

**FROM WITHIN THE
CHAOS: THE MAKING
OF *WOMEN BREAKING
BOUNDARIES 21* (2001)**

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THE FOUNDING OF WAN

THE FIRST ITERATION OF Women's Art Network (WAN) was created in 1995, but only a few artists were involved (or so I heard; I was still unaware of WAN's existence at the time). Later, in December 1997, a call for action was made with the goal of establishing a more open and ongoing network. A truly diverse group of people gathered, including contemporary artists and filmmakers, theater people, performance artists, manga artists, researchers from various fields, coordinators, art enthusiasts, and feminist activists. Three meetings were held before the inauguration of the group, with new participants joining each time as we repeatedly discussed one issue: why women's art?¹ It was as if we were gathered at the starting line and could not agree on which direction to head. Nevertheless, there were some shared motives. We all wanted to see more women's art and were feeling frustrated in our artistic careers. We felt that we were not being given due credit, that we had few opportunities to present work, and that exhibitions themselves mainly prioritized and were led by men. However, when it came down to how to define women's art and why a women-only network was necessary, it was difficult to come to a consensus. We eventually decided that holding an exhibition could be a way to arrive at an answer. That's a somewhat rough summary of what happened, but I think each of us enjoyed the situation and sensed the possibilities of creating something new. It was during this process that the idea of creating a decentralized network and a place where people, even first-time participants and outsiders, could speak freely emerged as one of WAN's aims.

1 [Here and in the group's name, women's art is transliterated in katakana from English as ウィメンズ・アート. This choice may reflect the term's foreign origin or an intention to connect WAN and their activities to other internationally established feminist art movements. The term and its connotations were debated among participating artists during the exhibition in the symposium "Looking at Women's Art." An excerpt of this discussion is published in the bilingual exhibition publication *Women Breaking Boundaries 21* (Tokyo: Saiki-sha, 2002).]

THE STRUGGLE TO FIND A VENUE

WE WROTE IN our first proposal that we would rent a building in Tokyo for one month and that it would be roughly 600 square meters in size. The idea of using a vacant building reflected our desire to freely alter each room and the entire space. In addition to exhibits, there would be performances, skits, a screening space, artist talks and roundtable symposiums, and a café where people could take a break. In post-bubble-era Tokyo, an empty building seemed all the more symbolic and suitable as an exhibition venue. However, even though there were empty buildings everywhere we looked, we quickly hit a wall once we began our search: we couldn't be sure if these buildings would still be vacant in two years and renting one would cost a fortune. We wondered if there wasn't an art-loving building owner somewhere who would sympathize with our plans. We tried going through some of our contacts, but without any luck.

We then thought of proposing the project to a relatively large gallery. We tried cold calling several galleries, but the results were disastrous. At Spiral Hall in Aoyama, for example, we were told that the purpose of the exhibition was not likely to appeal to the general public, that no well-known artists were included, and that our budget proposal was inadequate. We also visited the Striped House Museum of Art in Roppongi (closed as of this year [2000]) with high hopes, as we had heard that they often accept project proposals and also imagined that the director, a woman, would agree with the purpose of our exhibition. But we would soon learn how naive it was to count

on sympathy simply because someone was a fellow woman. “We already held an exhibition of women artists ten years ago, so why have another women’s exhibition now?” (“The situation surrounding women is probably not any different today from how it was ten years ago.”) “Artists should carve out a place for themselves not through inclusion in a group but through individual ability, which is possible these days.” After our meeting with the director, Ito Tari and I, both members of the organizing committee, reflected on the conversation over coffee at a café. We encouraged each other, noting that while it was true that there had been a boom in interest in female artists in the past, what had been favored was a specific “feminine” style. What we wanted to show in the form of a group exhibition was the diverse ways of life of each individual, not bound by the imposed framework of femininity. Now was indeed the time to make this exhibition happen.

