical and virtual society through their erotic orchestration of narratives, forms and music.

*Rati* was made as a response to the representation of women in Internet chat rooms. Based on her experiences, Phoebe Man finds that one who claims a female identity is usually required by one who claims a male identity to show her vagina or breasts. She questions if "being a woman" should be exclusively defined by "a piece of meat."<sup>2</sup> Hence, she created a walking vagina in her video and web versions of *Rati* to address this question.<sup>3</sup>

The walking vagina is given a life beyond as the female sexual object in the heterosexual economy of chat rooms, if *Rati* is seen from a realist perspective. The walking vagina has its/her heterosexual desire and relationship with a man. When reaching orgasm, it/she fully embraces its/her partner. It/She has an active intellectual and artistic life, and poses the philosophical question about who she is and what she should look like. It/she is also situated in networks of social relations in both virtual and physical community. In other words, it/she is not just "a piece of meat." It/She has great bodily, intellectual and social power and potential at the same time. It/She is not only a marker of sexual difference but also a woman in real life, having her triumph, difficulty, fear, anxiety, and so forth.

If *Rati* is read at a semiotic level, another important issue can be raised. Can vagina be taken as the sign for women? This has been a much debated issue. *Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago and her fellow workers celebrates the intellectual achievements of women in world history (mainly of European and North American regions) and attempts to build up women's genealogy and solidarity. Appropriating Leonardo DaVinci's *Last Supper*, it stages on the grand dinner table china plates that bear vaginal imageries and every single plate represents each acclaimed woman. It is a piece which deploys "women's sexualized body ... as the sign of reclaiming women's essential identity and integrity."<sup>4</sup> Since the 1970s, it has been regarded by many as "having transgressed the silencing of women and her sexuality."<sup>5</sup>

However, in the 1980s British feminist art historian and cultural theorist Griselda Pollock problematizes such "libertarian" way of signifying women. According to Pollock, "sexuality is understood within this tradition as a quality or attribute, innate, essential and liberating; in Foucault's phase, 'the truth of our being.'" She suggests another "notion of sexuality" articulated by Jacques Lacan's rereading of Sigmund Freud and the historical project of Michel Foucault, "in which the potentially oppressive socio-psychic production of sexuality is stressed." She asserts within this tradition, "Sexuality is perceived as an effect of social discourses and institutions (Foucault). Artistic practices have also been implicated in the manufacture and repetition of sexual position in the way that they manage desire and pleasure, fuel fantasies and situate the viewer. Feminist practices have insisted upon the recognition of gender specificity in art as elsewhere but selected practices have addressed precisely the way in which the sexing of subjects and the production of sexual difference are effected and renegotiated in the ceaseless circulation of visual and other representations."<sup>6</sup>

In other words, representing "women's sexualized body" as "the sign of reclaiming women's essential identity and integrity" does not question how "women's sexualized body" has been culturally and socially constructed. Neither does it question how women's sexualized body has been situated in the social and cultural organization of male gaze. This view does not necessarily oppose the representation of women's bodily experiences. Instead, it leads one to think if representing women's sexualized body can really make women "speak" and "be heard" in the circuit of "phallogocentric" social and ideological structures, desire and fantasies. "Can the subaltern speak?" Gayatri Spivak has brilliantly questioned in her now classic essay which bears the same title. She addressed "the complex politics of widow self-immolation (sati) and the less familiar suicide in 1926, for political reasons, of the young woman Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri." She concluded that under the complex structures of patriarchy, western imperialism and capitalism, etc., the young woman's voice could not be heard, not even by her own families and relatives.<sup>7</sup>

(How) Can an artistic practice represent women's bodily experiences) and dismantle the phallogocentric social and cultural construct at the same time? This has been a very difficult task for many feminist artists.

*Rati* and *Inside a Bed* (18mins, Mini DV PAL, 2001) which suggests masturbation, sex and orgasm through a simple digital manipulation of floral and vaginal imageries are, to some extent, connected with this feminist pursuit. Both works result from the artist's dissatisfaction with the representation of women in Internet chat rooms and move to explore what a woman is and what she wants. Despite all the answers given in the video works, *Rati* does not seem to have an answer at all. Or *Rati* can not answer at all, in term of its narrative, and music which attempts to ridicule the whole narrative and gives the whole video a mysterious and ambivalent tone. At the end of video, *Rati*, the walking vagina, looks at the mirror and asks: who am I? This scene leads the audience to embark again on the journey to address the fundamental questions concerning women, their desires, fantasies, social relations, bodily experiences and the modes of representing women. Hence, what does it mean to be/become a woman, a female person, or not in the scope of this essay, a Chinese woman? *Rati* leaves it as an open question.

**ELSA HSIANG-CHUN CHEN** is an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow and Visiting Professor at UCLA. She researches and teaches contemporary art histories in the Asia Pacific regions. She is also an independent curator and art critic from Taiwan.