



## Who Needs Men Anyway?

Men have long been dominant in our constructed world. Not since the days of ancient Egypt or perhaps during the Tang dynasty have we had such concentration of female power as we do today—not that things are perfect, but progress has been made in the right direction over the last 50 years or so. As women continue to gain more power socially, legally, and economically worldwide, the way that we understand the relationship between the sexes is surely going to change. Interestingly, this social trend may be, at least in part, a reflection of a wider scientific trend in terms of realizing the general inferiority of the male sex. What do men do for the species, other than donate genetic material and open jars? With advances in medical science, women may soon be able to reproduce without men. Liu Dao's most recent exhibition will attempt to loosely blend the categories of science, art, and literature to explore whether there is any redeeming value in the male sex, to playfully and whimsically search for an answer to the question: *Who Needs Men, Anyway?*

Let's start with a question: sex—what's it good for?

Is it means to an end, a method of pleasure? Some are of the view that sex is good only for the way it makes them feel. To these people, sex is at best a hobby<sup>1</sup> and at worst coping mechanism through which they can forget their problems and their pasts<sup>2</sup>, if only for a few seconds. For them, sex is chasing the fleeting feeling of placidness in an attempt to hold tightly to some sense of security not unlike one has when looking at Altoon Sultan's paintings: serenity, belonging, and wide-open possibilities<sup>3</sup>.

Only slightly differently, some believe that the only function of sex is to procreate<sup>4</sup>—to have small versions of yourself to continue to toxify<sup>5</sup> the planet and buy shit and have small versions of themselves. These people, mostly fundamentalists of some sort, are the most boring people. Boring is not always bad though, and in a way, they have a good point. Think of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*. Someone might evaluate that piece of art as being boring, and this might be fair enough if one were to have weighted and bodily expectations of what art should be. But given the context of the piece as being unprecedented during its time and a part of the birthing of modern art, its place of importance in art history is undeniable. While it may be boring to an untrained eye, this piece (and the multivalent philosophy surrounding it) was the very definition art-forward<sup>6</sup>.

Back to the question of the value of sex. Aside from the practical value of species survival and of pleasure, sex is a dangerous, dangerous game—one that 99% of multi-celled organisms participate in<sup>7</sup>. However, it is important to point out that sexual reproduction is not at all necessary for life itself to exist. It is but one method of procreation. Admittedly, it is the primary method, at least for now—but what if isn't the most efficient method? Some evidence points toward the answer being, resolutely, "no, it is not." If that is the case, then the conclusion is obvious: men, the useless buggars, have got to go as we forge a feminine future<sup>8</sup>.

Regardless of species, sexual reproduction is costly in ways that seem impractical. Physically, it oftentimes spurs the males to become aggressive or show off (you know the type)<sup>9</sup>. Male bowerbirds build ornate nests in an effort to attract mates, peacocks that reproduce only have the best and brightest feathers, and even flowers put valuable resources into smelling attractive to bees and other pollinators. Sex is also biologically costly. To fuse half of your genetic material with that of another organism is to sacrifice sweet genetic capital. In a world where asexual reproduction is possible, why is it not preferred? Long story short—it oftentimes is, when the choice is there. There are certain species of snails, starfish, and yeasts which have the ability to engage in both sexual and asexual reproduction. Overwhelmingly, they engage in asexual reproduction if their

environments are favorable, moving to sexual reproduction only when circumstances are inhospitable. This question of exactly why multicellular organisms engage exclusively in the less efficient sex games is one of the great questions of biology, one that puzzled Charles Darwin and continues to be a matter of speculation among scientists today<sup>10</sup>.

Which brings us to this basic biological fact: procreation is key to the survival and progress of a species. No procreation means no new organisms, which in turn means no more species<sup>11</sup>. Basic stuff, but it bears repeating in these strange and uncertain times. "Strangeness and uncertainty" here point to not only our collective social climate (which is becoming more and more connected as the global becomes the local<sup>12</sup>), but also toward the scientific precipice to which we are nearing. Artists, with their finger on the pulse of culture and history, are often ahead of the so-called curve, producing work from a chillingly prophetic perception of where we are immediately headed. This is clear with those like Jacques-Louis David, Picasso, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, artists who, in their own ways and times, used their understandings of immediate circumstances to bring forth the futures that they saw. Artists today are keen to build a bridge between their art and science, to locate themselves in what will make this historic moment explosive and unique. This includes such stunts such as artists manipulating bacteria to imitate famous artworks, and even sometimes including their own genes in experiments. It also includes collectives like island6 that use high-tech materials and highly-refined collaborative creative processes to produce artworks that blur the line between the personal and the public, and the audience and the artwork. Artists today are still engaging in social and cultural prophecy, even if—and probably at least partly because—they aren't conscious of it<sup>13</sup>. Let us consider another piece of recent art history. One of the most thoroughgoing trends in the artworld of the last five decades has been art by and for—not just of—women. At the intersection of art, science, and womanism stand several artists.