Next, we decided to reach out to public art museums, but we were again faced with insurmountable obstacles. In a public museum, we could only rent a community exhibition space for a maximum of one week. There was also the issue that the results of the lottery for use of the space would be announced just six months prior to the exhibition. It was completely infeasible to organize an exhibition of thirty participants, including invited artists from overseas, in just six months, and the time frame also wouldn’t meet the conditions for most grants, which require an application at least a year in advance. Even so, we were finally granted use of the public gallery of the Museum of Modern Art, Saitama, for two consecutive weeks, thanks to an introduction by museum curator Matsunaga Kō. However, the person we talked to suggested to us a two-week period at the end of the year when the museum was closed, so that our show would not affect the schedules of the various graduation and club exhibitions that are held at set times every year. With the museum closed, there would be few visitors. The fountain in front of the museum looked frigid as I left the meeting.

Soon afterward, Mitsuda Yuri of the Shoto Museum of Art tipped us off about Hillside Forum in Daikanyama. We immediately visited with our proposal. The person in charge listened to us carefully and gave us the OK a few days later. This was a relief at first, but since the project would not be taken on by the venue and we would instead be paying to rent the space, we couldn’t rest easy until we heard back about our

grant applications.

We had applied for grants from the Body Shop Nippon Fund, Pola Art Foundation, Asahi Shimbun Foundation, Japan Arts Council, Tokyo Women's Foundation, Ichikawa Fusae Fund, Women's Fellowship: Charle Women's Encouragement Award, Asahi Breweries, Kao Foundation for Arts and Sciences, and Japan Foundation, among the major bodies. Of these, only Asahi Breweries told us their reason for rejecting our application: "Some of our female employees felt that only including women makes the project exclusionary. It's not inclusive of society at large." A women-only exhibition, exclusionary? What if it only included men? Only children? Would it still be considered exclusionary? Asahi Breweries was meant to be our first step toward getting an endorsement from the Association for Corporate Support of the Arts. The association has a condition that, to make an endorsement, at least one member company has to commit to supporting the project. Personally I don't think the system makes sense. As someone navigating it, it makes you feel confronted with a chicken-or-egg situation. Why would we need to be endorsed by the association after a company has already committed to funding our project? What would be the point? It makes one suspicious that the grant recipient is forced to take over some of the tax maneuvers of the company. Regardless, we were fortunate enough to get four of the grants we applied for, totaling more than four million yen. In March 2000, when we were supposed to hear back from the major grants, I spent my days worrying about the size of the envelopes in the mailbox. If the envelope was small, it would only contain a single notice of rejection, but if it was a notice of acceptance, the envelope would be large and thick, with the necessary documents for future procedures enclosed.

THE INITIAL THEME: WOMEN'S SELF-PORTRAITS

WE MADE A NEW call for participants with a deadline for the end of June. Initially, we had intended to make the call open to the public partly in order to let more people know about the exhibition, but as our plans progressed, the majority of the group felt that the show should feature work by the people who have been part of the network, and so we changed our approach. We decided that in order to expand the scope of the exhibition beyond ourselves, we would invite professional artists who agreed with our aims to participate in the exhibition together with those who wanted to among the then nearly forty WAN members, or “networkers.” We envisioned the scale of the exhibition to be up to around thirty participants. In order to get to know each other better and to deepen the purpose of the project, two presentation sessions were proposed, where all the participants could gather and introduce their works to each other. By July, more than twenty network members had expressed an interest in taking part. In addition, no fewer than eight artists had come forward to participate through the introduction of Toki Noriko of Toki Art Space. Of the artists we invited, nine from both Japan and overseas also signed on. Before we knew it, we had a large group of over forty artists. As the scale of the event grew, there were many heated discussions within the organizing committee. It became clear that everyone envisioned the exhibition very differently, perhaps because of the varied fields of expertise. Artists who had experience with exhibitions and installations protested that the number of participants was far too large for the space, and that at

this rate the exhibition would become chaotic. Meanwhile, performance artists countered that what was crucial was to enrich the content of the exhibition and that they wanted to stay open to possibilities, even at the risk of a certain degree of messiness. In the end, we were unable to settle this difference in perspective, and even today, with the exhibition successfully over, it continues to be a point of contention.

