

Representing Bodies and Identities in Global Exhibitions The Case of Female Photography in the Japanese Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale

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Abstract The paper focuses on Japanese female photographers in international art exhibitions. Until recently, Japan's photographic field was predominantly male-dominated. Traditionally, women were considered incompetent with technical equipment and this long-enduring stereotype limited them to passive roles as models. However, from the late 1980s/early 1990s, a shift occurred, with female photographers gaining prominence. In parallel, the representation of Japanese women artists in international venues started to rise and more names began circulating in the global art circuits. This essay inspects in particular one of the most important events on the scene: the Art Biennale in Venice, the oldest and most prestigious of these large-scale exhibitions. Two important shows, held respectively in 2005 and 2009 at the Japan pavilion of the Venice Biennale, provide the starting point for this analysis: they were the only exhibitions ever dedicated to women photographers by the pavilion in its 70-year-old history. The artworks of Ishiuchi Miyako and Yanagi Miwa were showcased, two of the most important women photographers in recent years.

Keywords Japanese female photography. Japanese photography. History of photography. Venice Art Biennale. Women artists. Women photographers. Ishiuchi Miyako. Yanagi Miwa.

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1 Introduction

The paper is the result of a wider ongoing research on Japanese photography realized by women, often ignored or overshadowed by the male production, and on the ways their work has been presented in international venues. By looking closely at cases of large-scale, international exhibitions that included - or excluded - female photographers and artists from Japan in the past, one of the most striking examples of disparity in the ratio of male/female represented artists is the Japan Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale. Still considered one of the most prestigious institutions for the validation and the promotion of the visual arts on a global level, the Venice Biennale has a long history in which political, economic, and power dynamics are tightly entangled, and to which the Japanese pavilion is no exception.

As it will be seen in further detail, the Japanese pavilion has exhibited photographic projects realized by women only on two occasions: the 2005 and the 2009 exhibitions. The works presented in these shows were realized respectively by Ishiuchi Miyako 石内都 (b. 1947) for the 2005 edition, and Yanagi Miwa やなぎみわ (b. 1967) for the 2009 one. Despite being of different generations, Ishiuchi and Yanagi are two of the most prominent Japanese artists of the past decades and their artistic practices share some common characteristics that will be inspected in this study; with different approaches, through their art they both address concepts such as the plurality of female identities, the oppressions of the body, and issues concerning gender roles and expectations.

Looking closely at their exhibitions, it can be argued also that Ishiuchi and Yanagi share some features not only for the perspective they bring in their artistic production, but also for the specific cases of their Biennale interventions: they are the only female photographers ever exhibited at the Japan Pavilion since it opened, thus selected to be the national representative of their country of origin; in their respective editions of the international exhibition, both were dedicated a solo show in which they presented new projects never seen before; and finally, they both have a keen interest for portraiture and display a strong emphasis on non-conforming female bodies. It is remarkable that the two artists who have received such an impressive visibility on the international scene are both so involved with gender-related issues, the female body and appearance, and women's lives. This may lead to notice, on one side, a wider need to approach these topics, which seems to be shared between different women photographers in Japan; in parallel, on the other, it seems these images have generated a rather positive response from the international scene, especially considering the plurality of exhibitions that, following their shows in Venice, featured the two artists.

In order to provide an in-depth overview on the relevance of the works by Ishiuchi and Yanagi in this context, it is necessary to make considerations on the concept and display of their shows, as well as to look closely at the history and structure of the institution hosting the exhibitions. The analysis of this institution was possible thanks to materials that were viewed at ASAC (Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, 'Historical Archive for Contemporary Art') of the Biennale in Venice, Italy at the beginning of 2022. The methodological frame of the study is an approach that takes into consideration the two artists' individual careers in Japan and abroad, as well as the historical documentation on the Biennale at ASAC. Framing the research around the Biennale exhibitions was necessary also to circumscribe the two artists' vast photographic production to the very meaningful projects that will be discussed further in this paper.

2 The Art Biennale in Venice

The definition of the term 'biennale' or 'biennial' has been used to identify a large-scale collective exhibition, which regularly presents a vast number of international artists to the general public. Its main characteristic is its recurrence: it is repeated every two to five years, with a different art director or committee for each edition, and thus transformed every time (O'Neill 2012, 52). The widespread use of the word is a consequence of the adoption of the structure, shaped after the Venice Art Biennale model, that has become a growing phenomenon among the curatorial practices adopted to display contemporary art on a global level.

Since the end of the twentieth century, an increasing number of similar international exhibitions and art fairs has flourished in many different countries that were out of the mainstream art circuits before the last few decades. To mention a few examples, the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea (1995-ongoing), the Havana Biennial in Cuba (1984-ongoing), the Taipei Biennial in Taiwan (1984-ongoing), the Cuenca Biennial in Ecuador (1987-ongoing), and the Johannesburg Biennale in South Africa (only two editions: 1995 and 1997). The increase witnessed an inevitable stop only between 2020 and 2021 due to the global pandemic, with most of these events reopening at full capacity in 2022, including the Venetian one. In inspecting the structure of the biennale model, Paul O'Neill (2012) highlights,

[t]he biennial is now the default exhibition model across the world, its capacity as a promotional tool for nations and city branding making it irresistible to cultural policymakers, to such an extent that it has become a homogenizing force – a model to be copied rather than subverted. (O'Neill 2012, 51)

The political and economic powers, as well as the attention that these events' promotion generate around their participating institutions and the hosting venues and cities, are intrinsically linked in the biennial systems. Each presenting itself as a recurring and unmissable appointment for the art world on a global scale, these international shows undergo significant changes throughout their various editions. This is a consequence of the fact that every new display is organized by a different curator, who invents an original, central theme and selects different artists whose works can be consistent with the main topic.

