Margo Machida

UNSETTLED VISIONS

contemporary Asian American artists and the social imaginary

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UNSETTLED VISIONS

OBJECTS / HISTORIES:

Critical Perspectives on Art, Material Culture, and Representation

A series edited by Nicholas Thomas

PUBLISHED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE GETTY FOUNDATION

tion is a body of secondary documentation. Yet by sharing their recollections with the artist, and having also witnessed the stories of others who came to speak of their experiences, those involved—former internees and their families, as well as members of the wider audience—became part of a new community of memory that could be as substantial as a monument made of stone and mortar. Indeed, in citing Web-based projects like the interactive "Widows of War Living Memorial," the author of the *Time* magazine article on the "new memorial" also suggests that the contemporary public memorial no longer even requires an overt physical presence, nor does it need to be mediated through official channels. It can, instead, be created, maintained, and preserved through the conscious volition of individuals who actively seek to remember in the company of like-minded others.

The mobilization of popular memory brings into play the sort of memorializing impulses that often come to the forefront in times of heightened social tension and catastrophe. Although it occurred long after their internment, in a sense the moving response of aging Japanese Americans asked to contribute artifacts to projects such as Aono's can be compared to the spontaneous outpouring of raw emotion that followed the events of 9/11. Of their own volition, average New Yorkers came together in the aftermath of that terrorist act to erect memorials around the city that publicly expressed their sorrow. For months following the tragic event, passersby created makeshift vernacular shrines. They lit memorial candles and densely festooned the surrounding walls and sidewalks with colorful ribbons, toys, flowers, and private trinkets; with photographs of the dead and missing; with handwritten notes that served as testimonies to what they had witnessed; and with moving images of a still-intact World Trade Center.

Yong Soon Min • the Korean War

Asian nations—Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan—became major Cold War battlegrounds for the two post–World War II superpowers in a contest for political and economic influence that played out around the world. Alongside growing Soviet might in the Far East, the near-simultaneous emergence of militant Communist regimes in China and North Korea so soon after the defeat of Japan raised the possibility of a new and even greater threat to the interests of the United States in the Pacific. Until the collapse

and breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, both the United States and the USSR would commit troops and treasuries to these arenas, often working through surrogates but also suffering substantial casualties and dissention at home in the process.

Having spent her early life in a nation divided into allies of the competing superpowers and laid to waste by protracted warfare, the Korean-born artist, educator, curator, and political activist Yong Soon Min considers herself a child of the Cold War and identifies deeply with people from other nations who also suffered as pawns in that long-running international conflict. Min's work reflects a highly politicized sense that ties personal history to worldwide power struggles. Consequently, Western foreign policy, colonialism, and racism are basic concerns in her work. Deploying a charged iconography addressing the East-West conflicts and inequitable relations that characterized interactions during the Cold War, Min seeks to identify her experience with broader international issues of cultural disruption, oppression, and resistance.

Korea, as has been stressed, is "a culture forged in the crucible of wars."[63] As a bridge between Japan and the Asian mainland, the Korean peninsula occupies a strategic position in northeast Asia. Situated between far larger and more powerful neighbors—China, the Mongol Empire, Japan, Manchuria, and Russia—Korea was continually invaded, occupied, fought over, and pervaded by foreign cultural influences. For long periods of its history Korea was most directly affected by the Chinese, through whom Confucianism and Buddhism were introduced. During the slow ebbing of imperial Chinese power in the nineteenth century, a sharp competition between Russia and Japan ensued to control Korea and the neighboring Manchurian lands of northeastern China, leading to the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. After their victory over Russia, the Japanese claimed Korean as a protectorate; Japan officially annexed Korea in 1910, ruling and colonizing that country until the end of World War II.

With Japan's defeat in 1945, Korea was split along the 38th parallel into occupation zones administered by the United States and the Soviet Union. Within three years a U.S.-backed Republic of Korea and a Communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea had been established in the south and in the north, respectively. In 1950 North Korea invaded and nearly overwhelmed the south. United Nations forces under American command then entered the fight, leading to a prolonged and devastating war that seesawed up

and down the Korean peninsula—inflicting extensive casualties on combatants and civilians alike and prompting a massive Communist Chinese counterattack. An armistice was finally declared in 1953. Since the cessation of hostilities found each side occupying positions roughly along the boundary that had been established at the beginning of the conflict, the ceasefire line was formalized into the demilitarized zone that continues to this day to separate the two Koreas. Without a final peace treaty, a substantial force of American combat troops remains stationed in South Korea—a continuing source of contention with the north, for oppositional political groups in the south, and among some Koreans in the United States.

