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The domestic residue: feminist mobility and space in Simryn Gill's art

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Feminism, now nearly half a century old, is still fractured by two divisive forms – the desire to emancipate women from masculinist power structures, and the affirmation of woman's sexual difference. However, as Teresa de Lauretis and Gillian Rose argue, for feminism to remain relevant, it must also be attentive to the fluid hegemonic conditions of power, and thus, strive to evolve new 'forms', which emphasize feminism's political mobility. Developing this proposition, this article discusses how a new critical feminist mobility may be detected in the work of Sydney-based Malaysian artist Simryn Gill. Born in Singapore in 1959, and hailing from a migrant Punjabi family who first settled in Malaya in the 1920s, Gill constantly travels between her home in Sydney and her family bungalow in Port Dickson, a small coastal town in Malaysia. I will discuss how Gill's feminist perspective may be mapped through the artist's shifting spatial contexts by looking at three spaces – the gallery, the domestic interior and the tropics. Through these spaces, I will explore how the artist occupies the dual roles of 'woman' and 'women', thus demonstrating the changing and fluid energy of a mobile feminist stance. Gill's art valorizes the domestic sphere as a recurring theme with this subject being central to her self-definition in the public sphere. Yet, her treatment of domesticity is distinct in its furtiveness, a tactic, which I argue, enables a feminist agency that is politically mobile, and capable of engaging issues of gender, sexuality, race, class and citizenship.

Keywords: feminism; feminist mobility; domesticity; art; Southeast Asia

Introduction: The artist as mobile feminist

... the art-producing task of the 'woman artist' ... is not, in my opinion, radical critique ... or a separatist aesthetic – neither the ultimate denaturing nor the essentializing of gender – but the judicious, amorous, and constant testing of the boundaries between Nature (X) and Culture (Y), between the matter of one and the thought of the other (Armstrong 2006, xiv).

Eight objects, each manifested in three different materials, occupy a tiny section of a vast gallery floor. The uncanny quality of these objects derive from our familiarity with them – a metal tiffin (Anglo-Indian term for 'food container') reworked as a cow-dung tiffin, and again as a 'Labour' brand soap tiffin; an audio cassette cast in agar and again in local backyard clay; a shoe in agar and in clay. They are recognizable as household items, and their alternate revisions appear to re-appropriate domestic materials – soap, clay, agar and organic waste (cow-dung). An art critic who wrote about this installation described it as 'disproportionate and vaguely uncomfortable' because of its diminutive stature and its embarrassing inability to fill the immense gallery space. It invoked in him, a feeling that the work was 'visiting' the gallery rather than holding court in it. The work in question is

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by Sydney-based Malaysian artist Simryn Gill. Gill is one of Australia's foremost artists and has been internationally prolific since the mid 1990s. In the last 3 years especially, her global reputation was established through exhibitions in leading art events and institutions.¹ The critic significantly read the installation as indicative of the artist's migrant and familial histories thus underscoring that it represented someone who was 'forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders' (Langenbach 1994, 86).²

The critic's uneasiness with the bare floor is not unanticipated. In art history, the floor as opposed to the orthogonal verticality of the canvas is debased and uncultured (Krauss 1997). Its horizontality demands non-upright modes of engagement such as crouching, bending and squatting, which collectively recall non-anthropomorphic postures borne of primitive quadruped animality. The material experience of the gallery floor, which is normally invisible to, or unremarked by, the gallery visitor, is here, further augmented by the diminutive scale and placement of the objects. The critic is not just asked to reconsider his usual viewing posture but also forced to re-evaluate the gallery as a non-neutral framework, a space that supports certain kinds of work, while alienating others. Then, there is also the improper juxtaposition of spaces and techniques – the detritus of domesticity sits uncomfortably within the professionalized space of the white cube. One leaves the article with a sense of the critic's ambivalent response, not only to the work's domestic scale, but also to the way it reflects Gil's intertwined roles of artist, wife and mother. Even while the installation critically disturbs the spatial configuration of the gallery by accentuating its limits and assumptions, what is even more interesting is how the critic automatically relegates the artist's perspective to a depoliticized domestic realm, recasting her professional position as somewhat compromised by her other familial roles as wife and mother.

Here, it is the domestic re-appropriation of public space, which becomes contentious, and gender roles become troublesome. The gallery should not be treated like the kitchen floor. Or as artist-writer Frances Stark attests, the artist who wants to be taken seriously should take lessons from the architect, involving herself in productions 'with elaborate extensions, disruptions and transformations into, and of material reality'. Professional work should not be modelled after a housewife's labour which involves time-intensive but invisible maintenance as she 'will stay and maintain the home, decorate, arrange, rearrange, prepare, wash, put things away, bring them out again' (Stark 1999, 12). Crucially, these two figures are also defined by their designated spaces. While the architect is free to create, the housewife is ultimately buried within the domestic realm as she busies herself with minute and intimate routines that involve 'household gadgets and decorative accoutrements' (Chee 2007a, 334).

From Stark's twin artistic engagements above, I extrapolate two figures – 'woman' (normally associated with the more conventional roles of housewife and mother) and 'women' (a politicized and shared position, usually in opposition to the dominant practices and aspects of masculinity) – as equally possible modes of feminist spatiality. While one might either depoliticize the artist's domestic tendencies as the first critic has done, or to render it as a strategy for occupying public space as Starke proposes, I wonder whether feminist spatial aesthetics and techniques may be less static than reiterated here. Can feminism be more mobile, that is, can it take on multiple forms of agency? And more importantly, in the context of this article, can feminist mobility be mapped through particular spatial tactics?

'A common divide keeps forming', Snitow (1990, 9) reminds us, 'in both feminist thought and action between the need to build the identity 'woman' and give it solid

political meaning and the need to tear down the category 'woman' and dismantle its all-too-solid history'. Feminist geographer Rose (1993, 12) similarly argues that feminism has always been divided by the two positions for strategic reasons since:

... to retrieve and celebrate the difference between women from men often end up by affirming Woman and inadvertently trapping women into the stereotypes of masculinism, while abandoning Woman entirely for the diversity of women can be politically disabling because it removes any common ground for alliance and struggle.