Massimiliano Gioni (2013), who has a significant experience as the curator of many international exhibitions - among which the 2013 Venice Art Biennale, *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* (The Encyclopedic Palace) - stated that this sort of exhibitions offer a certain level of freedom to the artistic direction in selecting the appropriate artists and projects to be involved. Moreover, he argues that it is precisely the temporary nature of the exhibitions that makes them open to innovation and change, as "flexible tools that are just waiting to be reinvented and transformed with each new edition", unlike all other artistic institutions such as museums and permanent collections (Gioni 2013, 173).

Conversely, other opposing voices have highlighted how, in fact, the biennales play an active role in shaping the art world, or in keeping some of its aspects intact; indeed, despite having among their main aims the promotion of a polyphonic dialogue and - in theory at least - the creation of a space for exchange, it can be noticed that biennales are not liberated from politics and power dynamics, but do actually contribute to these to some extent. Despite the international proliferation of this model of shows, the huge 'La Biennale di Venezia' is still evaluated the most prestigious art event worldwide, and it can draw unprecedented international attention to the artists presented. For these reasons, the curatorial choices made for the event resonate deeply within the global art system.

However, the biennales and particularly the Venice case can be seen as examples of how the artworks exhibited in these large-scale shows have been commonly organized around hierarchies of center/periphery rather than encouraging more equal, dialogic relationships between artists (Withers 2008, 459). Exhibitions of this kind tend to mirror a system of race and gender inequalities that are still very present in the broader art system; as explained by curator Maura Reilly, "[d]espite decades of postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer activism and theorizing, the art world continues to exclude 'Other' artists - those who are women, of color and LGBTQ" (Reilly 2018, 17).

From the geographical point of view, the trend that privileges the 'central' artistic productions, mainly from Europe and the United States, becomes evident, for instance, if we look closely at the system of Biennale prizes that are assigned to artists and selected projects in

Venice. These awards, such as Golden and Silver Lion or special mentions – although some categories have changed during the years – are appointed for every edition and are an additional tool to draw attention on the work of a specific artist or a country.

But the prizes can also offer insights of the dynamics of the global art system. For example, if we focus in particular on the post-2000 years, it is worth noticing that the individual awards, such as the prestigious Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, have been repeatedly assigned to individuals from the more mainstream centers of art. During the past 11 exhibitions held from 2001 onwards,¹ a total of 17 such prizes were awarded; of these, only 4 were won by non-US and non-European artists: Malick Sidibé (Mali) in 2007; Yōko Ono 小野洋子 (Japan) in 2009; El Anatsui (Ghana) in 2015; and Cecilia Vicuña (Chile) in 2022. And two of these, Ono and Vicuña, were actually shared with other names: John Baldessari (US) in 2009 and Katharina Fritsch (Germany) in 2022. On the opposite side, during the same time frame a total of six European plus seven US artists were awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, thus redirecting the international attention towards a more common ‘center’ of art and marginalizing ‘others’. The disparity of numbers suggests how the global art system seems to not have shifted from its common position, but rather still benefits the Euro-American perspective.

Repeated hierarchies and imbalances are also evident when the exhibitions are analyzed from the gender perspective. Looking for instance at the Biennales editions of 2005 and 2009 – the same that are under inspection in this article – it becomes clear how in the shows held at both the Giardini and Arsenale areas the women artists were not given the same space as men. Comparing the complete list of artists participating in the main exhibitions, the results highlight that the total presence of women amounts to the 38,3% of the overall artists in 2005,² and only the 37,5% in 2009.³ Therefore, despite the official position of the Biennale as a place for a more diversified and

1 The Art Exhibitions were held every 2 years from 2001 except for the latest one (2022) which, due to the Covid pandemic, took place 3 years after the previous one (2019).

2 It is worth mentioning a gap between the participants in the Arsenale and the Giardini exhibitions in 2005: at Arsenale women artists were 46,1%, so a more balanced number with their male counterpart, while at Giardini they were only the 28,6% of the total artists exhibited in the show.

3 Statistics compiled by the author. The numbers differ slightly by those reported by Reilly (2018) as they take into consideration only the main exhibitions held at Correrie at Arsenale and at the Central pavilion at Giardini, while it is not completely clear whether Reilly included in her analysis also the totality or part of the national pavilions. Also, for the scope of this article, the numbers follow the same binary distinctions between male/female artists proposed by the Biennale official catalogues and materials. Still, from these premises, it would be worth dedicating an additional analysis to the presence – or absence – of non-binary or gender-fluid artists in the same exhibitions.

plural dialogue, the issue of gender underrepresentation seem not to have been fully overcome in the past years.

Another crucial element that shapes the dynamics behind international institutions such as the Venice Biennale is the economic factor: curator Tim Griffin wonders whether, despite the multiple exchanges and the plurality of visions that can take place in these occasions, the system of these large-scale exhibitions could be in fact just a mechanism to direct the art market towards the interests of a few galleries and art tycoons by commissioning works and having them included in these shows, thus making them more valuable on the commercial level (Griffin 2013, 9-13).

Griffin's point is relevant in analyzing the case of the Art Biennale in Venice particularly considering that the commercial purpose was one of the primary reasons that led to its creation, back in 1895. Indeed, the first 'International Art Exhibition' has been established in order to revitalize the art market in Italy, besides the aim to institute a recurring exhibition showing the latest artistic trends of the time (Poli 2011, 34-5). The establishment of the Biennale signified important transformations for the urban area of Venice that nowadays can be considered a proper 'creative city', according to the definition provided by Jinna Tay (2005): we can consider creative cities those urban spaces whose characteristics are a vibrant arts and culture sector, capacity to generate employment, and possibility of meeting of global and local demands. These transformations were not dissimilar from the first World 'Expo' Fairs, such as London 1851 and Paris 1855, that were historical moments for the development of urban spaces, architectures, innovation and trade, and showed aesthetic manifestations of these changes (Tay 2005, 220-2).