The 1948 division of Korea into two nations with antagonistic ideological and political agendas had arbitrarily separated families, leaving relatives cut off from one another, and touched off a mass flight of Korean refugees from north to south. The near-total devastation of the ensuing war and the resulting economic privation would lead many South Koreans to go abroad; many of them settled in the United States. Those who came immediately after the conflict were principally war orphans and the wives or relatives of American soldiers formerly stationed in Korea, along with members of the South Korean military and diplomatic corps and their families. With the Immigration Act of 1965, however, the Korean presence here changed significantly. Lured by opportunities for economic and social mobility for themselves and their children, and by the relative political stability of this country, as well as by *migukpyong* ("American fever")—a vision of the United States as an earthly paradise—a growing number of South Koreans, including middle-class professionals and intellectuals, began arriving.[64]

Yong Soon Min was born in Bugok, a small rural village in South Korea, several months before the truce that brought the Korean War to a halt in 1953. Her father, an officer in the South Korean armed forces, left for the United States before she was born to teach at a language school run by the American army. While her mother worked at an American military base in the southern capital of Seoul, the artist's grandparents raised her in the countryside. At the age of seven, she and her family joined her father in the United States. Min grew up in California and then moved to New York City in 1981, where she first became involved with the Asian American cultural activism that would have a formative influence on her work and concerns. The artist, who now lives in Los Angeles, is a member of the "1.5 genera-

tion"—a term by which Korean Americans describe those born in Asia but raised in America.

Longing for an idealized Korean homeland, "a place of belonging, wholeness, and rootedness," Min views herself as "half home as an American and half home as Korean."[65] After spending so many years in the United States, when Min paid a return visit to Korea as an adult she found herself initially feeling like a tourist in the land of her birth. The continuing partition of her homeland, therefore, is for Min a vivid metaphor for an abiding sense of personal displacement and internal division.

In early graphic works like *American Friend* (1986) and *Back of the Bus* (1985), Min anchors her family history in world events by incorporating old snapshots, taken during the Korean War, of her parents with American soldiers. In the lithograph *Talking Herstory* (1990), Min's self-image is depicted recounting the story of her early life, her "words" billowing overhead as a swirling stream of images derived from childhood photographs of her family in Korea (figure 25). Overlaid against a background of archival images, rendered in ghostly halftones, of the World War II Allied leaders meeting at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences that divided Europe and Korea into spheres of influence and control, she speaks of a family and a national history entangled with the all-powerful forces that so radically changed their circumstances. By personalizing these earthshaking world events, Min stresses the very real effect that history has had on individuals like herself, people who, while acutely affected by those times, have all too often had little control over the ways in which they were later depicted. For the artist, such "alternate histories [have] as much significance . . . as the dominant history that one reads . . . in textbook[s]."[66]

Beginning in the mid-1980s Min's art increasingly took the form of installations. *Whirl War*, created for New York's Jamaica Arts Center in 1987, represented her first effort to fashion a large-scale, room-filling environment. Integrating matching texts in Korean and English with elements of drawing, painting, and sculpture, *Whirl War* aggressively spilled over the walls and floor of its entire exhibition space. By combining references to Korean cultural practices, the Korean War, and third world politics, this complex, freewheeling mixed-media piece was a summation of themes that had long engaged the artist. On one wall, to suggest the depth of the divisions produced by the Cold War, Min cleaved the surface into distinct black

25 Yong Soon Min, *Talking Herstory*, 1990, lithograph with collé, 30" × 22". *Courtesy of the artist.*

and white zones, and then vertically bisected them with the letters "DMZ" (Demilitarized Zone) emblazoned in jagged strokes of dark red paint. Affixed on scroll-like hangings, the opposite wall contained a scattering of texts, objects, and images associated with the artist's heritage, the Korean migration, and the legacy of that war. Among them was a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes, a brand that, owing to U.S. military involvement in several Asian countries, has for many in the region become a readily recognizable icon of that presence. On two adjacent walls were dual pseudomythological images of Min, one reminiscent of the ancient Greek god Atlas, bearing the

weight of the world squarely on her shoulders, and the other hurtling headlong to the gallery floor as if, according to the artist, diving directly into the swirl of life. Such contrasting self-images were intended to embody Min's awareness of the rigors and rewards that a commitment to political activism in the arts calls for: it is for her as much a weighty responsibility as it is a joyous vehicle for self- and social liberation. "I have always tried to put the image of myself out there . . . to personalize it . . . [thereby] suggesting the connection between the personal and the political."[67]