One is well-known and controversial conceptual artist ORLAN, who is most famous for her *Reincarnation of Saint-ORLAN*, created throughout the 1990s, during which time the artist received several plastic surgeries on her face, filming the surgeries and documenting the results. Her surgeries were not to enhance in her features to be in line with the current standards of beauty, but rather to adopt multiple standards of beauty from throughout the history of art—she adopted the forehead of *Mona Lisa*, the nose of *Psyche*, the lips of *Europa*, and the chin of *Venus*. At one level, her artwork is a rejection of nature and the natural; on another level it is an embracing of the power of human beings to choose fate, make luck, and build worlds. She does these things with her identity firm as ORLAN, the subversive, and as ORLAN, the woman.

Another contemporary artist straddling these categories is iconic photographer Cindy Sherman. Sherman is most well known for her 1977 *Untitled Film Stills* in which she modeled for herself, assuming the position of imagined B-movie characters in order to comment on and reject the social structures that demanded two-dimensionality of the multi-faceted female. In becoming the 70 characters she created, Sherman's own identity became elusive; in her photography, she bucked off the expectation of any real

<sup>1</sup> Ahem... "cars" are also a hobby. See <https://island6.org/superchargedcord>

<sup>2</sup> A trip does the trick for most people. See: <https://island6.org/fodested>

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the beautiful thing about possibilities is how they limit us. Each choice is the destruction of other possible worlds, like waves crashing over one another. See: <https://island6.org/ridingagravitationalwave>

<sup>4</sup> We should note that the issue is balance. See: <https://island6.org/ohiloveyourbalance>

<sup>5</sup> Although the toxic can have a certain charm too. Is there anything more mysterious than a woman with knowing eyes and cigarette in her hand? Certainly, but only if you add a pug to the passenger seat. See: <https://island6.org/silvershadow>

<sup>6</sup> It's almost as if Malevich and the other futurists were the fish saying "Let's Hit it, OK?" to the artworld. <https://island6.org/letsshititok>

<sup>7</sup> Like a multi-layered round of Space Invaders—but with stronger consequences. See: <https://island6.org/aliens>

<sup>8</sup> And in this feminine future, how will these times be remembered? Will future historians look upon our times with disappointment, or will they carefully clean our stories, allowing us to be unapologetic people of our time? See: <https://island6.org/asmallshrineofmine>

<sup>9</sup> Men don't ride into battle for nothing. See: <https://island6.org/allquietnochance>

<sup>10</sup> I have my own theories, represented by <https://island6.org/mynearestanddearest>

<sup>11</sup> No humans would mean that buildings and cars become nothing more than landscapes. See: <https://island6.org/fluchtpunkt>

<sup>12</sup> Television screens and you are all responsible. See: <https://island6.org/largerthanlife>

<sup>13</sup> Artists oftentimes engage in their moment with a deep understanding of history. In a way, all art is in conversation with the past—and in the constructing of the artist's narrative, the future. See: <https://island6.org/recursivethinking>



expectation. This too was a subversive act, serving not as a firmament of a hyper-constructed identity but as an escape from any definite identity at all.

Another artist plays with ideas along these same lines. Yasumasa Morimura has contributed a great deal appropriation art. Similar to ORLAN, Morimura reaches back into art history for inspiration, and in the same vein as Sherman, he focuses primarily on metanarrative self-portraiture. By photographing himself playing as famous western subjects, he questions the implications of all the personalities involved—original artist, original subject, their respective audiences, and, most of all, himself. Morimura's art is a great example of static interactivity and a testament to the artists' ability to transcend worlds through visual mediums. Of course, "moving between worlds" is just a way of describing the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of identity through careful observation and manipulation of what many take at face value as fact.

Framing is essential to constructing and understanding one's identity, and this is a vital part of being an artist; at island6, we do this by exploring our own torn existence as being delightfully weighed down by the cultural legacy of Shanghai, something that happens by the threads of our experience here being pulled until we've got only a string remaining. What we're left with are crucial yet unanswerable questions not unlike the questions prompted by ORLAN, Sherman, Morimura, and others. What is natural? Do we have an obligation to it? Through our actions can we change what is natural? And what does nature have to do with it anyway?

Of course, these questions play differently depending on the focus. Liu Dao is concerned with the intersection of technology, collaboration, and other-meets-other (whether that's East-West, ancient-contemporary, woman-man, etc.). Other artists are asking different, sometimes more specific questions.

