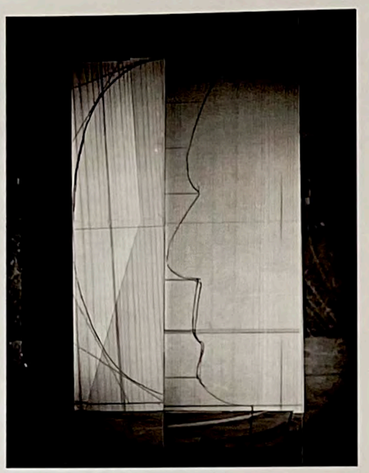
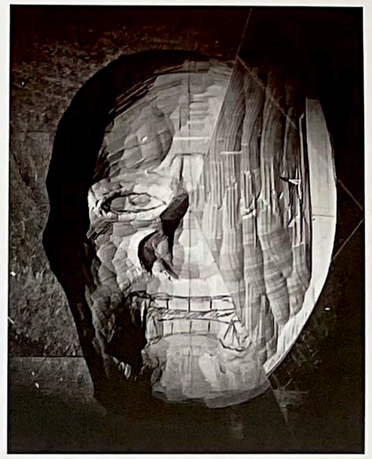


WIEBKE LEISTER Echoes and Callings



In the work we meet Hannya and Namanari and possibly Hashihime, angry spirits from Japanese Noh drama and storytelling who cannot lay their memories to rest. Female characters, perpetually referred to as deranged or jealous, who were unable to speak for themselves during their human lives because of societal pressures and injustice. They had to transform into demons, to become spitting, revolting, brutal, unforgiving creatures. Women, who were forced out of their bodies. Beings, who remain in limbo between life and death. Furious ghosts, who are not 'mad', but are angry with someone, angry about something that was done to them while they passively endured, until something cracked. They are broken by grief or transfigured by rage, pain or betrayal. Then active, activated, rushing forwards with all their might.

Their stories start where most Western tragedies close – at the end of their human lives. They are encountered in their transformed states, as returning ghosts, apparitions and echoes, seeking both revenge and release. We follow their imaginary genealogy – re-embodied, contradictory, intertextual; telling tales of silence and manifestation, distress and embodiment, stillness, and fury – building the crescendo of a single expression, from figuration to abstraction. With their body in pieces, mouth agape, shouting or screaming, troubled and maltreated, setting out to frighten, they conjure another self from their liminal existence and reveal themselves as terrifying images. They have existed throughout times and cultures. But today, more than ever, their images are recognised as released and untamed. And finally, speaking out. Loud.

— Wiebke Leister

The images of *Echoes and Callings* are collages combining black and white prints, yellow acetate and pencil. Wiebke Leister worked with Noh masters, scholars, mask makers, archivists, and actresses in Japan, Germany and the UK to study visualisations of female demons. The work is based on the characters and masks of these demons from Japanese Noh plays. Ashley Thorpe introduces the tradition and how it figures in the work.

ECHOES:

And then there is Yamamba:
birthplace unknown, lodgings uncertain,
wandering with clouds and streams
no mountain depths unreachable.

Certainly she cannot be human.