As inheritors of a history wherein subjugation, suffering, hardship, and oppression, imposed by outside forces as well as domestic rulers, are dominant motifs, Koreans speak of the concept of *han*. Variously translated as "unresolved longing" and as a "grudge that lasts forever, an eternal unrequitedness," it is a term used by many of Korean background to characterize a major aspect of their worldview.[68] Since the source of han lies chiefly in radical disruptions of Korean society extending over centuries, Koreans retain a finely honed awareness—indeed, a deep vernacular historical consciousness—of the political and cultural forces that have indelibly shaped their society. It is, moreover, a frequent practice in Korea, and, by extension, in Korean America, to use the dates on which formative events occurred as a form of temporal shorthand—an allusion, based on shared knowledge, to traumatic historical mileposts that continue to resonate in the collective imagination of Koreans.[69] One such defining moment for Korean Americans is *sa-i-gu* (or *sa-i-ku*),[70] translated as 4/29, the day that the 1992 Los Angeles riots began, the four-day disturbance in which numerous Korean American businesses were looted and burned to the ground. This violent event, which also witnessed television images of armed Korean businessmen defending their livelihoods, so unsettled Korean Americans that one commentator was moved to describe its effect on her community as the "han of Korean people . . . com[ing] to rest in the psyches of Korean Americans."[71]

The Korean use of salient dates is a central element in *Defining Moments*, Min's 1992 photographic suite of six black-and-white silver gelatin prints, originally inspired by the jolting events of sa-i-gu. Herein Min's body and face metamorphose into a corporal template, an animate screen on which is inscribed an outpouring of dates, phrases, and images that hold deep meaning for the artist, as well as for many other Koreans and Korean Americans. The recent history of Koreans and their longing for a very different future is evoked and played out directly on the artist's body, through this vivid visual metaphor. Likening her body to the Korean nation physically

25 Yong Soon Min, *Talking Herstory*, 1990, lithograph with collé, 30" × 22". *Courtesy of the artist.*

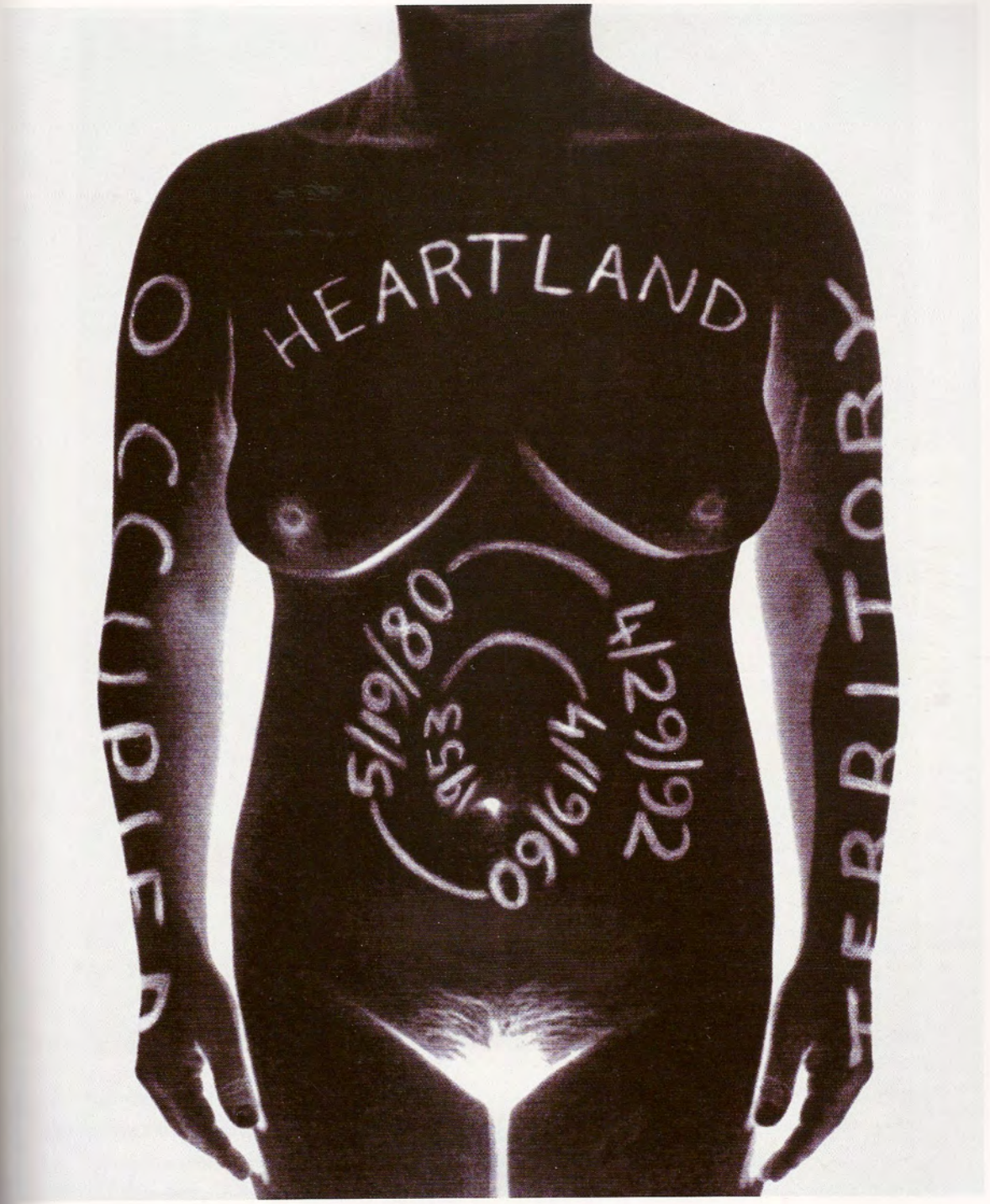
separated by the DMZ, Min depicts herself as a divided territory, cut off from the land of her birth by years of war and turmoil.