Yet while the emphasis on 'women' supposedly constitutes a shared politicized condition where difference is broadly understood in relation to masculinity, the latter category of 'woman' almost always ends up as an essentialist construct in which practices aligned with, for example, domestic modes and scales, are normally depoliticized, thus, undermining their radical potential. Following Teresa de Lauretis's argument that feminism should be pliable and not mimic masculinist imperatives, Rose suggests that there is a 'sense of space which ... is associated with (this) emergent subject of feminism', which is paradoxical in nature because it simultaneously occupies 'centre and margin, inside and outside' (Rose 1993, 140). Emphasizing that 'one form of feminism cannot be adequate to the task of resistance', she calls for 'critical mobility' in feminist thinking and practice, that is, a radical re-examination of other possible forms through which feminism may thrive (13).

In summary, Rose's emergent feminist subject can take on shifting perspectives. It can move between, and occupy both polemical categories of 'women' and 'woman'. Furthermore, it can also move beyond gender and sexuality to consider how feminism may evolve as a critical strategy shaped by complexities of ethnicity, class and citizenship, for example. It is the fluid positioning of the feminist subject, what I call here feminist mobility, which is significant to a contingent feminism.

In this article, I want to explore the spatial tactics of a mobile feminism. I define feminist mobility as the flexible capacity to occupy dual positions – centre and margin (mainstream discourse/practice vs. feminist discourse/practice, for example); and the artist's dual roles as 'woman' and 'women'. A discussion will be made of Gill's art, whose conceptual core revolves around the question of space. Space becomes the politicized medium through which a new mode of feminist self-definition is accommodated. As a migrant who has frequently moved, settled in and unsettled from one city to the next at various times because of circumstances both of her choice and not, this artist's approach to space is inexorably restless, if not uneasy.

Frequently described as embedding postcolonial, diasporic and biographical tendencies, criticism on Gill's art often leverages on her complicated personal history. The work has not been specifically addressed by feminists although its subject matter revolves around domestic and everyday situations. Perhaps it is so because it is hard to categorize Gill's aesthetics as comparable to say, artists such as Cindy Sherman, Martha Rosler, Mierle Ukeles or Annette Messenger. The problem is not in the work but in the prescribed feminist modes of categorization and looking. In this group of artists, distinctions may already be drawn between two modes of feminism, and its divisive stances between 'women' and 'woman'. For example, Sherman and Rosler work through the condition of women operating within a patriarchal system, while Ukeles and Messenger's production hinge on recuperating woman's work (cleaning, knitting) and its aesthetics. Nevertheless, the choice between either stance is not simple.

Demonstrating how the private domestic sphere participates in public discourse has been central to the feminist project since the 1970s ('the personal is political') and is an

important theme of recent postcolonial feminist writing. As Rosemary Marangoly George highlights, the category of 'Third World Woman' is problematically framed as a singular subject who is doubly embedded yet absent in familial and national discourses. Significantly, this figure is also, as George iterates, rigidly spatialized within particular locations. For example, women in the Indian context became aligned with the untouched spiritual realm of culture, as opposed to its material realm, which Indian nationalists saw as already tarnished by colonialism. The spiritual sphere or private realm of culture was 'thus a space in which the nation imagined itself as free' (George 2006, 222).³ Consequently, women, their practices and domestic locations, became contentious sites of struggle between colonialists and nationalists. Domestic issues such as arranged marriages and the native practices of 'sati', where the newly widowed wife immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre, were scrupulously documented and fought out by colonialists and nationalists on these fronts. The Indian woman was symbolic because she embodied what was sacred. Nevertheless, she remained an object without voice.

Feminism in the twenty-first century is much more complex than what I recounted in the paragraph above with women acting equally as active participants in these discourses but also weighed down by their 'symbolic place' in society. Consequently, the stereotype of woman and her 'proper' place within the domestic sphere remains potent as illustrated by the critic's response to Gill's domestic appropriation of the gallery floor. The problematic moment arises when what is normally mute and residual – the domestic sphere – floats to the surface and becomes intertwined with the public sphere. Here is a concrete example where the schism between 'woman' versus 'women' breaks down since the work draws from the material evidence and scale of domesticity yet boldly negotiates the public arena, moving the discourse from kitchen and to gallery floor.⁴

Gill's interest in the domestic realm certainly develops from an existing feminist art canon where a critical stance towards objects, issues, techniques and relationships associated with ideas of 'home' and 'household' were made conceptually, methodologically and materially significant since the 1970s. However, I introduce the term 'domestic residue' here to highlight her variant approach to this genre. Unlike the overt domestic manifestations of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, for example, *Womanhouse* (1972) and *Dinner Party* (1979), which raised public awareness through direct engagement with household practices such as cooking, quilting, scrubbing floors, ironing sheets, washing or simply waiting at home, as well as provoking questions of women's sexuality through nudity, menstruation and ageing (Haar and Reed 1996, 255–7), it should be emphasized that domesticity, while central to Gill's work, remains surreptitiously in the background.

The 'domestic' in this case refers not only to the physical manifestations of household as home, but also encompasses imaginative boundaries whereby the postcolonial migrant self is empowered to enact and define her shifting identities vis-à-vis constantly changing geographical and historical situations in which she is located. Thus, it is not just the static space of home, which matters, but also the journeys and routes taken between these homes. 'Residue' alludes to Gill's furtive appropriation of domesticity in her work even as it features as a recurring artistic theme, continues to shape her working methods, and physically acts as a site of creative production. Yet, the furtiveness of the domestic residue in Gill's work is, in my opinion, strategic. It means that domesticity may be activated and perceived beyond its customary allegiance to feminine difference. Consequently, the domestic residue becomes a crucial spatial tactic for feminist mobility.

Reflecting on the central theme of the domestic residue in Gill's art, I will discuss how three spaces (the gallery, the domestic interior and the tropics) are negotiated through three

distinctly different roles of the artist (as feminine Other, as wife/mother/daughter and as migrant). These roles constitute multiple forms of Gill's feminist agency. The three spaces are, in turn, sites of display, labour and longing, for the artist herself. Space is used as a means to interpellate the subject – Gill the artist – as she fluidly adopts these roles. Through these spaces, new connections are made with subjectivity and visibility, which simultaneously 'forfeit predictable routes of gender' and dismantle 'segregated zones of feminine experience' (Lajer-Buchart 2006, 146–7).

Finally, it should be emphasized that while some depth into Gill's artwork is necessary, this article does not aim to exhaust art historical perspectives. Rather, I will use the artwork as a means to foreground a discussion on feminist mobility, exploring how space is appropriated, documented, occupied and negotiated to accommodate the artist's various agencies.