It is also worth mentioning that, for the first half of the twentieth century, La Biennale used to sell the works on display in its spaces, but these trades have been banned towards the end of the 1960s; however, as Ben Luke (2013) points out in his article on the Art Newspaper, usually the Venice Biennale shortly foreruns other crucial events for the art market, such as the Art Basel fair. The consequence of this is the common practice of the galleries taking part in Art Basel to invest on the artists whose works are exhibited in Venice at the same time (Luke 2013, pages not numbered).

As a result of this general context, it can be argued that the exhibitions following a biennial format help consolidating the international art economy as well as the system of sponsorships, dealers, collectors (O'Neill 2012, 53). For these reasons, even if the Biennale is not part of the sales circuit from an official point of view, still, it is not a neutral space: it contributes significantly to inflate the artists' quotations, as well as to nourish and shape the future economic investments, thus becoming a decisive factor for the art market and its system.

3 Japan at the Venice Biennale

Different architectures and exhibition spaces have come to compose the Venice Biennale during the decades. From a historical perspective, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the first national pavilions to be erected have been all properties of European countries: Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, and Hungary, followed by France and Sweden (then transferred to The Netherlands). The USA did not have an official representation at the Biennale until the 1930s. The first space for displaying Asian art in the Biennale has been Japan, which had its first exhibition inside the central space at Giardini in 1952 and established its own pavilion only after a few years, in 1956.⁴ Other participations from Asia began much later: for instance, the Republic of China's occasional exhibitions began in 1980, and are now permanently located in the Arsenale area; and South Korea has been participating since 1986, and had its pavilion built just next to the Japanese space only in 1995.

The number of national participations demonstrate an almost constant increase year after year, except for the most recent one: in 2005, for instance, the national pavilions were 70 scattered throughout different venues; in 2019 they reached an impressive amount of 90; and at the latest Art Biennale, in 2022, the official national participations have lowered to a total of 80. Since the premises at Giardini and Arsenale do not have the capacity to host all the projects included in every edition, many pavilions have also been set up in other historical palaces of the city center, as temporary branch sites of the Biennale. These, together with the official collateral events and the autonomous institutions' shows, create a widespread network of venues dedicated to contemporary art that recurrently occupies the entire city and attracts the global art world.

Despite the first Venice Biennale having been initially established to display the 'high art' of the moment, affordable only to an élite of art connoisseurs, during its history the event has expanded not only physically, but also in terms of popularity, with increasing numbers of visitors enjoying it edition after edition. The mediatic resonance of the event are impressive for all the participants, with huge compensations in terms of promotion and visibility.

Although the model of the national pavilions may seem out-of-date, having their own space at the Biennale is an important occasion for the participating countries to showcase works from artists who would hardly become renown beyond their national boundaries otherwise (Poli 2011, 139-40). Moreover, the curatorial choices of every pavilion

⁴ The details of the history of the pavilions can be found on the Biennale website: <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history/beginnings-until-second-world-war>.

might be driven also by other factors, such as political or economic dynamics. The chosen artists are going to become their country's official representatives for that year, thus, for every pavilion it is ultimately a matter of how to depict its own national identity on a global level. The choices made by every state can diverge in various ways; in some cases, the curators might opt for a selection that gives visibility to emergent or mid-career artists who are almost unknown abroad, even if this means risking having fewer visitors and more uncertain responses. In other scenarios the pavilions may prefer a safer choice by exhibiting works of artists whose names are already internationally well-known and appreciated. This can help assuring generally positive feedback to their show, but might waste the occasion to present innovative projects to a global audience and to mark the artists' entrance in the international art circuits.

The Venice Biennale's first edition took place, as mentioned above, in 1895. Japan has been exhibiting as part of the national participations since 1952, almost 50 years later, but its own pavilion has been completed by architect Takamasa Yoshizaka 吉阪隆正 (1917-1980) only a bit later, on the 28th edition, which took place in 1956. If we consider that the most recent Art Biennale, in 2022, was the 59th exhibition - as the event happens every two years but skipped some editions for different causes, such as internal issues, political turmoils in the 1970s or, recently, the pandemic - Japan took part to a total of 32 exhibitions at the Art Biennale with its own, dedicated space since its pavilion was completed. Considering also the 1952 and the 1954 editions, when Japan exhibited in the central pavilion at Giardini, the country participated 34 times in the history of the Venetian event.

However, by looking in detail at the exhibition list, an overwhelming predominance of the male presence in the Japanese shows can be noticed. Out of the 32 exhibitions at the pavilion, only 6 shows were entirely dedicated to female artists, and none until the 1990s: these were the solo exhibitions of Kusama Yayoi 草間彌生 (1993); Naitō Rei 内藤礼 (1997); Ishiuchi Miyako (2005); Yanagi Miwa (2009); Tabaimo (2011); and Shiota Chiharu 塩田千春 (2013). Additionally, two more women artists were included in group exhibitions during the years - Seoul-born Jae Eun Choi 崔在銀 in 1995; and painter Emi Kinuko 江見絹子 in 1962. Thus, only 8 women artists had the occasion to exhibit in the Japanese premises at the Biennale, against an astounding amount of 78 male artists.⁵ This means that only approximately the 10,3% of the artists exhibited in the history of the Japan

⁵ If we add to these numbers also the artists included in the first two editions that Japan took part in when it did not have its own pavilion yet, 1952 and 1954, the total of male artists becomes 90, while the women remain 8. Also, the artists who exhibited several times at the pavilion (such as Wakabayashi Isamu, Onosato Toshinobu, and Saito Yoshishige) were counted only once for these statistics. The complete list of shows and

pavilion are women. Also, they had almost no space at all until very recent years, as the first important presentation of a female artist in the space was Kusama Yayoi's solo show that happened only in 1993.