The first of the six prints, a high-contrast photonegative, provides a key to other works in the series (figure 26). In this starkly delineated nude image, a string of dates scrawled across the artist's limbs and torso pairs important events in recent Korean and Korean American history with turning points in Min's life, along with terms that compare her own body to the Korean body politic—"heartland," "occupied territory." The year 1953, for example, marks both Min's birth and the end of the Korean War, while 4/19/60 is the day riots broke out leading to the military overthrow of the South Korean government, after which she left for the United States. Ironically, 4/29/92 not only denotes the beginning of the Los Angeles riots but also happens to be the artist's birthday. Corresponding to these dates, in each of the following four photographs of the ensemble the artist's face and upper body are densely overlaid with scenes from the Korean War or of one of the later mass demonstrations and riots involving Koreans in Asia and the United States, all gleaned from documentary sources (figure 27). Conversely, the fifth and final photograph, with its luminous image of Mt. Paektu, speaks not to the embattled past, but to a hoped-for better future that will dispel the accumulated traumas of her people's history (figure 28). Revered in Korean mythology as the traditional birthplace of the Korean people, this dormant volcanic peak, situated in what is now North Korea, also functions as a common symbol of the wish for national reunification that resonates across political and ideological differences among Koreans.

As the locus and repository of contemporary contestation, in *Defining Moments* Min's body is literally transformed into the site on which Korean memory and heritage are mediated. According to one commentator, musing on the refashioning of the Asian body by migrant artists in this country, "What could be closer to me than my own body . . . yet what could be more permeable to the currents of the world?"[72] Since this writer believes that "truth" fundamentally emerges via "the sensorium of a gendered body," she maintains that historical memory and the insidious legacies of colonialism and patriarchy primarily come to women artists of Asian heritage "through the textures of a gendered awareness."

Although gender is not explicitly addressed in *Defining Moments*, it nevertheless is organic to the piece, as it is the foundation on which Min's art stands. By clearly establishing an image of herself as the knowing subject—

(opposite)
26 Yong Soon Min, photograph of artist's body with inscriptions, from *Defining Moments* series, 1992, gelatin silver print, 20" × 16". *Courtesy of the artist.*