The gallery and the artist as feminine Other

The floor, ... in being below culture, was out of the axis of the body, and was thus also below form (Krauss 1997, 95).

In *Heart of the matter* (1994), the artwork described in the section above, Gill rehearses two aspects, which recur in her gallery installations. The first is her use of the floor plane as a site of display. The second is the showing of found objects, which may or may not be reconstructed and formally abstracted. At face value, these double strategies do not seem to depart radically from the artistic canon where 'great male artists' like Jackson Pollock and Carl Andre have given prominence to the floor as a plane of culture, and Joseph Beuys for example, has picked up countless found objects and fragments, and brought these into the sacred realm of the white cube.

Yet, Gill's strategy is not based on a 'separatist aesthetic' whereby the cool Minimalist discipline for form and material intentionally subsume subjective traces of the maker (Armstrong 2006, xiv). Unlike Dan Flavin's factory-fabricated fluorescent tubes, Carl Andre's neatly stacked bricks or Donald Judd's use of nondescript plexiglass, Gill's objects are notably assembled from organic, found materials on sites personal to her own trans migratory history and location. Beuys' auratic objects, which resonate quite closely in their eclecticism with Gill's own collection, consist almost entirely of society's detritus – discarded things with an awkward scarred presence, things which are unpolished and rough. There is, however, a thematic focus on decay and destruction as a means to jolt the observer's perception of the world. Although like Beuys, interested as she is in beauty and the enigma of her found objects, Gill's approach is neither about creating the shock of the new nor about injecting the unfamiliar into the familiar. Instead, her collections are a means to locate an artist, who happens to be a migrant female subject, into the gallery space at the same time as she is compelled to deal creatively with the artistic legacy of materials, concepts and processes which have preceded her. There is thus a deliberate decision to adopt some of these recognizable formats – using the gallery floor, borrowing what is outwardly a Minimalist vocabulary concentrated on distinctly consistent forms, revisiting the ragpicker's art of gathering found objects – but simultaneously subverting these tenets with autobiographical traces and objects of gendered import. The occupation of both 'centre' and 'margin' in terms of approach expresses Gill's feminist mobility.

In *Mine* (2007–2008), a series of spherically shaped objects are strewn casually on the gallery floor. These materials and objects were found around the artist's studios in Sydney and Port Dickson, and included banana skins, paper bark, hairbands and shoelaces found on the streets, aerial roots from ficus trees, tropical vines, stalks of gourd plants,

mangosteen skins, cow pats, pomegranates from a friend's fruit bowl and a brick tumbled into roundness by the sea. The objects, ranging from 3 to 18 cm in diameter, appear to be almost perfectly disciplined into spherical forms. However, two aspects are particularly striking here. In themselves, the objects are evidently personal to the artist in that they trace two sites which are geographically and culturally different yet yoked together by her presence and affiliation in each. Furthermore, the stringent shaping of these materials, which are ephemeral, local (especially the plants and fruits) and sometimes unwieldy, attest to a struggle by the artist to turn in what are evidently inconsistent structural forms into a coherent collection, a practice that speaks of how a mediating technique or form is needed when pulling together disparate objects drawn from two very divergent sites. Some of the objects are naturally round (the pomegranates taken from a friend's fruit bowl), others wilfully shaped by hand (the ficus' aerial roots and the mangosteen skins), and still others transformed by the power of nature (a brick tumbled into roundness by the sea). The homogeneity of the rounded forms on the clean gallery floor belies their diversity and origins from different locales. Essentially, these are tell-tale traces of climate, culture and nature intrinsic to two-seaside towns of vastly dissimilar scale and profile.

The title 'Mine' accentuates both the artist's assertion and conundrum over what may be hers in each spatial context, be it in her itinerant studio spaces or the borrowed gallery space. Indeed, what may be Gill's is only ever rehearsed in the labour, which disciplines these materials into discernibly consistent forms. This labour is painstakingly limited by the handmade, a proximity to, and the domestic scale of, her home studios, which in turn influenced the sizes of the resultant objects on display. Thus, unlike Beuys' found objects (fat, felt, beeswax, copper, bronze, iron) which are imbued with a sense of myth and with larger symbolic or even therapeutic associations linking the artist to his audience, Gill's collection embodies both intimate material and corporeal specificities which inflect a personal struggle with her own shifting locations of home and a trans migratory history, 'the interrelationship between an artist and a work, therefore, is both materially situated and in process, an effect of actions in the world' (Meskimmons 2003, 4). Mobile feminism is demonstrated as the artist acts in the dual capacities as 'woman' (embedding outward domestic practices and objects in content) and 'women' (incorporating feminism's call for 'the personal' to be projected into the public realm).

Anthropologist turned artist Susan Hiller has commented that the most interesting work is:

... a very sophisticated play on accepted and recognized systems of representation, format and so on, with a desire to subvert, modify, change and, through this interplay, create a space, gap, hiatus or absence in which something new can come into being (Hiller 1985, 367).

Gill's use of the gallery floor subverts the format applied in Minimalist art. The floor in her case speaks of a transitional condition, that is, a vastness of space which can never be fully or comfortably occupied by the artist. In another floor installation titled *Garland* (2006) (Figure 1), a collection of worn objects from the beaches of Port Dickson and the southern islands of neighbouring country, Singapore, accumulated since 1993 when the artist was resident in Singapore, are awkwardly placed on the floor. There are shards of glass, metal pieces, rocks, seashells, discarded toys and household objects. The arrangement is tense. Some of the beachcombed objects have been gathered into congruous groups categorized by similar shapes, materials or use, while the majority is still in a large, unsorted pile, awaiting some form of definition.