In this wider frame, as abovementioned, the only examples of women photographers whose work was showcased in the pavilion are Ishiuchi Miyako and Yanagi Miwa. This general lack of representation, as well as the reduced possibilities for women artists to expose their works, is a consequence of the predominance of men on the artistic and photographic practices in Japan until very recent decades. For what concerns photography, this phenomenon seems to depend on the cliché of the ideal roles that have been commonly attributed to women, believed not to be the right users of any technical equipment and machinery; or expected to ignore the correct functioning of the camera, making it possible for them to become only amateur photographers and not professionals (Ross 2015, 6-7, 50-1). This long-enduring stereotype has excluded women from accessing a proper education in the field, discouraging them from enrolling to universities and specializing courses in image-making. As art critic Iizawa Kōtarō (1999) argued, signs of visible changes in this situation began to be more evident only from the late 1980s (Iizawa 1999, 15). By looking at the history of (female) photography in Japan, it can be argued that until the very final decades of the twentieth century the photographic technique was mainly taught by personal connections - from a professional photographer to their assistant - rather than learnt in schools (Friis-Hansen 2003, 265).

Both Ishiuchi Miyako and Yanagi Miwa provide examples of how some of the photographers that emerged on the Japanese art scene in the recent decades have been attempting to challenge, on one side, the limits of the preconceptions that pervade the relationship between women and the photographic practice. On the other side, they have been inspecting the stereotyped views of women's roles, their bodies and their identities on a broader level. With different approaches and outcomes, both artists show that the body can be a place of struggle.

No representation of the body can be neutral; as argued by Elizabeth Grosz, "the body, as much as the psyche or the subject, can be regarded as a cultural and historical product" (Grosz 1994, 187). Grosz added to the seminal essay *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf, who labelled 'beauty' as a proper ideology and stated that it is a controlling strategy that makes women become the oppressed objects of male desire and gaze, based on the idea that the quality called 'beauty' objectively exists: "Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it" (Wolf 2015, 3-5). For Wolf, this ideology

participating artists can be found at the official website of the Japan pavilion: <https://venezia-biennale-japan.jpf.go.jp/e/>.

is a powerful tool to keep male dominance intact and is used to limit the modern women's growth and expression of individuality (Wolf 2015, 11). The ideal beauty standards coincide with all the representations, widely spread in the visual culture, of individuals characterized by pleasing bodies and faces, tall and thin, young or seeming immune to aging, in perfect health, confident, happy, attractive.

The same standards are widely popular also in Japan, where the beauty industry has been a major business for the past decades and is one of the largest on a global scale. Similarly to other consumerist cultures, Japanese advertising and media promote flawless images of women as well as aesthetic concerns that do not differ too much from those that are perceived as flaws to be hidden or corrected by women all over the world (Miller 2006, 5). The beauty industry in Japan shows a deep influence of globalization and is fueled by mass consumption. On this topic, Borggreen argued how contemporary Japanese artists, particularly since the 1990s onwards, have been reflecting on consumerism, gender-related issues, and have been offering new critical insights into the everyday societal environment (Borggreen 2018, 178-9). Therefore, both Ishiuchi and Yanagi's productions can be seen as examples of a deeper reflection on the present-day consumerist culture and, through the representation of bodies that in many ways differ from the normative standards, of the wish to overturn the ideals of what imagery of the female body should (or should not) be spread by the visual culture.

4 Ishiuchi Miyako, *mother's 2000-2005 – traces of the future*

The first case to be inspected is the 2005 Biennale, a peculiar example in the history of the Venetian institution. The usual division of the central group show into two sections, due to the physical separation of the two main exhibition areas of Giardini and Arsenale in the city, was even more emphasized that year. Rather than being part of the same show and divided into the two locations, as it commonly happens, it featured two central exhibitions, two main themes, and two curators. These were *L'Esperienza dell'arte (The Experience of Art)*, hosted at Giardini and curated by María de Corral; and *Sempre un po' più lontano (Always a Little Further)*, displayed in the Arsenale spaces and curated by Rosa Martínez.

The 2005 edition has been widely labelled by the local and international press as a female-oriented Biennale for two main reasons: on one side, it was the first time ever in the history of the institution that a female curator (or two, in this case) was appointed for organizing the central show; and on the other, the repeated attention that Corral and Martínez drew on the importance of including women artists of different nationalities in their group exhibitions.

Indeed, if we look closely at the artworks displayed on that occasion, we can find some important artists who are usually renowned for their feminist approaches, such as Marlene Dumas, Monica Bonvicini, and particularly Barbara Kruger's intervention on the façade of the main pavilion at Giardini - who also won the Golden Lion for the Lifetime Achievement that year (Corral 2005a, 257). And other contributions such as, just to name a few, Mona Hatoum, Kim Sooja, Joana Vasconcelos, Regina José Galindo at Arsenale, where the exhibition featured also the Guerrilla Girls, whose installation *The Guerrilla Girls' Strange But True Facts About La Biennale Di Venezia* (2005) and particularly their famous poster *Benvenuti alla biennale femminista! (Welcome to the Feminist Biennale!)* were ironically mocking the institution's only apparently inclusive approach that year (Martínez 2005a, 300).