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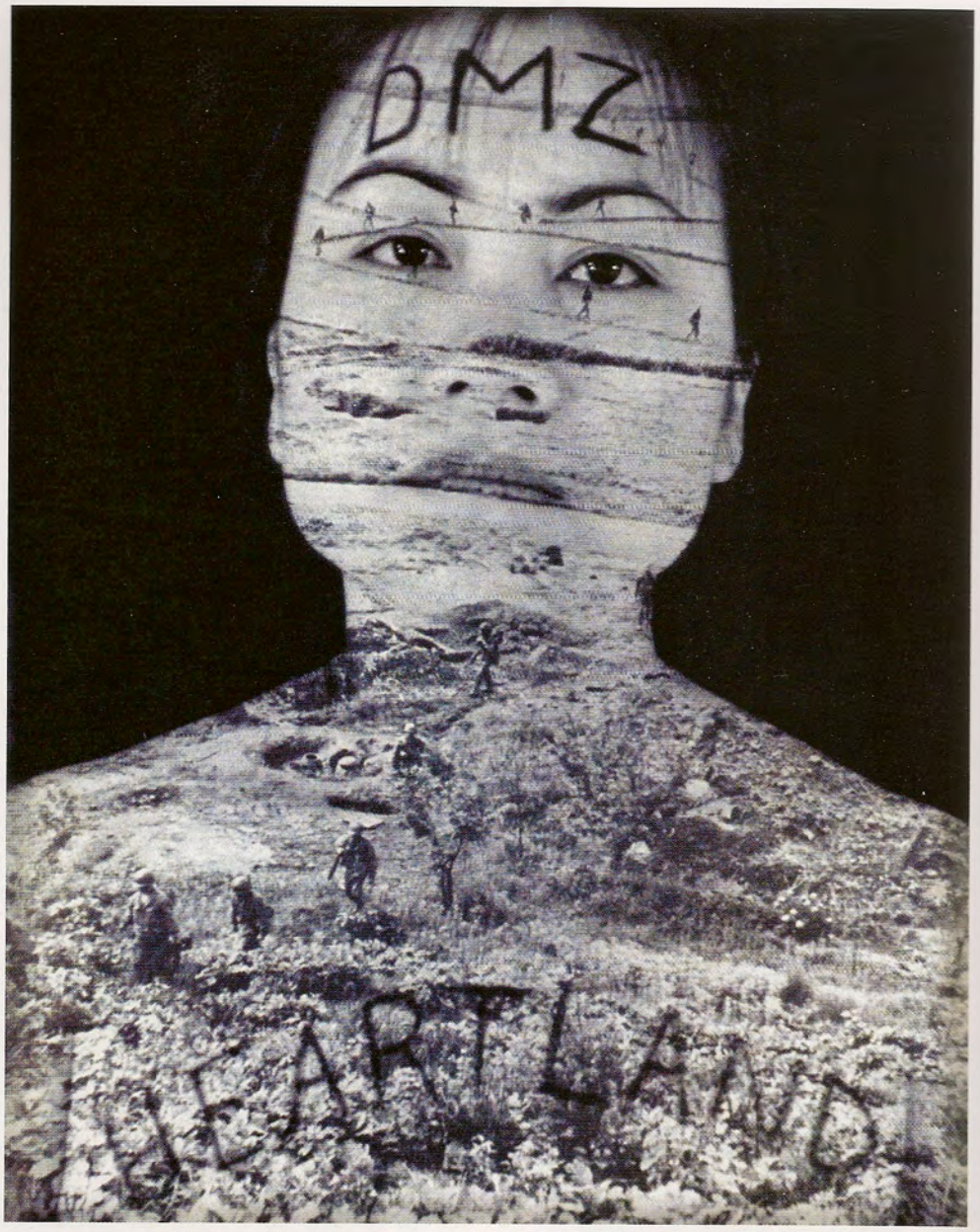
26 Yong Soon Min, photograph of artist's body with inscriptions, from *Defining Moments* series, 1992, gelatin silver print, 20" × 16". *Courtesy of the artist.*



27 Yong Soon Min, photograph with images of the Korean War, from *Defining Moments* series, 1992. *Courtesy of the artist.*

28 Yong Soon Min, ph
with Mt. Paektu, from
Moments series, 1992.
of the artist.

g Soon Min, photograph
ages of the Korean War,
fining Moments series,
ourtesy of the artist.

28 Yong Soon Min, photograph with Mt. Paektu, from *Defining Moments* series, 1992. *Courtesy of the artist.*

the Asian woman who as actor, witness, and commentator vigorously confronts contemporary events—she wants to "engage in [what], at least in Confucian terms, has always been considered the male domain. Issues like world affairs."[73] Min's oppositional stance to Confucian values highlights an issue of central concern to many contemporary Asian and Asian American women. In referring to the pervasive influence of Confucianism, Min alludes to an ethos that enshrines patriarchal authority and continues to be expressed in the hierarchical social structures of East Asian cultures that place women in a markedly inferior position. In this ancient Chinese doctrine, which idealized antiquity and, above all, earthly harmony and respect for age and authority, social relationships and rules of conduct were established for all members of society, and a woman's "place" was rigidly defined by familial roles, whether as daughter, wife, or mother. Notwithstanding major social changes in both Asia and the United States, for Asian women certain Confucian mores have often endured, among them the expectation that a "good" Asian daughter should respect and obey figures of authority, including parents, elders, and, above all, males. Though many younger Asian and Asian American women certainly find these traditional expectations oppressive, pressures continue to be brought to bear on women who assert themselves or put their ideas forward in the public arena.

