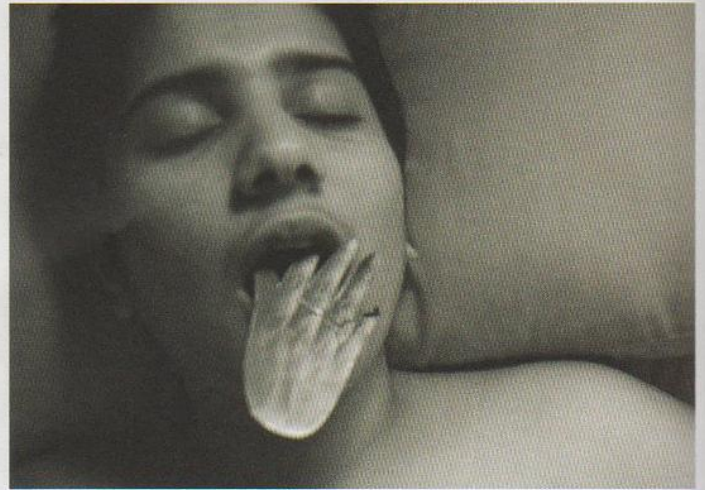


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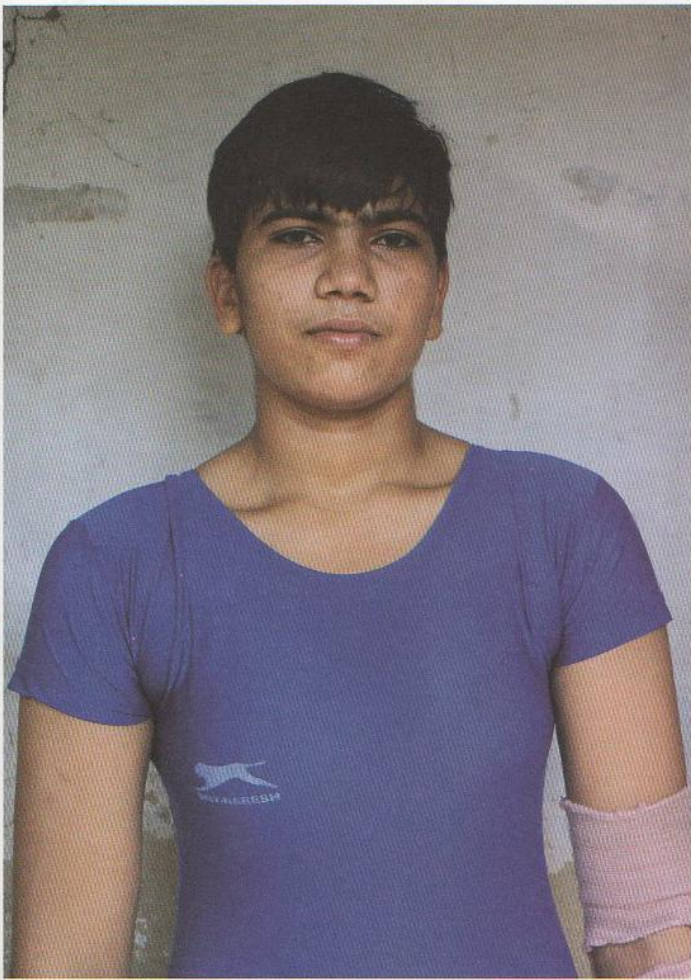
Bodies That Matter

Young video artist Tejal Shah wrestles with the conventions of gender and sexuality. By Natasha Bissonauth

Tejal Shah's work, like the artist herself, is queer, feminist and political. Born in Bhilai, India, in 1979 and a resident of Mumbai, Shah explores the physical and theoretical fluidity of gender in works such as *Trans-* (2004-05), a two-channel video installation showing the artist and collaborator Marco Paulo Rolla in various states of drag, and *What are You?* (2006), a video installation about Mumbai's transgender *hijra* community. Her work has been included in major exhibitions such as "Global Feminisms" at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and "India: Public Places, Private Spaces" at the Newark Museum. *ArtAsiaPacific* contributor Natasha Bissonauth sat down with Shah to discuss studying abroad, as-yet unfinished projects and the South Asian diaspora.

After six years in Mumbai, you are currently working on your MFA at Bard College. How does studying abroad compare with making art in India? It is a very symbolic time. When I last studied abroad at age 19, I was just beginning to understand art-making alongside gender and sexuality. As an exchange student at the Art Institute of Chicago, I familiarized myself with American art education, which intersects the politics of gender, sexuality, race and class. I was, however, always aware of my outsider position, having grown up in India.