As mentioned above, the structure of the Biennale is the result of long-enduring political and economic dynamics that are mirrored in the history of its spaces, following the way each country wants to represent itself on the international scene; also, the central shows were often showing little or no attention to women artists; while it can be argued that the 2005 Biennale was showing a small improvement towards a more diverse representation of contemporary artists, the above-mentioned percentages of women artists included in the main exhibition (38,3% of the overall participants) demonstrate how that edition still maintained a strong majority of male representation.

In this uneasy context, Ishiuchi Miyako's series of works presented as the Japanese national participation seems to embody a genuinely unique contribution to the quality of the edition, and displays a deep and intimate exploration of the difficulties of life seen from the perspective of a specific woman, the artist's mother. The show at Japan pavilion for the 2005 Biennale was entitled *mother's 2000-2005 - traces of the future* and took its name from the title of the new project that Ishiuchi was presenting that year, *mother's*, which the artist had been working on for approximately five years. The exhibition featured a linear set-up, where the artworks were neatly arranged one next to the other occupying all walls of the space. In the display, two videos were included: one, entitled *mother's 2005*, showed the same objects of the photos against a white background; the other screened a succession of images from Ishiuchi's initial projects in Yokosuka. The photographs, among which some were printed in bigger formats than others, focused on small details of the items depicted, in a succession of fragments of the life of the woman through her belongings. Curated by Kasahara Michiko, the former Chief curator at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, the show was one of the first important solo presentations of Ishiuchi's work in an international venue. Although the photographer had been active on the art scene since the 1970s, this occasion really consecrated the value of her work on a global scale.

Ishiuchi Miyako (pseudonym of Fujikura Yōko) is now regarded as one of Japan's leading contemporary photographers. She was born in 1947 in Aioi, Kiryū City (Gunma), and grew up in Yokosuka, the location of a big US Navy base in the decades after World War II, to which she dedicated her important early series. Often compared to other renowned photographers such as Tōmatsu Shōmei 東松照明 (b. 1930) and Moriyama Daidō 森山大道 (b. 1938) for the attention that all three photographers dedicated to the depictions of postwar Japan, Ishiuchi nevertheless distinguished herself for the particularly intimate and personal touch of her images (Kasahara 2005, 122). In the past years, Ishiuchi was the recipient of prestigious prizes, including the Kimura Ihei Prize in 1978 for her photobook *Apāto* (*Apartment*) of the same year; and the Hasselblad Foundation International Award in 2014, just to mention a few. Her artworks are included in important private and public collections, such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York; the Metropolitan Museum, New York; Tate, London; and the Yokohama Museum of Art.

Ishiuchi studied at Tama Art University in Tokyo in the late 1960s, where she was attending courses in Textile Design and got close to the feminist collectives that were originating within the institution as part of the wider national and global students' protests of the end of the decade.⁶ However, she left university in 1970 before graduating, and was only after this time that she started experimenting with photography - notably, thanks to a relative of hers who let her use a darkroom and its equipment (Ishiuchi, Kokatsu, Nakajima 2012, pages not numbered). In that period, she also became close with the group *Shashin Kokka* (Photographic Effect), which in the mid-1970s was exhibiting in various galleries in Tokyo (Kimura et al. 1976, 15). Ishiuchi herself exhibited in one of their group shows in September 1975. It was on this occasion that the artist presented her work to the general public under the pseudonym Ishiuchi Miyako, which was her mother's maiden name and unexpectedly accompanied her whole future career (Phillips 2014, 11).

It is necessary to mention that Ishiuchi was the only female photographer included in the 1975 *Shashin Kokka* show - a situation that will occur again on several other exhibitions in the following years. Another example is the show *Japan: A Selfportrait* hosted in 1979 by the ICP International Centre of Photography in New York City and curated by Shōji Yamagishi, which featured Ishiuchi as the only woman among a total of 19 photographers in one of the very first prestigious

⁶ In particular Ishiuchi participated in the first demonstrations of the collective called *Shisō Shūdan Esu-Ii-Ekkusu* (Thought Group S-E-X) that was created by students of Tama Art University, activists Mori Setsuko 森節子 e Yonezu Tomoko 米津知子 (Shigematsu 2012, 66-7; Mizoguchi, Saeki and Sōko 1992, 169).

presentations of the Japanese recent photographic production in an international venue (Yamagishi, Capa 1979, 139-41).

Interestingly, the ICP show was presented a second time in an additional international exhibition, with an almost identical list of artists and a very similar title, *Autoritratto: Giappone (Selfportrait: Japan)*, that was held precisely in Venice later on in the same year. Organized by ICP itself as part of a very extended festival called *Venezia '79: La Fotografia (Venice '79: Photography)*, the exhibition was not part of the official Biennale network but, nevertheless, it was using the institution's premises, particularly the central pavilion – then called Padiglione Italia – at Giardini. For these reasons, Ishiuchi's 2005 presentation in the Japanese pavilion was actually the second time she had her works displayed in the Biennale spaces, as the first one was *Selfportrait: Japan*, anticipating her solo show of 26 years. Again, in that occasion Ishiuchi was the only woman out of a selection of 18 artists in total.

A completely different setting hosted the *mother's 2000-2005 – traces of the future* show, for which Ishiuchi was dedicated a solo presentation and displayed her project *mother's* (2000-05) that she had been working on in the previous years. As suggested by the title of the work, the photographic series looks closely at the life of Ishiuchi's dead mother, who passed away in 2000, and does so by looking at objects and garments that belonged to her. It also includes some incredibly intimate close-up photographs of the woman, taken just a few months before she passed away. In describing the project, Kasahara questions,

How do we live with our dead? [...] How do we live with our loss?