For Korean women in particular, representations of a strong, explicitly politicized female presence also provide an important counterweight to the male-centered character of Korean nationalism, a contemporary ideology imported from Japan by way of the West, in which, not unlike Confucianism, the role of women is perceived as subordinate to that of their husbands and sons. Modern South Korea is described as an "androcentric nation" guided by patriarchal neo-Confucian mores and solidified through the dictatorial efforts of a series of U.S.-countenanced military regimes, in which women remain relegated to the position of "voiceless auxiliaries."[74] Underscoring how present-day Korean nationalism has at times run counter to the interests of women, some cite the long silence of the South Korean government surrounding the mass exploitation of Korean women as "sex slaves" for the Japanese army during World War II. Needing Japanese support to help rebuild their nation after the extensive destruction of the Korean War, the ensuing male-dominated South Korean regimes consistently opted for a conception of the national strategic interest that left little or no room for the needs and demands of women.

Interweaving Histories • *DMZ XING*

In the traveling multimedia installation *DMZ XING* (1994), Min connected her personal history with the postwar experiences of Southeast Asian refugees—Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Hmong, and Amerasians.[75] These people's lives were forever changed by the collective trauma of mass uprootedness and forced dispersal, and their very presence in the United States, like her own, is the result of armed struggle during the Cold War. In response to the military debacle that ended the Vietnam War, the United States passed the Refugee Resettlement Act of 1975, which initially allowed five hundred thousand people from the former Republic of South Vietnam to enter the country. Southeast Asian immigration grew further with the passage of additional legislation in 1980 and 1987 that included people from other nations in Southeast Asia and the offspring of U.S. soldiers.[76] According to the federal census, by 1990, more than a million Southeast Asian refugees had settled here.

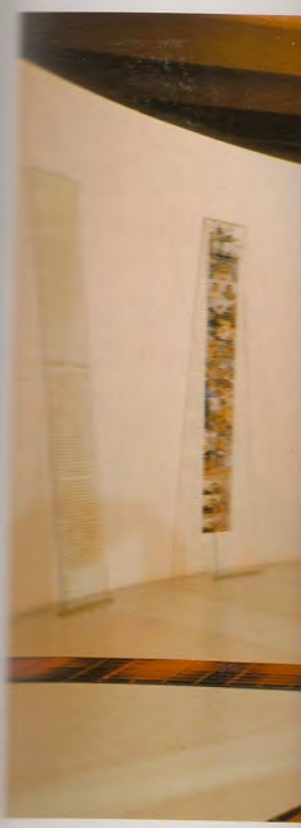
The title of Min's piece, with its reference both to commonplace American street crossing signs and to the abbreviation for the Demilitarized Zone (a Cold War geopolitical imposition that had once bisected Vietnam as it still does Korea), is for the artist a loose visual and verbal double entendre.[77] As such, it is meant to conjure the intersections between the histories and experiences of very different Asian groups, as well as the removal, the "X-ing out," of the Cold War–imposed barriers that have long split nations and peoples in Asia and in the United States. The Hartford, Connecticut, nonprofit art exhibition space Real Art Ways commissioned the piece, extending a broad mandate to produce a work that addressed regional history, community life, and culture. Already "intrigued by the genre of oral history and testimonials and . . . hopeful that the firsthand account would provide information and knowledge not readily available from other sources," Min decided to meet and interview local Southeast Asian refugees who had been resettled in that state.[78] Taking an approach similar to Aono's *Relics from Camp*, Min solicited public participation in the process of memorialization—devising a piece that grew directly from oral testimonies granted by people displaced by the U.S. war in Indochina.