The impulse of the observer maybe to disregard the installation as detritus or to begin to discern the families of forms, materials and functions, which also initiate some sort of



Figure 1. Garland (2006) worn objects collected from beaches in Port Dickson, Malaysia and the southern islands off Singapore since 1993 (source: Simryn Gill).

narration about where these things come from, and what kind of person this collector could be. The floor is intentionally used as a base, to re-enact as it were, the personal action of beachcombing which requires one to squat, bend forward, squint, look again, sort, decide, toss away or keep. In *Garland*, the space of the gallery floor is transformed from the clean

white cube into a messy space of labour, where one's identity is gradually fashioned over time, through the serendipitous art of collecting. Collecting, according to Gill, allows her to understand her own position within an unknown spatial context, as though finding one's own way through the world of things.⁵

Walter Benjamin has written about how a child's fascination for the discarded fragment is akin to the ragpicker's appreciation for recycled waste (Benjamin 2002). For both, the act of collecting is redemptive and renewing, where the forgotten and the broken once wrenched from their original contexts, become valuable again (Gilloch 1996, 88–9). The child reassembles the fragments in a new constellation, usually a miniaturization of a new world. One may read similar tendencies in Gill's pickings. The artist's fascination for 'orphaned things, or that which is obsolete, incomplete, fallen off the edge and disused', may be compared to her own displaced personal histories.⁶ The found objects are like talismans which Gill serendipitously accumulates, and which she allows to fill up the nooks and crannies of her own home in Sydney – overcrowding tables and shelves, housed in recycled jars and boxes, many of which are procured from local grocers – until their material presence overwhelms, necessitating yet another transformation of context and purpose in their existence.

Transposed onto the public context of the gallery floor where new connections ultimately surge to the fore, *Garland*, as curator Haruko Kohno eloquently describes:

... waver, indeed quite magically, between hard and soft, dead and alive, important and trivial, tangible and imaginary. In the pile, the ancient and modern meet, as nature and culture merge. Delivered to shore by the gentle tides of the Straits of Malacca, this midden of particulars is proof to how time slowly makes it way into things, changing eternally their appearance yet never completely divorcing them from their origins. Differences are dissolved to the extent that the objects no longer exist as separate entities of varying provenances, but rather like common denominators of one landscape. Perhaps by extension, Gill also hints collectively at people who reach destinations by faith or fate, through journeys of hope or fear (2004, unpaginated).

The floor installations are considered, quiet arrangements emphasizing intimate minutiae against an almost hostile and neutral space. This aesthetic composition and its formal approach reflect the circumstances of a woman artist whose agency and identities are similarly ephemerally and contingently constituted through very specific moments, relationships and objects, which ultimately need to survive across vast and divergent spaces that delineate points in her own journeys and destinations. Still, the gallery floor as Krauss underscores, is not without its own history, remade as it were by the likes of Pollock and Andre whose works re-employ and command the floor as a new, albeit self-possessed canvas, influencing and generating a consistent output of work which valorizes either modular standardization (for Andre), or abstract organic bodily geometry (for Pollock). In contrast, Gill's floor installations do not work in quite the same way. The floor is literally treated as a site of labour, where her incongruous objects can coexist side-by-side. Thus, the floor, in this instance, is a borrowed, temporary landscape rather than a canvas which the artist has permanent rights to. It is where the artist is still staging an emerging sense of self, enacted through physically disparate but emotively connected objects linked to her positions in the visible world. In this sense, Gill's floor pieces are not finished objects but in-process residual fragments of her geographically impermanent, materially located and historically complex makeup as a woman artist of colour. Each installation works to perform this transient position, consistently mapping, working through, and showing a process of 'unpossessing femininity – (of) a woman who lays claim to space without having it' (Lajer-Bucharth 2006, 165). Consequently, Gill's floor

pieces appropriate mainstream art historical space, lineage and techniques only insofar as a visible base onto which the marginalized subjective feminine Other may be projected and given prominence, reiterating once more the critical mileage of her mobile feminist stance.

The domestic interior and the artist as wife/mother/daughter

There is no place like home!⁷

Gill's mobile feminism is particularly played out through her studio environment. Working from the domestic frame of her family home, both in Sydney and in Port Dickson, the artist has candidly admitted that most of her important work and thinking emanates from the kitchen table, a site which not only influences techniques driven by the mundane pragmatism of household economics, available space and accessibility, but may also account for the artist's fascination for domestic interiors and the lives contained within these spaces.⁸ The kitchen table, or the 'biggest table in the house' becomes the stable point for making creative leaps, and it remains as Gill's most consistent base, even while she moves from one house or from one city, to another. It is interesting that the kitchen table can be seen as a piece of furniture that generates paradoxical spatial interpretations. It belongs neither exclusively to the kitchen, which is associated with feminine work, nor to the more public spaces of the house like the living room. Akin to feminist mobility in its flexible positions, it carves out a niche between the served and serving spaces. Thus, at the kitchen table, menial household labour, creative professional work and individual self-presentation of the woman in the house, as mother, wife and/or daughter, coincide.

George suggests that the kitchen table may be associated with 'a feminism that sees the very radical potential of domesticity' where there is 'no incongruity in harnessing the wisdom and labour of this homely location ... [with a] ... feminist practice' (1998, 9). In their speculative drawing-essay titled 'Table Manners', architects Sarah Wigglesworth and Jeremy Till (1998) also draw on the kitchen table as a site in which resistance may reside since the table, which is commonly seen as a space of decorum hosting family meals and convivial relationships, also holds the residue of unseen labour and daily maintenance. For George, Wigglesworth and Till, the kitchen table is a potent, albeit ambiguous space within the home since it not only houses mundane routines but may also accommodate individual expression, specifically that of creative feminine labour. Indeed, it could function as a material space where the divisive traits of feminism – between 'woman' or 'women' – may be reconciled since the domestic frame is re-politicized here.

While the artist's work is not shaped by the specific significance of the kitchen table, it does 'acknowledge an unglamorous domestic location as the focal point of undoubted, radical energies' (George 1998, 10). Resisting an intellectualization of domesticity as integral to her work, she nonetheless admits that the domestic realm is important because 'it becomes a frame from which I can begin to think about bigger things'.⁹ By this, one understands that Gill sees the way she is materially located in a particular place and time as fundamental to how more complex and shared issues of identity are constructed. Indeed, her 'place-in-the-world' is heavily marked by her gender and race at least in Malaysia's Muslim dominant landscape where women are customarily sequestered in private spaces, and preferential treatment to Malay Muslims and converts has been made constitutionally lawful. As a Punjabi woman born to a second-generation migrant family in Singapore when the island state was still part of British Malaya, the artist is multiply disadvantaged. It is hard to say where her 'homeland' is located, or even make legitimate claims towards

an ancestral home, which is now physically under threat from imminent and unchecked development. Indeed the struggle of finding a permanent domestic setting in which to cultivate her multiple identities as wife/daughter/mother has alerted the artist to the complexities of the domestic interior as a locus of identitarian politics and its potentially



Figure 2. Dalam (2001) type c photographs, from a series of 260, 23.5 cm × 23.5 cm each (source: Simryn Gill).

hybrid forms. Hence, instead of representing 'home' as a sequestered and private space of straightforward femininity, typically associated with the 'woman' of the house, Gill's unsettled curiosity towards the domestic realm has prompted images of this space as a complex private double for a more reticent and controlled public front, which accommodates women's complicated roles in them.