Death is always the experience of the living. The deceased person can tell us nothing about death: it is the living, the survivors, who speak of and share their thoughts about the deceased, recount the stories of their lives, tell tales of their wisdom. (Kasahara 2005, 122)

Ishiuchi reportedly talked about her complicated relationship with the woman. Even the decision to use her mother's old name might arguably be interpreted as means to establish a deep connection with the woman, despite the issues in communicating with her. It creates an over-imposition not only of the two women, but also of their generations and their perspectives: a way to inspect the point of view of the mother which is not dissimilar from the exploration developed in the photographic work under examination here.

The series *mother's* tenderly explores topics such as life's hardships, bereavement, death of someone dear, and how the personality of the deceased person keeps permeating their belongings after they pass away. However, Ishiuchi also goes beyond the personal relationship and considers the person not only as her mother, but as a woman, and particularly a woman who had an unconventional and difficult life. As Kasahara argues in a following analysis of the work:

The series was created by the photographer in an effort to overcome her feelings of loss after her mother's death, but simultaneously, it captures her mother as another woman while graphically describing the changes that occurred in women's attitudes in post-war years, through the stormy life of a single individual. (Kasahara 2009, 42)

Indeed, Ishiuchi's mother had to overcome many painful episodes since a very young age: to mention some of the many challenging events of her life, she had to move to Manchuria to work when she was only 18, just before the beginning of World War II; during the war, she faced the loss of her husband who was sent to the front and reported dead - which at a later stage would reveal to be untrue; and again, she experienced the subsequent necessity to return to Japan; in her homeland, for a living she was driving trucks with military materials.

The exhibition of the 2005 Biennale included the important piece *mother's #3* (2000), an old black-and-white photograph from those years, portraying the woman just next to the military truck, followed by images of the belongings of the woman taken after her death. The items shown in *mother's* range from garments, to underwear, chemises, shoes; they include even tools for make-up, such as tubes of used lipsticks, but also false teeth, wigs, or brushes full of hair - objects that are usually kept hidden from the public eye, which Ishiuchi brings under the spotlights as the protagonists of her images.

These objects embody the person who wore them and evoke her absent body. In the text accompanying the exhibition, curator Kasahara describes these photos of her belongings as proper 'portraits' of the objects (Kasahara 2005, 123). This is an interesting take on the work, especially if we consider that *mother's* also includes real portraits of the woman. Besides the above-mentioned *mother's #3*, depicting the woman at a young age, the portraits taken shortly before she died are close-ups of her mother's skin that show scars, wrinkles, marks of the time, details that are commonly considered flaws, to be covered or hidden.

The texture of the skin, with its imperfections, is an element that recurs in other series by Ishiuchi, such as *1·9·4·7* (1990), *Scars* (2005) and *Innocence* (2007). In all these works, the focus on the marks is a way to reflect on - and stand against - the normative concepts of the feminine beauty as well as the dominant view of what should be the ideal and perfect body for a woman. Vujanovic and Wolthers (2014), in the publication that accompanies the 2014 Hasselblad Award, a prize that was conferred to Ishiuchi that year, argue that in these series "she focuses on women's scars and other disruptions of the body, thus forming a critique of the dominant, normative and very limited view on female beauty and perfection" (Vujanovic, Wolthers 2014, 7).

The ideals conveyed by the beauty industry are often a merge of local and global trends. As Miller points out, there are some aspects of the aesthetic culture that are peculiar to Japan - for instance, the

preference for a pale skin (Miller 2006, 4-5). But many others, as an effect of the global advertising, remain the same for all the women on a transnational level: a pleasant and attractive body, the absence of wrinkles, the concealment of the passing of time. Through the woman's skin, which becomes the protagonist of these photographs, the center of the photographer's attention - as well as the viewer's gaze - is found in the representation of ageing, which is another element usually kept hidden from the mediatic depictions of women. Kathleen Woodward argued that ageism is further structured by gender in our visual cultures, which wish "to erase the older female body from view" (Woodward 2006, 163). On a symbolic level, old age is commonly conceived to begin at around 50 years old, the moment that coincides with the average the menopause age and, therefore, the end of the reproductive capacity of the woman's body, as "the cultural dichotomy of youth and old age has long been underwritten by the biological dividing line between the reproductive and post-reproductive years [...]" (Woodward 2006, 168). Therefore, the idea of a pleasing body seems to be strongly tied with concepts of fertility, youth and good health, and any representation that suggests the existence of bodies that differ from these standards is not encouraged by the media.

The skin of Ishiuchi's mother in her photographs show traces that are also signs of past traumas and accidents: therefore, they function as a *memento mori*, a reminder of the body's fragility, which can be easily wounded and weakened by violent events of life. Ultimately, they are a reminder of our mortality. The concept of death permeates these images, then, not only because of the deceased woman who inspired the project and is the protagonist of the photographs, but also in the way the wrinkles and flaws recall the passing of time and the approaching of life's ending.

5 Yanagi Miwa, *Windswept Women – The Old Girls' Troupe*

The second case inspected in this paper is the Japanese exhibition presented for the 2009 Biennale, an edition that was titled *Fare Mondi (Making Worlds)* and curated by Daniel Birnbaum. It was an important year for the representation of Japanese artists in the Biennale network, with the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement awarded to Ono Yōko 小野洋子, who in the main exhibition was presenting her *Instruction Pieces* (1960-2009). The central pavilion at Giardini also hosted a section dedicated to the 1950s-60s avant-garde group Gutai which, beyond artists such as Yoshihara Jirō 吉原治良 (1905-1972) or Murakami Saburō 村上三郎 (1925-1996), also included artist Tanaka Atsuko 田中敦子 (1932-2005) and her iconic pink fabric piece *Sakuhiin (Work)* (1955).