Another thing that the organizing committee was forced to reconsider was the title itself. Initially, we had agreed on the title of *Women's Self-Portraits*. Our grant applications proclaimed, "Rather than engage in debates over 'art' and 'gender'—which too often rely on imported theoretical arguments—the title *Women's Self-Portraits* points to our intention to confront the present and reflect on ourselves in order to create 'art for living' that allows each person to open up freer futures." In response to this there was feedback that *Women's Self-Portraits* was too old-fashioned and dull, and that it might be taken literally to mean an exhibition of portraits. The core issue was whether the title would attract audiences. While searching for a venue and fundraising, we were repeatedly made aware of the various negative connotations attached to the word "woman," so it was quite concerning to hear that "self-portraits" might read as old-fashioned and dull. What gave us the push to rework the title was a comment from Kasahara Michiko, who had organized the *Love's Body* exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography [now Tokyo Photographic Art Museum] that had achieved a record number of visitors: "The title is crucial for appealing to the audience." The title *Women Breaking Boundaries 21* was voted on by the organizing committee from among several proposals.

In the end, the number of visitors exceeded our expectations and the exhibition was a great success, but we have no way of knowing whether the title change had any effect. Some participants commented that it was a pity that the title had been changed, and that *Women's Self-Portraits* would have better communicated the issues raised in the exhibition.

PRESENTATIONS AS SOCIAL EVENT

HOLDING A PRESENTATION of works before an exhibition is unheard of, let alone on two occasions, we were told by some of the participating professional artists. One of the reasons for these unusual gatherings was that there were many participants who were creating artwork for the first time. Another purpose was to share the process with people who were not participating as artists but had taken on various tasks as volunteers. The occasions were therefore conceived as social gatherings of participants in preparation for the exhibition, but they turned out to be notable events in their own right.

The first of these gatherings was held on August 19 and 20, 2000, at Nakano Women's Hall and Laplace in Shimokitazawa, respectively. Participants came from as far as Sapporo in the north and Miyazaki in the south. In principle, at least, everyone was expected to attend, and 80 percent of the more than forty participating artists and volunteers showed up. There were also a few new faces who attended having heard news of the occasion. Each day was a long, roughly eight-hour marathon, with each person given twenty minutes or so to present. With other business such as task assignments and announcements from the organizing committee also taking place in between, we were quite rushed for time. Comments from the participants on the first presentation session can be found in WAN's *Newsletter*, no. 6. The following is an excerpt of a comment by Ito Tari: "The thoughts expressed by each individual carried a lot of weight, and I was fascinated by the diversity of expression and content. I could visualize

the exhibition and felt as though we were at the starting line. Now that we are at this point, I think we need to reexamine what this exhibition is trying to convey to people. Is the appeal of diversity enough? What is it that the women seek beyond the boundaries that they are breaking? I want to see that spirit burst through. Let's recognize once again that this is an art action from a new perspective, an exhibition that answers the question of what women's art is."

The second gathering was held two months later as a two-day, overnight event on October 21 and 22 at the Tokyo Metropolitan Musashino Youth House. The presenters, mainly those who had been unable to attend the last event, each introduced their own work, and people with various responsibilities reported on their progress. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly, as we had already become acquainted with each other, and whereas previously everyone had their hands full with their presentations, this time the discussions extended to considering the idea of breaking boundaries and the purpose of the exhibition as a whole. We also had various matters to take care of, such as deciding how to divide up the finished flyers for distribution and exchanging tickets for cash, so we ran out of time as predicted, but it goes without saying that conversations flowed late into the night.

PRE-EVENTS: "ACT 1" AND "ACT 2"

AT THE TIME OF the WAN's founding, it was decided that the main pillars of its activities would be regular meetings once every two

months, casual brunch gatherings on months without regular meetings, the publication of a newsletter three times a year, and the planning and production of artist talks and events. The overarching goal was to hold a women's art festival in the winter of 2000 (which was pushed back to January 2001 due to venue constraints) and several preliminary events were to be held leading to the festival.