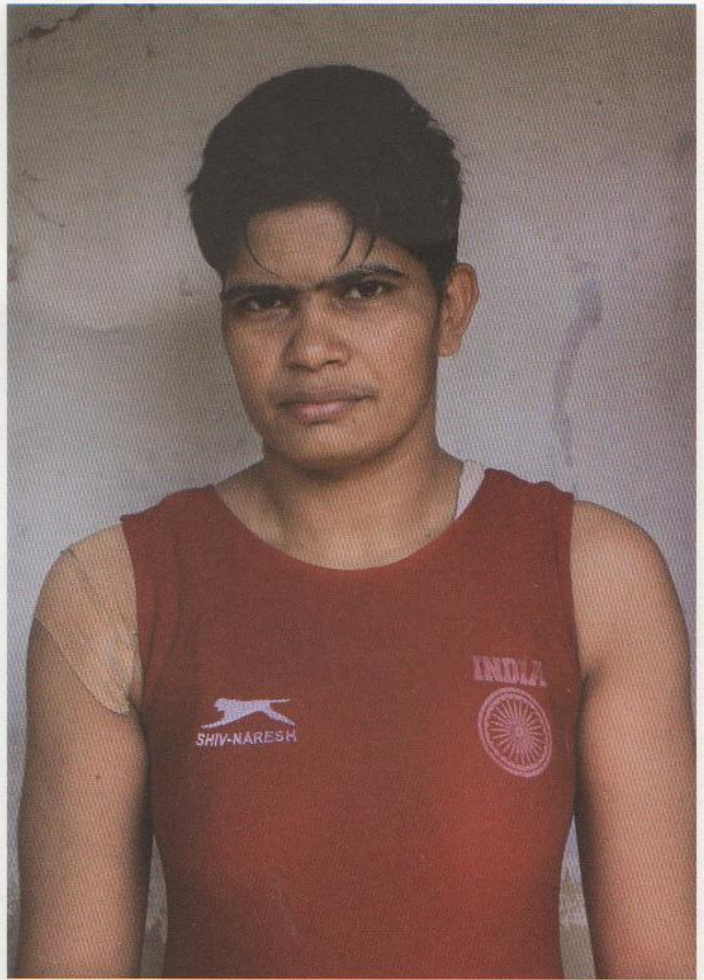
In India's contemporary climate of increasing right-wing fundamentalism—especially the policing of morality—I sometimes unconsciously engage in self-censorship. Studying abroad has been crucial to freeing my imagination. I feel less like an anomaly, less entrenched in familiar history and politics. Physical and emotional distance has allowed me to address issues more introspectively. Looking back, "What are You?" my solo exhibition at Mirchandani + Steinruecke in Mumbai and Thomas Erben in New York in 2006, explored gender and sexuality at a remove. This distance is slowly collapsing, allowing me to excavate a deeper vulnerability.



3.

In There is a spider living between us (2008), an experimental short film, you combine two separate narrative voices along with filmed images of yourself swinging on tree limbs, lying in bed and erotic drawings of contorted bodies. The video's stop-motion animation dissolves the formal narrative of beginning, middle and end. Can you talk about how the components of this work come together? There are two distinct narratives in the piece. The first is like a diary entry in which I recall arriving home, drunk and aroused only to be sexually frustrated after hearing my parents having sex. In the other voiceover, I recite a Platonic text on the idea of love. This is one of the first pieces in which I explore personal sexuality instead of the theoretical or social constructs of gender—as I did in *Trans-*, in which Marco Paulo Rolla and I transformed our “original” gender to its opposite by shaving our beards and applying make-up and jewelry. *There is a spider living between us* considers desire—the yearning for two to become one. This urge for integration is echoed in several of the techniques I use: still-frame animation, photo-collage and memoir-style voice-overs. On a formal note, I use drawing and stop-motion animation, such as the cut-out photograph of a disembodied hand—my mother’s—that crawls over my body in the film, for the first time here.

How does your work-in-progress Women Like Us (2009–) express the cultural nuances of female masculinity, a concept examined by gender-theorist Judith Halberstam? This series of photographs, accompanied by a sound piece, documents professional women wrestlers in India. The series started as a thorough investigation of a male-gendered space and how female masculinity plays out in a violent but intimate sport. The sport opened to women only nine years ago in India and I took this opportunity to gain insight into its politics.



4.

Why are most women who wrestle working-class? What do they make of their gender manifestation, if anything? And how does that sit with mainstream ideas about women and gender in India? Does their gender indicate anything about an alternate sexual orientation?

So this series is not strictly about sexuality? No, the project is more about representing a group of unregistered and rejected individuals who are nonetheless still a living part of Indian society. This project is filled with contradictions. For example, one of the wrestlers whom I photographed for this series, Sudesh, has been married for more than seven years. She started wrestling after marriage with the support of her family, but she wrestles with men because there aren't other women in her weight category. On one hand, many of these women adhere to mainstream ideas about family, marriage, nationalism, yet are very non-conformist.

Now that you are in the United States, how would you describe your relationship to the diasporic South Asian art community?

I find parallels with people who have been “Other-ed” and that, by extension, defines my relationship to the diaspora. I relate to certain feelings or conceptual gestures regardless of where the artist is from, but my own experiences have been very different. I find thematic threads with Chitra Ganesh's work in her dealing with lesbian sexuality, cultural identity and the grotesque, but I believe that the connection I feel with her work is primarily a human, emotional one.

1. Tejal Shah. Photo by Alis Atwell / ArtAsiaPacific. 2. THERE IS A SPIDER LIVING BETWEEN US, 2008, video stills. Courtesy the artist. 3. WOMEN LIKE US - RAKHI, 2009, digital archival photograph, 50 x 34.5 in. Courtesy the artist. 4. WOMEN LIKE US - SUDESH, 2009, digital archival photograph, 50 x 34.5 in. Courtesy the artist.