In this wider context, the Japanese official participation in the International Art Exhibition brought to Venice the solo show of another

female photographer, Yanagi Miwa, only four years after Ishiuchi Miyako's presentation. The show was entitled *Windswept Women: The Old Girl's Troupe*, and curated by Minamishima Hiroshi. The title of the exhibition derived from the project *Windswept Women* (2009), which Yanagi was presenting on that occasion for the first time, composed by a series of five black-and-white gigantic photographs that depicted huge-scale, otherworldly female characters and were occupying the space inside the pavilion almost entirely. These three-meters-by-four images were also surrounded by huge frames with vegetal patterns that were also designed specifically for the exhibition and emphasized the monumental scale of the artworks.

The artist has been a very acclaimed photographer in the past few decades. She is widely renowned for her sharp representations of women that defy the canonical views of gender roles with a performative use of artifice and disguise. Born in 1967 in Kobe, Japan, and currently living and working in Kyoto, Yanagi graduated at Kyoto City University of the Arts, where she studied traditional crafts. She began her career with textiles, at first using photographs only as a medium to document her works and installations, and only after a few years decided to use it as her main technique (Yanagi, Phillips 2008, 213-14). Since the beginning of the 1990s Yanagi has been exhibiting in numerous galleries and art institutions in Japan, Europe and United States and, although in the past ten years her formerly active production seems to have slowed down, it can be argued that she is still to be rightfully considered one of the most prominent photographers on the Japanese contemporary art scene.

For the 2009 Biennale, Yanagi's intervention transformed the exhibition space and its appearance both outside and inside the Japanese pavilion. First of all, the artist changed the architecture by covering the white pavilion with a huge black tent, which becomes the metaphor of darkness, at the same time recalling the idea of a circus or a moving theatre. The element of the live performance seems to be hinted at also by the word 'troupe' in the title of the show, a connection that was even more evident in the early version of the exhibition's name – originally *Strolling Party: The Old Young Women Theatre Company*, changed into *Windswept Women: The Old Girls' Troupe* a few months before the opening (ASAC, Biennale 2009, National Participations, folder 912, document not numbered). The structure that was installed outside was also replicated inside the pavilion through a second, smaller black tent; this created an isolated space where the 10-minute video *The Old Girls' Troupe* (2009) was being projected.

The tent has many references. It symbolizes, as mentioned, the idea of darkness: obscurity fell over the city of Venice covering the whole pavilion, in a manifestation of otherworldly, mysterious forces that are behind the apparition of the figures inside the exhibition space. But it also recalls the idea of a membrane, protecting a transformation in

progress. Furthermore, curator Minamishima (2005) suggests that this artifice turns the pavilion into a space that embodies time, as well as the fluidity of death (Minamishima 2005, 21-2). Additionally, in his words, by using the artifice of the tent the artist also wishes to highlight the political nature of the pavilion, and therefore is to be intended as Miwa Yanagi's way of protest against a hidden nationalism:

[Yanagi] wrapped up the Japan Pavilion, constructed as a symbol of national prestige as well as a container of exhibitions, in the form of a non-exposing soft shielding, shrouding and nullifying the object. The Venice Biennale was born against a background of political hegemony which was disguised as a culturally-fit international exhibition. In fact, 77 nations represent countries in venues all over the Venetian Islands, creating an impression that the Biennale is a battlefield of artistic conflict controlled by illusory nationality. [...] A tent, fabric material, is a metaphor for an individual's delicate mind which has been giving in to the power of ideology. (Minamishima 2005, 22)

The key part of the exhibition, however, is the photographic series *Windswept Women* that will be now inspected in more detail. The project is composed by five huge black-and-white photographs, each portraying a different woman against a stormy background. Yanagi realized these images in studio, in which she had a proper set and a scenography built for her models. For these photographs, the women were applied prosthetic breasts and other fake body parts, which changed their features dramatically, and were violently swept and shaken by artificial wind which distorted their appearance even further. The model's outlook is constructed to convey the simultaneously contradictory and allegoric idea of 'old girls', where characteristics of young and old women blend together in the same figure, thus merging the concepts of life and death. Linda Nochlin (2008) highlighted a common trait in Yanagi's photographs, and stated,

Artifice, demonstrated artifice, is the name of the game, and 'revealing the device' - making evident the constructed nature of the photographic environment - is a prime strategy of her project [the earlier series *Elevator Girls*], and remains so in all her work. (Nochlin 2008, 232)

In the artworks that Yanagi presented for the 2009 Biennale, the characters' bodies, similarly to the skin in Ishiuchi Miyako's photographs shown four years before, are wrinkled and altered to show a femininity that does not follow the beauty standards that typically surround the women's bodies. Yanagi can be seen as an example of an artist who, in Woodward's words, "challenges us in a rich variety of ways to see differently", to look beyond our conventional ways to see the female body. (Woodward 2006, 167)

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that, once again similarly to Ishiuchi, Yanagi's work often presents images of death, of the fragility of human bodies. For instance, a previous series, titled *My Grandmothers*, depicts the sitters' view of their own self in fifty years. After asking each of the models, Yanagi translated their descriptions in pictures, with the help of make-up and digital manipulation to transform them in ladies at an old age - which, in Nochlin's opinion, is "a site of dramatic feminine liberation" (Nochlin 2008, 232). As additional example, one of the photographs from an earlier work, *Elevator Girls*, was titled *White Casket* (1994), creating an evident connection between the image of a coffin and the shape of the elevator of the portrayed women's workplace, a luxurious shopping center.

The *Windswept Women*, who seem to belong to an alternative dimension, look like spiritual apparitions; the sensation is emphasized by the monumental dimensions of the photographs, that tower over the viewers. Their peculiar characteristics, and their automatic connections with the aesthetics of sorceress, or crones, can be easily understood and perceived by all visitors on a transnational level, regardless of the person's age or place of origin. However, I believe there is something in their outlook that recalls certain representations of a specific figure from the Japanese folklore - the *yamamba*, or *yama-uba*: the mountain witch.