In May 1999, we held “WAN Act 1: ‘Feminist Art’ and Japan, Where We Are Today” at Suginami Community Center. In the morning, Kitahara Megumi and Nishiyama Chieko introduced the evolution of feminist art that has been flourishing in Europe and the United States since the 1970s, and there was a screening and talk on Idemitsu Mako's video work *Woman's House*. This work is invaluable as it provides the only documentary footage of the *Womanhouse* art installation by Judy Chicago and others in California.² In the afternoon, consecutive artist talks were held by members of WAN. They each did their best to express themselves in a short amount of time in various ways by using videos or slides to introduce their works, giving actual performances, talking about their current state of mind, or reciting their favorite poems. Mitsuda Yuri wrote a detailed account of this event in issue 42 of this publication. The phrase “expressions for living,” which Mitsuda penned in the text, cogently captures WAN's aims, and I have since frequently used it when describing the network.

Later, in March 2000, we held “WAN Act 2: Discussing Women's Self-Portraits” at the Yokohama Women's Forum. The facilities were provided free of charge for two days through the sponsorship of the Civic Activity Support Program of the Yokohama Women's Association for Communication and Networking. We displayed installations at the entrance and throughout the venue, held performances and piano recitals in the auditorium, organized workshops and video screenings in the meeting rooms, and, at the symposium, had Toki Noriko and Kasahara Michiko speak from their respective perspectives as gallerist and museum curator about planning art exhibitions with reference to their personal experiences. “Act 2” was the first full-fledged public event for WAN as an organization, and it allowed the involved WAN networkers to experience the joys and challenges of managing a group for producing an exhibition.

Such were the many small steps we took toward the *Women*

² [Other documentary footage of the installation exists, such as the films *Womanhouse* (1974) directed by Johanna Demetrakas and *Womanhouse is Not a Home* (1972) directed by Lynne Littman.]

Breaking Boundaries 21 exhibition. We got through every event feverishly, but as I reflect on that time, it makes me acutely aware of the thrill and importance of working—without ever turning back, or without having the possibility to turn back—to evoke a connection between society and this living thing called art that does not allow for a second chance.

AT THE CLOSE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I HAD SOME DOUBTS in writing this account. I have been a member of the organizing committee since the inception of the exhibition. I was in charge of the exhibition office, where information was collected. And I can say with pride that I put this exhibition before everything else for two years. But still, I can't speak on things that happened that I don't know about. For example, articles about this exhibition appeared in all four major newspapers. The event also appeared in the listings pages of many magazines. I don't know the daily efforts of the people in charge of press relations that led to this coverage. Nor do I know about the design of the flyer, distribution of tickets, planning of the Art Salon, communication between the exhibition staff and participating artists, or the related event held in Osaka, the 1st Women's Performance Art Osaka (January 12–14, 2001). Of course, I am not completely unaware. I simply feel that it is not enough to merely provide the bare facts. I hope to eventually have the opportunity for participants to share their experiences and what they thought about them.

At the end of 2000, a related event, "Women's Art Salon: Herstories

on *Pioneers in Art*,” was held at Toki Art Space in Gaizenmae. We installed shelves on a wall of the gallery to display materials sent to us by museums and individual artists at our request. We also invited Taniguchi Gahō (artist), Komatsuzaki Hiroko (painter), and Wakakuwa Midori (art historian) to talk about their accomplishments in their long careers, women’s perspectives, and their own struggles as women, in addition to having the members of the Women and Art Project give a presentation on the late Kishimoto Sayako (member of the Neo Dada movement). We will continue to collect material on women artists, and plans to eventually establish an archive are beginning to take shape.

On December 31, 2000, as the year was drawing to a close and I could feel the time remaining dwindling away, I was in my room with two other committee members busily pressing a Print Gocco silkscreen stencil against reusable grocery bags as part of the exhibition’s collaborative project.³ The printed cloth bags were hung all over the room on laundry lines with clothespins. The words on the bags read “WOMAN AT WORK,” a play on the phrase “Men at Work” that is often used to indicate ongoing construction. This project was not an artwork by a single individual but one conceived and produced collaboratively by a group of participants. We set up our installation, titled *Women at Work (Under Construction)*, in one corner of the exhibition space. We hung one hundred bags on the wall and put vegetables and tools used in various situations in work and life inside them as a way of conveying that women are everywhere at work. The project was also an art action that would continue even after the exhibition closed, as the bags were also sold at the venue, allowing women to take this message from *Women Breaking Boundaries* out onto the streets. We also used a projector to show footage of the day of the installation and comments by participants on the wall, and headphones for listening to the audio from the video were placed over helmets on top of step ladders as another nod to the theme of construction. This collaborative project also constituted a flexible space that could be transformed for use in performances, video screenings, and symposiums.