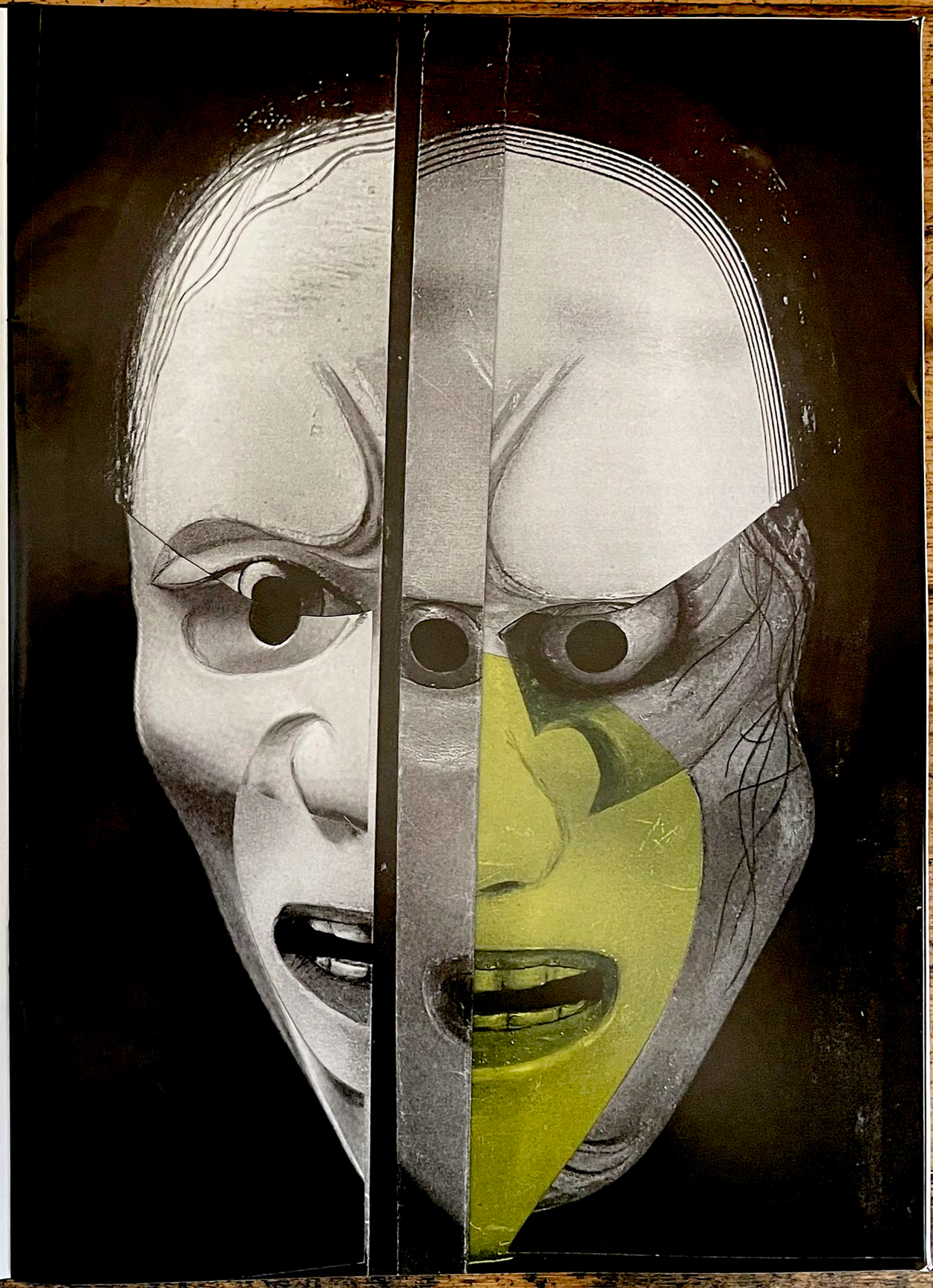
With drifting form, like drifting clouds,
temporarily transforming self,
by attachment transfigured, a she-demon
appears before our eyes; however,
when right and wrong are seen as one,
form itself is emptiness...

The above is taken from *Yamamba* (*The Mountain Crone*), a demonic play from the Japanese Noh drama, a form developed according to the taste of the shogunate in the fourteenth century by actor-playwright Kan'ami Kiyotsugu (1333-1384) and his son Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443) (here translated by Monica Bethe and Karen Brazell). *The Mountain Crone* refers to a ubiquitous cultural figure, appearing in folk tales and oral storytelling across Japan, and even in modern fiction. When Yamamba finally appears in the second half of the play, she is described as:

a shape with speech that's human
a thicket of snowy brambles for hair
with eyes that sparkle like stars
and a face that's painted red –
a demon gargoyle crouching at the eaves –
this apparition, perceived for the first time tonight,
to what does it compare?
The demon of the ancient tale, who
devoured a maiden in a single gulp one rainy night.

Despite her ferocious appearance, Yamamba insists that

Echoes & Callings: A Hannya Manifesto Sharon Kivland (ed), was published by Ma Bibliothèque in May 2023.



she is a paradoxical, almost tragic, figure:

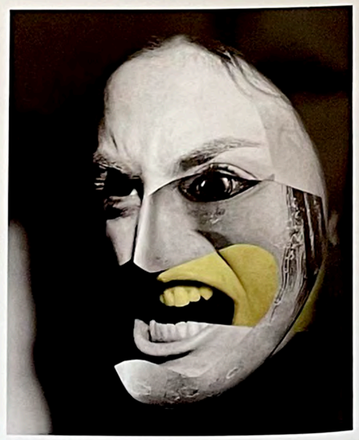
dragging good and evil, Yamamba
makes her mountain rounds in pain.

In their introduction to *Yamamba*, Bethe and Brazell highlight how this paradoxical construction relates to the prevalence of non-duality in medieval Japan. Under non-dualist thought, especially as it pertains to Zen Buddhism, any act can inculcate the non-existence of self. As a figure of non-duality, Yamamba can be interpreted as both a symbol of female self-empowerment and a victim of exclusion. She is set apart from society, enabling her to occupy a social space that is free from the vicissitudes of male domination; for, there are 'no mountain depths unreachable.'