Real Art Ways provided the artist with contacts with local Asian American social service organizations, including the Connecticut Federation of Refugee Assistance Associations, which serves both Asian refugees and

more recent European arrivals. With their help, Min met with local Southeast Asian and Amerasian families at their homes, as well as with members of a Vietnamese Buddhist temple, accompanied by translators and a photographer hired to document the visits. In ensuing discussions, she encouraged her interviewees to recount the situations in their homelands during the period, the effects the war had had on their lives, the ways in which they had come to the United States, and their circumstances since arriving. Conducted over several months during 1993, the interviews yielded a rich body of textual and visual material that provided the conceptual core around which Min developed the installation. As the artist indicates, the piece was meant to be "very synthetic, an attempt to bring together [the] new oral history material I had gathered . . . and also to create a context for these interviews. . . . Digging back into the history of the Vietnam War just brought into focus the incredible level of parallels and connections to the

29 Yong Soon Min, *DMZ XING*, exterior view, 1994, Asian American Cultural Center, University of Connecticut, Storrs, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. *Courtesy of the artist.*

30 Yong Soon Min, *DMZ XING*, interior view. *Courtesy of the artist.*

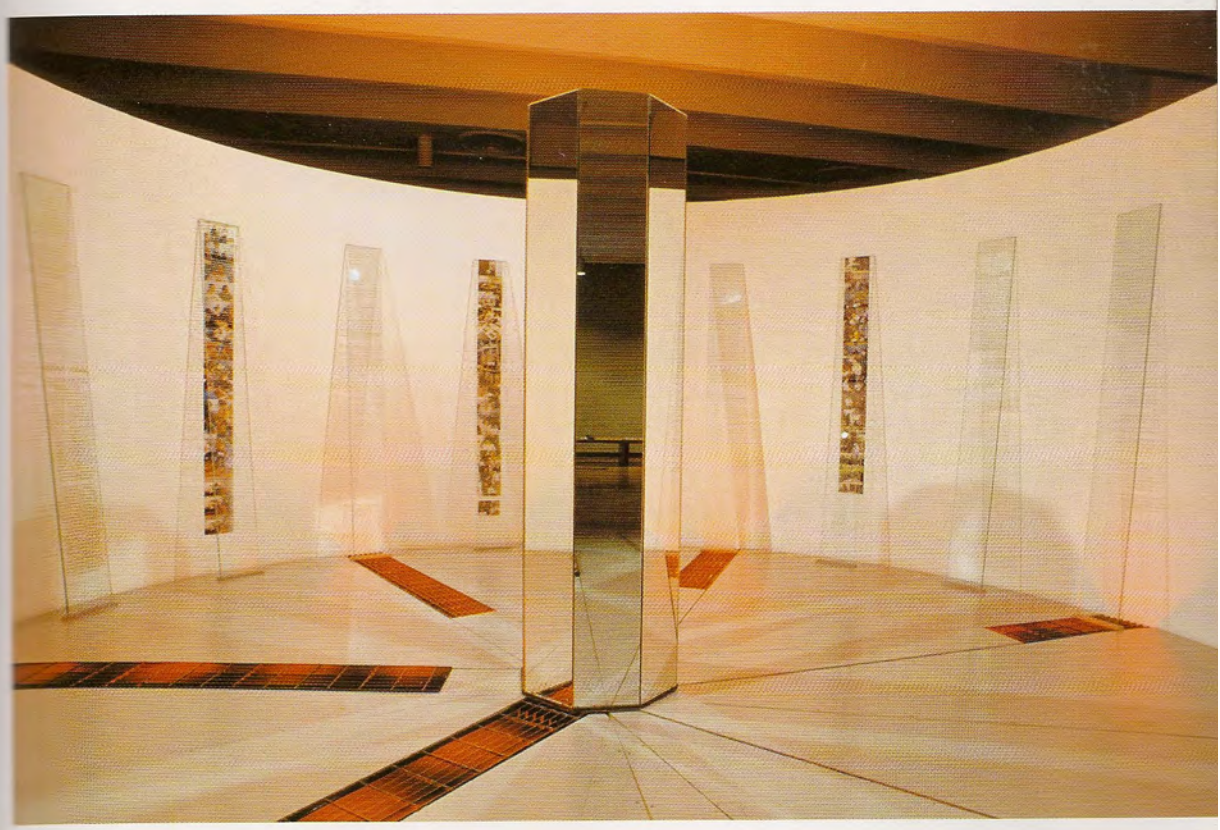


Yong Soon Min,
MZ XING, exterior view,
94, Asian American
ultural Center, University
Connecticut, Storrs,
ixed-media installation,
imensions variable.
ourtesy of the artist.