Questions about gender roles and the natural world are nothing new. For example, the ancient classic *Dao De Jing* is based on courses of action and non-action that are traditionally thought of as feminine. The text is sometimes read as being a response to the patriarchal tradition of Confucianism. The traditionally feminine modes of non-assertiveness, quietness, weakness, and softness are, to the Daoists, where true strength resides. The text also warns against such modes as ego, aggression, and unnecessary manipulation of one's surroundings—all elements of traditional masculinity.

More recently, feminist literature in the West takes aim at the patriarchal structures built there. Although it centers primarily on male characters, Marie Shelley's *Frankenstein* serves as a similar sort of warning against the pitfalls of committed masculinity, against arrogance, and against entitlements of several kinds. Shelley's careful use of women as a backdrop against which to paint her corrupted male characters is particularly interesting—especially given that there is no clear indication of the source of corruption. Was it a result of the characters' natures, or a result of the environment's impact on them? Dr. Frankenstein and the Creature are parallel in this way, and their unflinching cultural learnedness of modern masculinity damns them both.

In biology, this sort of self-destruction in light of the greater context of the species is sometimes called the "male tax." Much of the obvious evidence for this tax hinges on observations of social behavior. For example, in the animal kingdom, males tend to be stupider and more violent than their female counterparts, sitting around useful for little except genetic donation—which in itself is a travesty for the female, a loss of 50% of her genetic material in place of the male's. Some theories suggest that sex for our species is useful to combat against bacteria, viruses, or other invaders; others think fertilization by males is more of an "evolutionary compromise" to maximize gene variety. Some theories seem to suggest that sexual reproduction allows for a choice of desirable traits among mates. In the minds of many biologists, it's a sort of blend of these.

Regardless of the exact reason why, it remains clear that females are in the proverbial drivers' seat when it comes to reproduction—the choice is theirs. This means that the survival of the species rests with them. This becomes more concrete when you think of the mating habits of creatures like the praying mantis, who eats the head of her mate immediately after copulation, and

several species of spider, where the female is several orders of magnitude bigger and stronger than the male<sup>14</sup>.

Now, this obviously isn't the case for men—at least for most of them—but it is important to note that human beings aren't as isolated as we'd like to think. We exist and have existed within a complex web of other beings. The praying mantis has just as much wisdom to offer as Shelley's Elizabeth character, and this is meant earnestly. What separates humans is the ability to frame the narrative, and to decide what wisdom to take and what to leave. *Who Needs Men, Anyway?* is not a call to action or a veiled normative statement; like everything else, it's an option, another way of experiencing our world if only for a few seconds.

However, there is no single right answer to the question of who needs men. At a certain point, it becomes a question of personal preference, which means the value of the question comes from the discussion around it. And this discussion is bound to be a fragmented, moving target so incredibly bogged down by the different and equally valid contexts of science, art, literature, and other ways of describing experiences. When trying to capture the diverse answers to this question and others like it, one comes against similar boundaries as when one tries to describe and depict the art scene in Shanghai. Liu Dao has taken up both of these challenges in our artworks—producing imaginative responses to the question of men and providing the Shanghai context in which we work.

#### About the Liu Dao Collective

Liu Dao is a Shanghai-based art collective of tech-geeks and creative talents driven by innovation and interaction. The collective produces cutting-edge art that engages sights and scenes from the old and new China, and elevates the skills of new talents by working from a communal forum. Liu Dao's art is visual, interactive, conceptual, humorous, and always striking, involving fresh takes on modern technology, and always the product of collaboration. Since Liu Dao's beginning, painters, sculptors, photographers, filmmakers, new media artists, software and digital imaging artists, dancers, writers, engineers, and curators have worked together to produce original, intriguing shows. At island6, all the work exhibited is made on site and specifically for the theme of a show through the collaboration of the collective's in-house artists, curators and art directors. The collective has exhibited at the China Art Museum (Shanghai), at the Smithsonian Anacostia (Washington D.C.) and at the MOCA Shanghai, among many others. Major collections that have Liu Dao artwork include: Louis Vuitton House, Taipei - Antoine Arnault Collection, Paris - White Rabbit Collection, Sydney - Katz Collection (Neiman Marcus), NYC - Patrizio Bertelli Collection (Prada), Milano - Countess d'Ornano Collection (Sisley), Paris - Swire Collection (Temple House Chengdu, Middle House Shanghai).

**Dates:** From April 18<sup>th</sup> to June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019

**Curation:** Carlin Reinig & Andras Gal

**Art Direction:** Thomas Charvériat & Nick Hersey

**Coordination:** Yeung Sin Ching, Iris Gardener

**Artists:** island6 art collective (Liu Dao)

**Venue:** island6 Main, 50 Moganshan Rd, bld #6, 2/F, Shanghai

**Link:** <https://island6.org/WhoNeedsMenAnyway>



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<sup>14</sup> A different situation can be seen in <https://island6.org/undercertaaincircumstances>