Her ugly appearance – in the description by a male playwright – constitutes an attack on patriarchy. Her price for such assault is, predictably, condemnation and enforced solitude. The repetition of her daily acts – 'her mountain rounds in pain' – indicate her attachment (in the Buddhist sense) to the world; her longing constitutes a spiritual 'thoughtlessness' that ensnares her within the patriarchal system. Consequently, Yamamba expresses how the agency of individualised female power is constrained, even excluded, from a male dominated world. Does this make her a passive victim? Not necessarily, for as the text suggests, 'when right and wrong are seen as one, form itself is emptiness'. Yamamba embodies the interstice between the purging of patriarchal constructions of femininity and an optimistic, as-yet unrealised, independent selfhood.

AND CALLINGS:

Following extensive research into demonic female characters as portrayed in Noh, Wiebke Leister created *Echoes and Callings*, a sequential narrative of transformative photographic collages that was expressed in different media – as installation, performance, in book form as both words and images – that activates a non-duality akin to Yamamba, but which recontextualises it. In harnessing the expressive power of the demonic female mask *hannya* – whose ferocious animalistic jaw seems to represent intense pain once reconciled with the deep sadness of the eyes – Leister not only proffers a counter-narrative to the patriarchal construction of women in Noh drama, but also uses collage to shatter the mask, and the reductive identi-



ties it represents, to issue a globalised matriarchal petition for women's self-empowerment that is, like dramatic text, a call to action.

Echoes and Callings constitutes a radical mode of coming into being, the transformation of repression and exclusion into a source of female strength and assertion. The outsider status of the demon is exposed as a parallel site of subjugation *and* emancipation, a being expelled from patriarchal society, but whose power emanates from a refusal to be silenced. The open mouths of women – frequently claimed in early psychoanalysis as symptomatic of hysteria – is here recovered as a righteous expression of indignation and a refusal to submit to degradation. The bestial cruelty of patriarchy that dehumanises women is re-embodied to resist misogynistic attribution, to snarl back at corporeal violence and its concomitant sexual objectification.

A mask is itself a site of antagonistic inscription; oppressive in terms of socially carved gender norms, yet potentially liberating in terms of reshaping and resisting the collective to free the individual. The word 'mask' is a noun and a verb – a word denoting both an object and a call to action. In Japanese, the word (面) can refer to the 'face' and a 'mask', constructing both as an interstice between the interior and the exterior, the character and the audience, the individual and society, and biology and gender. Leister's work lays bare the contradictory mechanics of the *hannya* mask as a site for such patriarchal inscription and bestial resistance in the service of self-renewal. The snarling mouth emblazons the anger of abjection across the face, but nevertheless confirms such abjection as a vital source of revitalisation and repair.

The cuts across each collage instigate a critical scrutiny of subject, of gender identities, their role in oppression, and the potential for their subversion. Such rewriting effects resistance: the patriarchal narrative is disrupted as the mask as object, and objectified face, is explicitly harnessed to the individual, pluralising meaning. The colour yellow is a supernatural hue that denies corporeality as much as it asserts its being. Taken together, these images invoke dramatic tropes such as the Yamamba to transcend them, for these are individual women as well as assertions of collective matriarchal power. The collages materialise how the remaking of gender necessarily emerges from lived history and undiscovered potential only as they are fought for in the present.

The ambivalence of these women as both supernatural and human affords them a mystical transcendence. While this work is a specific response to Japanese drama, it is concerned with the lived experiences of all women; it

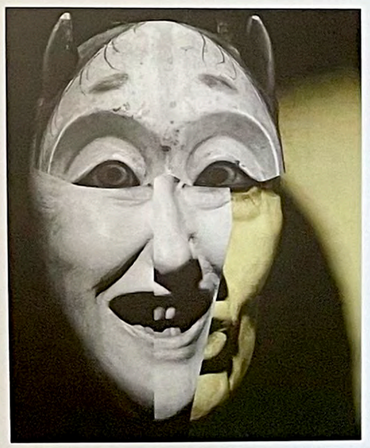
responds to fourteenth century ideologies but reverberates across time. As with Yamamba, we are left to speculate about '*her*' true nature. Is it all that it seems? What has been erased? What can be retrieved and how might this impact upon the future? Perhaps the closing lines from Zeami's *Yamamba* encapsulate the emancipatory struggle at the heart of *Echoes and Callings*:

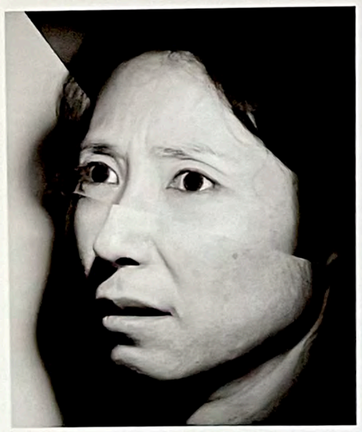
Until now she was here, or so it seemed,
mountain after mountain, making mountain rounds,
her destination never to be known.

— Ashley Thorpe







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