The artist's empathy towards the occupant's domestic pride and her attention towards their idiosyncratic household possessions, coupled with her concomitant role as mother/wife/daughter, enabled her to gain unrestricted access into many private homes even though she was a complete stranger. For *Dalam* (2001), almost all the houses she photographed were occupied by another wife/mother at the time she sought access to these spaces. She also reveals that as a Punjabi woman coming from a minority race group, she was perceived less as a threat to these other women who seemed to find little basis of comparison and competition with her. Yet, while engaging in small talk and light banter about cooking and cleaning, Gill as mother/wife could also take on the dual role of the objective artist voyeur standing behind her camera. This mobile subjectivity ultimately inflects upon the content of the photographic collection by transposing prosaic matters such as the identification of common household paraphernalia, onto more weighty issues dealing with taste, wealth, class, gender and ethnicity.

In *Dalam* (Figure 2), a suite of 260 coloured photographs showing the interiors of Malaysian homes, Gill reveals her interest for the inside, which we cannot see.

'Dalam' means variously 'inside', 'within', 'interior', 'deep', 'profound', and by extension, 'intimate' and 'rooted'. It draws on the boundaries between not just inside and outside but emphasizes relationality and separation ... (Chee 2007b, 27).

The photographs, which hold an intense variety of domestic details both tasteful and kitsch, are cropped precisely to a dimension (23.5 cm × 23.5 cm) thus necessitating the viewer's active gaze. Due to the density of details and the volume of images, it is impossible to take in these interiors simply by browsing at a distance. The result is a vision, which is mediated by physical proximity, thus invoking a kind of intrusion into the private realm. Every space is cluttered by possessions but there are no occupants. In the photographs, the viewer comes across brocade curtains, plastic flowers, countless mountain-and-lake landscapes, religious altars, Bollywood posters, cabinets filled with never used china, repetitive sofa sets, expensive marble and cheap linoleum floors, plain or florid surfaces, neutral or gaudy colour schemes. The question of taste is not merely ideological. Taste locates us spatially – this is where we come from, this is where we should not go. Carruthers (2002) relates an interesting observation on taste when *Dalam* was first exhibited at the Galeri Petronas in Kuala Lumpur in 2001. The gallery, which is located adjacent to the Suria shopping mall, drew in a mixed and distracted crowd who were animatedly engaged with these interiors:

While they glided silently past the exhibitions of sculpture and painting that were showing concurrently with Gill's – perhaps unable to get a 'hold' on their modernist visual grammars – *Dalam* drew these erstwhile patrons like a magnet. It seemed that, rather than approaching the images as art or even as representations, they engaged 'directly' with the interiors – not least by pointing and touching, shouting with delight at the recognition of some familiar object, cooing with admiration at something 'beautiful', laughing scornfully at something deemed kitsch or lamenting someone's wretched poverty (249).

The audience's response to Gill's photographs cast doubt over the status of the work, making interpretations of it as high 'art' and popular 'décor' equally viable. In this instance, the conflation of mainstream art with marginalized pop culture seem wholly

intentional, as was the serendipitous decision to locate the exhibition so near to a shopping venue.

In *Power Station* (2004) (Figure 3), Gill revisits a more intimate and familiar domestic space as she returns to photograph her grandparents' home in Port Dickson, Malaysia. Despite her personal history, the spaces of the house are made surreal and distant when posed alongside an abandoned power station, a building which is located adjacent to the house, and which the artist had never visited before taking on this project. The paired rooms of house and power station, captured in 13 sets of photographs, are rendered, respectively, in black-and-white and colour. As Kohnno observes, this technique of eradicating colour from the house allows the audience to become intimate with the space but 'remove(s) the subject far enough so that we are not overtly aware of its former and present inhabitants' (2004, unpaginated). The sensation given by the paired rooms is one of curiosity rather than familiarity, fragmentation rather than exhaustiveness.

Some of these connections draw from the physicality and occupancy of both buildings in proximity to each other. The thermal power station was funded by the British in 1969 and built using French and Indian technology. It awaits upgrading, soon to be powered by