After we had finished silkscreening two hundred bags, the three of us went to a nearby shrine to enjoy the flames of the *dondoyaki* bonfire and a drink of sake that was offered to the New Year visitors.

3 [Print Gocco was a compact household screen-printing system produced by Riso Kagaku Corporation beginning in 1977. Originally marketed for creating New Years greeting cards, the printer became widely popular for its ease of use and affordability. The product was discontinued in 2008.]

TROUBLE WITH THE VENUE

I HAVE DEVOTED a large part of this account to the venue. Through my eyes, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the story of this exhibition started and ended with the venue. One of the attractions of Hillside Forum was that it was an exhibition space with a café. Adjacent to the café was a large space with vaulted ceilings that we thought could be used for performances. In reality, however, we were unable to do that because it would interfere with the café's business.

Furthermore, several problems emerged just before the opening when we gave the venue our final description of the exhibits. For example, the exchange after we mentioned that we would hang a hundred bags on the wall was as follows. "You can't hammer a hundred nails into the wall." "But we heard that nails are allowed on this wall." "A hundred is too many." Or when I explained, "For the nude self-portrait project, we will set up a completely enclosed area where visitors can freely take their own nude portraits, with staff at the entrance for the visitors' safety," they responded, "It goes against common sense to have people take off their clothes in an exhibition space. It's not that nudity itself is bad—we've had a photo exhibition by Araki [Nobuyoshi] after all." "So nude photos are acceptable, but not the real thing?" "Yes." "Nudity on site has been tried at the Setagaya Art Museum and other places." "We are a private gallery, not a public art institution, and in part because of the nature of our location, we try to maintain a certain image." "Will nudity spoil the image of the venue?" "Yes, we are not a bathhouse. We can't deal with something this consequential at the last

minute.” “We were told that you would not interfere with the artwork.” “This is a serious matter. Isn’t the organizing committee to blame for not explaining?” We were unable to reach an agreement, and in the end, we had to give up on the nude self-portraits. Did we lack common sense? I don’t think it goes against common sense to have naked bodies in an art exhibition. However, as members of the organizing committee, we should perhaps have been aware of the reality that private galleries allow even less freedom than public museums.

VIGNETTES FROM THE EXHIBITION

THE WOMEN’S ART EXHIBITION *Women Breaking Boundaries 21* was held at Hillside Forum from January 17 to 28, 2001, as scheduled.

Artists from overseas arrived one after another by the eve of the event, and they stayed in an apartment in Gokokuji and a house in Ōimachi that had been kindly offered as accommodations by acquaintances of organizing committee members. On the day of the symposium, we gathered around a meal of hot pot in Ōimachi and talked late into the night. Shu Lea Cheang (born in Taipei, a self-described digital exile), Nitaya Ueareeworakul (Thailand), and Nilofar Akmut (Pakistan), who stayed in Gokokuji, said that they talked until morning every day and that it was a memorable, lovely time. The fact that everyone had a place to stay is something that cannot be overlooked when talking about this exhibition.

On opening day, with the invited guests in attendance, a ceremonial performance titled “Opening Party” kicked off the exhibition. It involved a formal dinner setting, despite which the four “dinner guests” behaved freely and uninhibitedly, making a mess of the meal and finally wolfing down ice in swimsuits, in a reference to the image on the flyer. The performance was an invitation to demolish imposed frameworks and taboos and to break the boundary between routine daily life and the space for free expression that is art.

Artist talks were held nearly every day at the venue. Different kinds of formats were adopted, from standing in front of the works to laying out chairs, but the one that eventually took root was sitting in a circle on cushions in Gallery 4, which was carpeted and overlooked the Forum. This meant that visitors who had proceeded through Galleries 1, 2, and 3 in order suddenly happened upon and were bewildered by a small group of people sitting together, deep in discussion.