A very well-known *yōkai* (supernatural creatures) of Japanese mythology, according to legends and folklore beliefs, she is a being with the appearance of an old woman who lives in the mountains, kidnaps children to devour them and torments whoever happens in her territory. In Foster's definition,

In many characterizations, the *yamamba* is a demonic woman who harms or kills anybody unfortunate enough to cross her path in the mountains; she may also descend from her mountain habitat to terrorize people in the lowlands. (Foster 2014, 145).

In the Japanese tradition it is not uncommon to find cases where the figure of the old woman has been identified with the mythological *yamamba*. An extremely complex character, in some narratives she is depicted as an ambiguous or even sympathetic being, however, the main tales associate danger and fear to her image; in general, she is

believed to be a woman who cannot live in a village with other people, who cannot adapt to the social roles implied in a communal life. This led to more recent, feminist perspectives, that conceive her as the representation of the resistance to patriarchal hierarchies, as the woman who refuses to conform to social normativity. Rebecca Copeland (2010) argues that this mythological figure can be interpreted from a gender perspective, since she metaphorically represents the woman who wants to escape from the patriarchal society and its obligations (Copeland 2010, 57). As a consequence of her unconventional behavior, she was depicted with horrific features in order to warn the other people of the risks of being an outsider; Copeland explains,

The personification of unbridled female power - hideous and hated - the *yamamba* serves as a cautionary tale to men and as a warning to women everywhere to curb their appetites, whatever those appetites might desire. Intellectual freedom, sexual gratification, political power, the ability to name oneself - a woman's wants are figured as monstrous. They take her beyond the safe containment of home and leave her in unbounded mountainscapes. (Copeland 2010, 56)

The *yamamba* has been traditionally represented in the visual culture as an old woman with black or white uncombed hair, hidden in a mountain setting or in the wilderness. Often depicted as only partially dressed, the naked parts of her body usually show emaciated, thin limbs with her skin marked by age. When these images are compared with the *Windswept Women*, it can be noticed how Yanagi's portraits share many of the physical characteristics of the more traditional *yamamba* representations: the wrinkled and emptied breasts of the women in the black-and-white photographs; their facial expressions distorted in wild screams, like the protagonist of *Windswept Women V*; or in a whirlwind of uncontrolled laughers, as in *Windswept Women IV*; and the dominance of the natural landscape as the background of the photographer's works, with its threatening skies and developing storms.

Therefore Yanagi's women, recalling the aesthetic of the famous *yōkai*, can arguably be understood as taking part to the same controversial aspects, behavior and dynamics that are found in the stories of the *yamamba*, thus creating a deep connection with the legendary figure. Through the appearance of these supernatural characters in the Venetian exhibition, the artist might have also suggested that these women embody an allegory of the outsiders at large, of the women who resist the patriarchal rules and oppose to the traditional expectations built on female identities.

6 Conclusions

By taking a few selected projects as explicative examples, this paper has explored the work of two crucial Japanese female photographers who, through the portraits of the women they realized, chose to inspect unsettling topics such as death, traumas, physical alterations, and non-conforming bodies that exist against the beauty standards imposed on a global scale.

The works by Ishiuchi and Yanagi can be viewed as illuminating examples of how the practice of many of the several female photographers, who distinguished themselves on the Japanese art scene since the 1990s, has been widely inspecting and facing gender-related issues. This was achieved from two main points of view.

Firstly, by overturning the stereotype that has been limiting women's access to making photography as authors: both Ishiuchi and Yanagi have developed an impressive career and are considered among the most renowned artists of their country. Indeed, against all preconceptions, female professional photographers *can* and *do* exist; the comparisons to their male counterparts, which are still frequently brought up by the critics, seem to be unnecessary. Women photographers have been producing high-quality works from both a technical and a conceptual point of view, as they demonstrated in multiple projects, such as the two series presented in this paper.

Secondly, their sharp analysis of the female subjects. The individuals that populate Ishiuchi and Yanagi's images are no longer able (or maybe they never were?) to define their own identity through the concepts that are conventionally attributed to women, and can be understood as outsiders that refuse to fit into the roles that would be expected from them.

The women in Ishiuchi and Yanagi's works, as well as the artists themselves, can be seen as fitting examples of a definition given by Kasahara (2009) of the representations of women in the practice of other Japanese photographers such as Sawada Tomoko 澤田知子 (b. 1977) as "individuals that are no longer able to define their identity in terms of the conventional family images and roles, the husband, wife, and children" (Kasahara 2009, 45). This idea can be easily retraced through the images of both the series *mother's* and *Windswept Women*. The impossibility to find an identification with previously set roles, Kasahara adds, should encourage each of these individuals to try and find suitable definitions of their own identity (Kasahara 2009, 45). These alternative identities seem to be what Ishiuchi and Yanagi are trying to propose in their work.

As a final remark, it is important to state that the two projects, presented on the international scene, can be rightfully considered a crucial contribution in the establishment of a female authorship in photography, something that was repeatedly ignored in the history of Japanese visual arts and was, nevertheless, long needed.



Figure 1 Installation view of Ishiuchi Miyako's *mother's 2000-2005 – traces of the future*. 2005. Venice, Venice Biennale, Japan Pavilion. Photo: Giorgio Zucchiatti. © ASAC, Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia



Figure 2 Installation view of Yanagi Miwa's *Windswept Women – The Old Girls' Troupe*. The works in the picture are (from left to right) *Windswept Women IV* and *Windswept Women V*. 2009. Venice, Venice Biennale, Japan Pavilion. Photo: Giorgio Zucchiatti. © ASAC, Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia

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