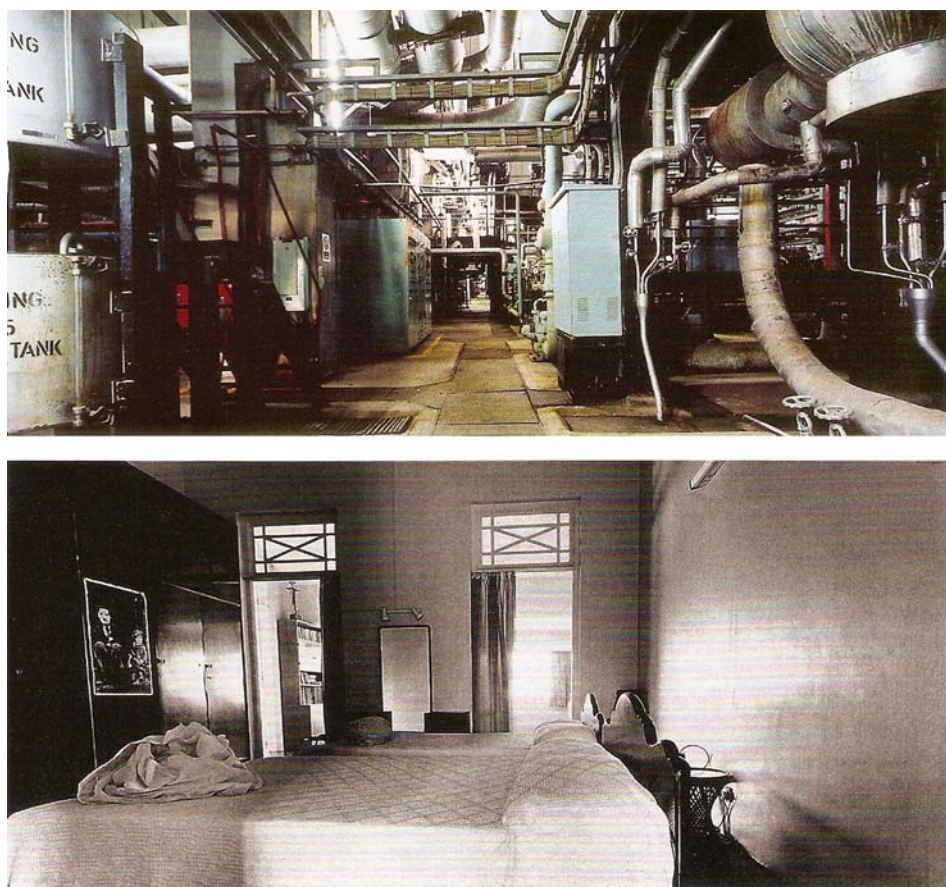


Figure 3. *Power Station #4* (2004) type c photograph and gelatin silver photograph, 1 of 13 pairs, 19 cm × 42 cm each (source: Simryn Gill).

natural gas. Its obsolescence is compared to the Gill bungalow, which has stood on the adjacent site to the power station since 1928. The house has accommodated four generations. Its generous scale seems disproportionate to today's compact living standards. The expiry of this house, dating from its first-generation migrants to Malaya, seems imminent. This tentativeness of space is matched by Gill's photographs, which bring both detail and whole, foreground and background, into undifferentiated relief, thus heightening the tension of each space. Each frame draws the viewer into the room, at the same time as it takes one beyond the frame, towards the edges of the image, the room or the context:

The most powerful space of the photograph resides in its peripheral space and the blank space, the glow, extending beyond and around the frame. This is the space of accidents, 'failures', social movement, contemplation. It is in the peripheral space that images turn into language (Nemet-Nejat 2003, 37).

Yet, it becomes clear from the photographs that both spaces – house and power station – could be perceived as equally alien to the artist, who intentionally adopted the dual positions of insider and outsider, particularly in relation to her ancestral home. A persistent emptiness and vastness of space alludes to the artist's absence from her hometown, resulting in an internal divergence that is embodied in these intimate yet voyeuristic photographs – she is at once home and away; these things are simultaneously familiar and distant; the cavernous power station she has never entered before now looks almost similar to the large empty house which she once resided in. In these images, Gill's double roles as daughter/granddaughter and artist play off against each other to complicate the meaning of domesticity, or more specifically the notion of 'being at home' for a diasporic individual like herself. The pairs of photographs – the coloured ones for the power station and the black-and-white ones for her family house – are uncanny in that these different buildings are shown in absolute dialogue with each other through their convergences of form and function. Gill, however, reveals her personal knowledge of the latter space and its occupants by including telltale details such as an umbrella stand in the living room filled with walking sticks, a heavy old-fashioned iron in use in an airy laundry room, a tidy indoor kitchen in comparison to a more lived-in outdoor one, and remnants of 1970s cane furniture which are still lovingly preserved in some of the rooms. There is an air of stillness, and a sense of melancholic waiting in every room. Each of these details operate in what Nemet-Nejat calls a 'peripheral space', rewarding the observer with more intimate knowledge of the absent occupant, if we only choose to look more intently. At the same time, the artist is also invoking the idea that 'home' may be more distant and unfamiliar than we imagine, as the two divergent spaces visually converge through unlikely pairing.

Gill works critically with this slippage by pitting our individual mental geography of home, which we think we know, with the interiors documented. This technique is also used in another more recent and personal photographic collection. In *Distance* (2003), a book of photographs made originally for the artist's sister and close friend who 'live far away from Sydney, and who I speak to almost every week', she took 135 photographs of her own house from where she would conduct these weekly conversations (Christov-Bakargiev and Gill 2009, unpaginated). The obsessive documentation, which started off as an act of wanting to take control of a relatively modest space, resulted in the house becoming more and more incoherent, 'it's too close, there is too much information, and no cracks for the imagination and one's projection to slip in and take over' (Bullock, Hibberd, and Gill 2006, 17). In this sense, the artist as wife/mother/daughter/sister is able to see much more in such a

confined space, drawing into the frame smaller, more mundane details and objects key to everyday life and survival. Thus, Gill's brand of kitchen table politics inevitably produces a particular aesthetics and vision – one geared towards the understanding of interiority as that which is profoundly difficult to pierce through at first glance. The vision required of audiences for both *Dalam* and *Power Station* is simultaneously empathetic, intrusive and unhurried. It is equally analytical and inclusive, specific and broad, and able to take in specific minutiae as well as overall forms. In this mobile subjective mode, Gill gives us access into the complex spaces of home, to inhabit and indulge in its practices and objects, as well as to move out of it, to see it as abstract forms and as revealing indices of taste, ethnicity, class and wealth.

The tropics and the artist as migrant

... if the rediscovery of our enjoyment of the tropics has to call up an original 'Asian sensibility' uncorrupted by the 'West' such a project has to be highly circumspect (Yao 1999, 28).

The notion of home as an unchanging, point of origin is becoming more problematic on a world stage where global and transnational flows of capital, culture, commodity and citizens are immanent, whether by migration, displacement, conflict or choice. Bachelard's (1958) oneiric and phenomenological invocation of 'home' as a singular unyielding idea and an embodied space tied to childhood memory and daydreams, while enticing, is also increasingly seen as over-romanticized. Bachelard's 'home' is primordial, a nesting space which everyone has imaginative access to. Yet, home for many immigrants, migrants and what Aihwa Ong calls 'flexible citizens' (1999), is more contested than secure since it is also constructed in relation to class, race, gender and ethnicity.

Although currently based in Sydney, the artist frequently travels 'home' to work in hot and humid Port Dickson, a small and sleepy Malaysian seaside town located along the once famous fifteenth-century spice route of the Straits of Malacca. Despite massive changes to the landscape in this part of the world where capitalism and corporatization's bust and boom cycles continue to fracture spaces through demolition, rebuilding and decay, her family still lives in a rambling seaside *bungalow* or detached house, originally built in the 1920s. Gill's creative output is informed by this long distance commute and her sense of being un-rooted. Or as she puts it, 'I can and do activate the question of how to think about place, and place-in-the-world through my own experience, and as a shifting and mutating and contingent value' (Papastergiadis and Gill 2007, 30).