Since Gallery 2 was “under construction,” many things happened there. The exhibition space was constantly in flux. Sometimes there was Indonesian drumming or dancing. However, it was quite a chore to take down the exhibits before each symposium or performance and then rush to return them to their original state for the next day. That was nevertheless the only choice we had in order to achieve what we wanted to do within the various constraints of the space.

The first day of performances was an amazing success. More than two hundred people gathered including the audience and those involved, making it nearly impossible to move—an extremely rare situation in performance art.

My overall impression of the exhibition was that it was very colorful. There was some criticism of the exhibition, including that it looked like a school art festival. Some of the participating artists from overseas said that the themes were not cohesive and there were too many different types of work, and that each space should have been organized around a particular theme. An acquaintance who was a student at Tokyo University of the Arts came to me to complain, “Is this art? I don’t know how to look at it!” I am sure that even among the participating artists there are some who were not satisfied with the exhibition. However, when I think about it, for our exhibition this chaos was perhaps necessary, or even inevitable, as a beginning. The moment we decided

to create an exhibition through discussions among participants and without a curator, the exhibition assumed a different approach, or rather a different potential, from that of a meticulously planned show. The same goes for when we decided to include amateur artists together with professional artists, or to allow all kinds of artistic genres. Isn't it premature to be convinced that the exhibition was a failure just because of some critical comments by a few art professionals? It is undeniable that the space was lively and fascinating, and responses to the questionnaires indicate that many visitors found works that spoke to them amidst the chaos and took the time to engage with those works in earnest. At one point, one of the participants, Esashi Tomoko, suddenly turned to me with a serious face as she was passing by and said, "I've realized that each and every one of these works is relevant to me." The *Women Breaking Boundaries 21* exhibition was, in a sense, a treasure trove. What we take away from the exhibition and what we make of it is entirely up to us. Today, I have the confidence to say that.

It snowed on both Saturdays during the exhibition, which is unusual for Tokyo. In spite of this, around one thousand people visited the exhibition during the two weeks. To us this was a significant number. *Women Breaking Boundaries 21*, a women's art exhibition featuring forty-three individual artists and one artist group, one which put women in full focus, was not overlooked. Early on, professional women artists who had been working for many years had even gone so far as to warn us that putting the word "women" in the title was risky. I would like to express my respect to the researchers and curators who endorsed this project, the members of the Image and Gender Conference, and the many others who supported us. It was truly thanks to them that the organizing committee, which worked rather clumsily as I've described here, was able to make it to opening day. Although I hardly had the space to touch on the contents of the Art Salon, symposium, performances, and artworks, Kitahara Megumi provides astute descriptions under the title "'Kōjichū' ni tsuki gochūi" [Beware, under construction!] in *Impaction*, no. 123 (February 15). The exhibition was also featured prominently on the front page of the February 15 issue of *Femin: Women's Democratic Journal/Fujin minshu shinbun Femin*. A symposium report by Nakajima Momoko (an organizing committee member) in the same newspaper also conveys

the significance of this exhibition. Toki Noriko reported on the Art Salon in the Club for *Bijutsu undōshi kenkyūkai nyūsu/Art Action History Newsletter*, no. 45 (January 16), and an account of the Art Salon and symposium is forthcoming in *LR* magazine. The organizing committee is also preparing to publish a catalogue. WAN networker and filmmaker Lim Desiree is in the process of editing a video documentary.

For those who seek more than what this report has to offer, or who are interested in the *Women Breaking Boundaries 21* exhibition, there is the *Women Breaking Boundaries 21* special issue of WAN's *Newsletter*. It contains messages from participants and an account of the Art Salon. We encourage you to read it. 500 yen per copy.⁴

⁴ [The original text includes a fax number and email address which are omitted here.]

This text was originally published as “Konton no naka kara: *Ekkyosuru onna tachi* meikingu repōto”, *Aida*, no. 62 (February 2001): 9–16. Translated by Monika Uchiyama.

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