Central to the artist's 'place-in-the-world' is her deep affinity for the tropics. Despite moving around so often, Gill attachment to the tropical world is unequivocal, 'I grew up in Malaysia. My sense of self was formed very much in the presence of the lushness and decay of the tropical climate' (Gill 1998, 15). The tropics is a place where time is accelerated. Laundry becomes quickly mottled on the line, pages turn yellow, fungi decorate walls and armies of ants migrate furiously upon sensing the coming of monsoon rain. It is a space marked by rapid cycles of excess and decay, ruination and rejuvenation. The notion of permanence and monumentality, so incumbent in the architectural tradition, are challenged by spatio-temporal rhythms of nature in the tropics – a nature that strikes with its scorching heat, pounding rains, destructive dampness and punishing droughts. Yet, as anthropologist Yao Souchou reminds us, our perception of nature in the tropics, through migration or time away at foreign places, becomes inevitably mediated by Western landscape texts such as those by Keats, Wordsworth, Byron, Conrad and Burgess which

describe a more picturesque clime populated by winding leafy paths, dappled sunlight and fragrant evenings under frangipani trees (Yao 1999, 76–8). Through these authors and their writings, one relearns how to appreciate the tropics, but also in turn, to fetishize it. Somewhere along this route, tropical nature becomes external to one's experience. Significantly, the tropics was also historically perceived as a space of Otherness, and closely associated with emasculation, decay and excess (Leys Stepan 2006). Being subject to colonization, control, exploitation and lately conservation, the tropical clime is still seen as subordinate to the temperate zone, and has not radically transformed established modes of thought, perception and imagination.

Gill's documentation of tropical space as one of longing and lost, and yet one with autonomous potentialities, begins to dismantle this customary opposition between what is essentialized and what is cultivated. The artist's mobile feminist perspective is aligned with what Yao calls 'the profound irony of our – postcolonial – confrontation with nature', that is, Gill has learnt to appreciate the tropics from positions within and from outside it, and demonstrates that both perspectives are critical to galvanize an



Figure 4. Standing still (2000–2003) type c photograph, from a series of 116, 31.5 cm × 31.5 cm (source: Simryn Gill).

understanding of tropical space as having an independent language and its own meanings (Yao 1999, 78). Gill re-appropriates tropical nature as a paradoxical space which is both marginalized and left aside, yet also fundamentally foundational to knowledge construction. The contested tropical landscape – which has been subjected to colonial epistemology and governance, and in which both growth and decay are wildly accelerated – is a favoured site for these experiments. ‘Plants and the plant world’, Gill explains, ‘offer a powerful way to think about where we find ourselves now and how we grow into and adapt to our sense of place’ (Raffel and Gill 1999, 8). Landscape, while often perceived as neutral, is a powerful category, which delineates a politically charged space. Using this doubleness, the artist’s ‘natural’ interventions are really artifices where one can be ‘political without being political’.¹⁰

In *Forest* (1996, 1998) (Figure 4), the limits between words and the imaginary worlds they conjure are destabilized by inserting these words into a foreign natural landscape. After Gill moved from Adelaide to Singapore in 1994, she started on a project where she began tearing pages from novels – significantly, many of these texts related to domestic relationships, ‘reflecting Gill’s own experience as a mother with young children, in another new city’ (Storer 2009, 51) – and glueing these strips onto trees in her own backyard. A ginger plant, for example, was inscribed with parlour conversations from Henry James’ *Portrait of a lady*. In *Forest*, the grafting experiments continue in a more systematic way where strips of texts, torn from colonial, local and mythical histories ranging from Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* to an Indonesian version of the *Ramayana* latch onto trunks, leaves, fruits, roots and soil. ‘These fragmented books do not describe their locations, but adapt to them, growing new tales’ (52). In *Forest*, Gill inverts the colonial enterprise by planting colonial texts into a tropical landscape and allowing the latter to consume, and eventually obliterate the former. Gill confesses that she has been enamoured by the romanticism of colonial texts since she was very young, and has chosen not to abandon this affinity when articulating her own position in the world. This stance differentiates her as a mobile postcolonial feminist who marks her place as a woman of colour without forfeiting her childhood experiences and affiliations with a colonial past. Thus, *Forest* visualizes the mobile feminist migrant’s struggle to graft an independent existence in her new adopted homeland, under her own terms of engagement. As curator Russell Storer observes, ‘Plants are a central metaphor for human connection to place: we speak about being ‘transplanted’ or ‘setting down roots’, ... and may undertake a ‘naturalization’ ceremony to become a citizen’ (51).

The romanticism of the tropics is revisited in *Standing Still* (2000–2003) (Figure 5), a collection of 116 photographs. Gill catches buildings of all kinds suspended in limbo at the end or at the start of their life spans, rudely cut short by a brutal economic downturn that hit Southeast Asia in 1997. Hotels, houses, shacks, schools, apartment blocks, offices and mansions are indiscriminately documented. *Standing Still* can be read on many levels: as objective documentary, sympathetic record or utopian critique. Each building seems to emanate its own echo, its insides blackened and vacuous. Gill is concerned about interior spaces more than forms, thus giving the viewer a glimpse of what may have been. The buildings are caught not in *rigor mortis* but transforming in rapid decay. What is also striking about these images is how fragile architectural space seems to be, returning as it were in these photographs, as part of the tropical undergrowth. In Malaysia, where these photographs were taken, buildings like these gradually recede into the natural landscape, and consequently become invisible. In *Standing Still*, these buildings dematerialize into the tropics as part-monument, part plant, part landscape, part structure, part civilization and part wilderness.



Figure 5. Forest (1996, 1998) gelatin silver photographs, from a series of 16, 120 cm × 95 cm (source: Simryn Gill).

Gill's fascination with the tropics compounded by her migratory status, compels a fresh definition of this customary space of lack and subordination, conversely, casting it as one of eternal renewal – things, buildings, words and practices ultimately return to the land. Here, where nothing remains permanent, reinvention of the self through space presents a distinct possibility. In contrast, her use of the photographic medium as a mode of documentation subsequently monumentalizes what is decrepit and decaying, raising these forms and cycles at par with a status quo that is permanent and unchanging, and in so doing, delimits tropical space as being both inside and outside cultural legibility.

Conclusion

In this article, I focused on the spatialization of a mobile feminism, that is, a fluid positioning of the feminist subject in different spatial contexts to account for issues of gender and sexuality, as well as the pressures of ethnicity, citizenship and class. In particular, I discussed how Simryn Gill's work reactivates a mobile feminist subjectivity by carving a 'paradoxical space', which occupies centre and margin simultaneously. Her work harnesses *space* – sites of display (the gallery floor), labour (the domestic interior) and longing/origin (the tropics) – and the recurrent theme of the *domestic residue* – which furtively engages geographical, historical, material and relational boundaries of the home and the self – to articulate a middle-ground version of feminist mobility. I explored how Gill's work demonstrates subjective mobility by her taking on multiple roles in these spaces, that is, the artist as feminine Other/wife/mother/daughter/migrant.

Like the robust background spaces from which it gains substance, the domestic residue is what remains and endures in the aftermath of migration, displacement and contestation. It carves out spaces where the mobile feminist figure, inscribing both 'women', 'woman', as well as their attendant subject positions such as mother/wife/daughter/migrant, may exist. The hybrid-like, inside–outside type of spaces produced in Gill's work, is concrete evidence of what de Lauretis and Rose have only been able to describe in the most abstract of terms.¹¹ And perhaps because feminist mobility must ultimately evolve, it may only ever be detected in that which remains untaken.

It is the act of teasing these politics and voices that interest me: the act of making the work, and then the question of how these embedded negotiations can be carried, contained by the flimsy aftermath, the thing we call 'art'. The residue. Who sees what is in the stuff that is left after the 'making'? (Papastergiadis and Gill 2007, 30)

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Notes

1. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (2009), Tracy Williams Ltd in New York (2006; 2009), the Smithsonian Institution's Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC (2006), London's Tate Modern (2006), biennales in Singapore, Seville and Liverpool (2006), and the *Documenta* 12 exhibition in Kassel (2007).
2. Langenbach is writing on Simryn Gill's *Heart of the Matter*, which showed at Singapore's *Substation* in April 1994.
3. George is drawing from Partha Chatterjee's thesis on the role of women as subjects and objects of nationalist discourse. See Chatterjee (1989).
4. In this respect, Gill's work resonates with another artist Mona Hatoum, whose body of work cannot be adequately rehearsed in this article. Perhaps the difference between Gill and Hatoum lies in the latter's clearly enunciated position as a postcolonial feminist acting as artist, while Gill's own political position remains mostly ambivalent, if not understated, in her work.
5. Conversation with artist, 26 March 2009.
6. Conversation with artist, 17 April 2009.
7. *The Wizard of Oz*. Directed by Victor Fleming. Hollywood, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939.
8. Conversation with the artist, 17 April 2009.
9. Conversation with the artist, 26 March 2009.
10. Conversation with the artist, 17 April 2009.
11. I would like to thank Barbara Penner for highlighting this observation.

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

El residuo doméstico: la movilidad feminista y el espacio en el arte de Simryn Gill

El feminismo, actualmente con cerca de medio siglo de antigüedad, está aún fracturado por dos formas divisivas: el deseo de emancipar a las mujeres de las estructuras de poder masculinistas, y la afirmación de la diferencia sexual de la mujer. Sin embargo, como argumentan Teresa de Lauretis y Gillian Rose, para que el feminismo permanezca relevante, debe también considerar las condiciones hegemónicas fluidas del poder, y por lo tanto, esforzarse para desarrollar nuevas “formas”, las cuales enfatizan la movilidad política del feminismo. Desarrollando esta proposición, el presente artículo analiza cómo una nueva movilidad feminista crítica puede detectarse en las obras de la artista malaya basada en Sidney, Simryn Gill. Nacida en Singapur en 1959 y proveniente de una familia inmigrante punyabi que se estableció en Malasia por primera vez en los años 20, Gill viaja constantemente entre su hogar en Sidney y su casa familiar en Puerto Dickson, una pequeña ciudad costera de Malasia. Analizaré cómo la perspectiva feminista de Gill puede ser mapeada a través de los cambiantes contextos espaciales de la artista, observando tres espacios: la galería, el interior doméstico y el trópico. A través de estos espacios, estudiaré cómo la artista se ocupa de los roles duales de “mujer” y “mujeres”, demostrando así la cambiante y fluida energía de una postura feminista móvil. El arte de Gill valoriza la esfera doméstica como tema recurrente siendo este central para su autodefinición en la esfera pública. Sin embargo, su tratamiento de la domesticidad se caracteriza por su furtividad, una táctica que, sostengo, permite una agencia feminista que es políticamente móvil y capaz de movilizar temas de género, sexualidad, raza, clase y ciudadanía.

Palabras claves: feminismo; movilidad feminista; domesticidad; arte; sudeste asiático

家户的残余：辛琳吉尔（Simryn Gill）艺术中的女性能动性及空间

发展至今几近五十载的女性主义仍然分裂成两大对立形式：将女性自男性权力结构中解放的冀望，以及对于女性情欲差异的肯定。但如同劳莉蒂丝（Teresa de Lauretis）和吉莉恩萝丝（Gillian Rose）所主张，女性主义若要维持其适切性，则必须考虑流动的霸权力状态，进而致力于开展强调女性主义政治流动性的新形式。本文发展此一立场，探讨如何能够从居住在雪梨的马来西亚艺术家辛琳吉尔（Simryn Gill）的作品中发掘新型态的批判女性主义流动性。1959年出生于新加坡、来自本杰比（Punjabi）并于1920年间定居马来西亚移民家庭的吉尔，频繁地往来她在雪梨的住所和家人定居的迪克森港——一个位于马来西亚的沿海小镇。我将藉由检视三个空间——画廊、家居装潢以及热带地方，探讨如何透过艺术家转换的空间脉络，标志吉尔的女性主义视角。透过这些空间，我将探讨这位艺术家如何占据“单一女性”和“众多女性”的双重角色，藉以证明流动的女性主义立场中转变的非固定能量。吉尔的艺术将家户领域维持为不断重复的主题，并成为她在公共领域中自我定义的核心。但她处理家户性（domesticity）的特殊之处在于其诡秘的特性；而我将主张，此一特性是赋予女性主义行动者政治能动性以参与至性别、性向、种族、阶级和公民权的战术。

关键词：女性主义、女性主义能动性、家户性、艺术、东南亚