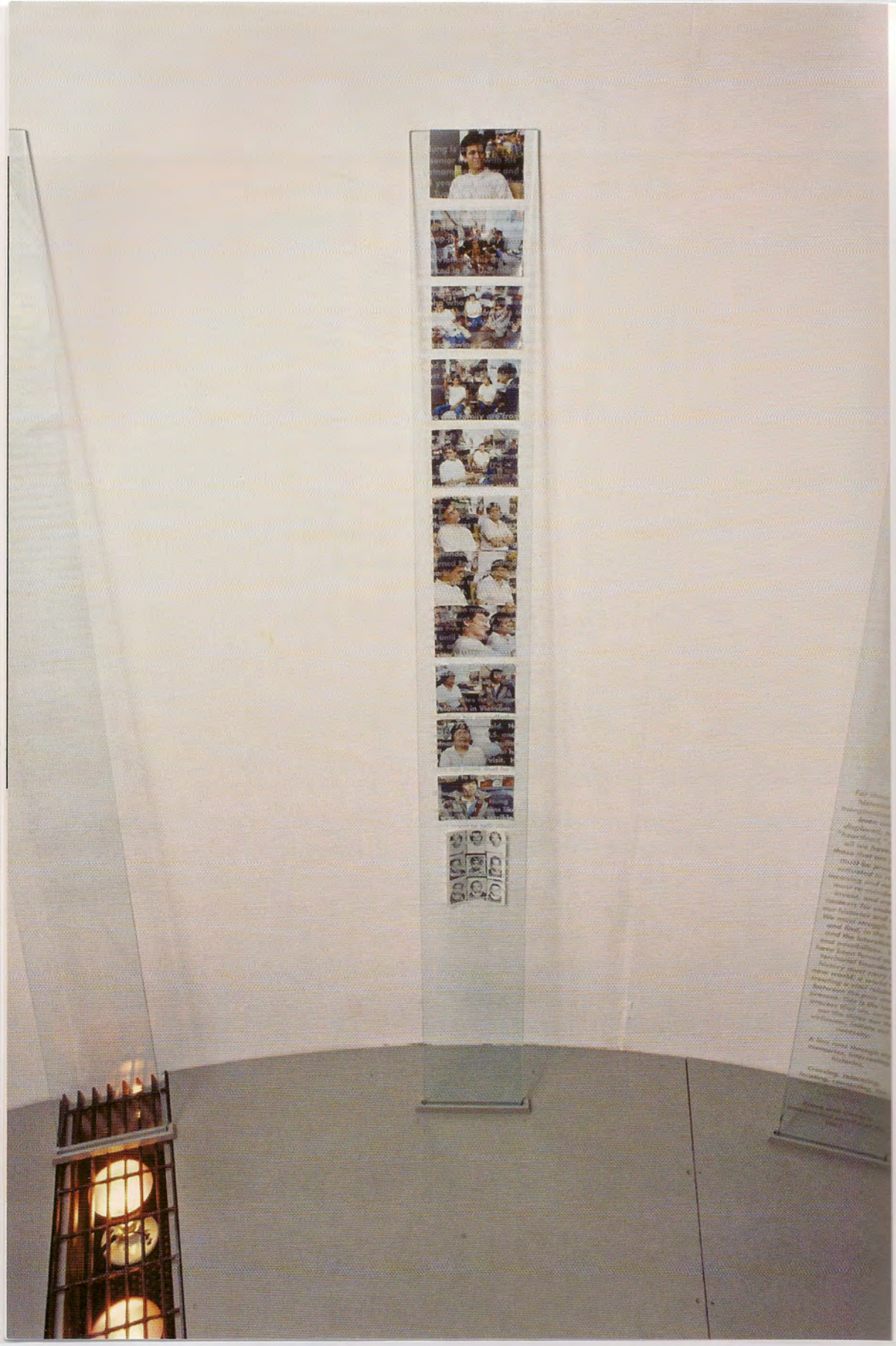
Korean War, and so those two histories . . . served as anchors for me in this project [and] a frame for incorporating these interviews."[79]

For *DMZ XING* Min used an eight-foot-tall, gallery-sized circular enclosure fabricated to contain texts, images, and historical references reflective of the life trajectories of Asian Cold War refugee and migrant families—her own and those she had interviewed locally (figure 29). Centered around a sturdy, freestanding octagonal pillar sheathed in mirrors, sixteen attenuated vertical glass panels framing ensembles of photographs of the refugee families were widely spaced around the pristine interior wall of the edifice (figure 30). Arrayed sequentially and each focused on a different theme or account, the panels were densely overlaid with text lightly etched into their lustrous surfaces (figures 31 and 32).

This complex, self-contained installation was, in essence, an extended intertextual group narrative in the form of a running visual chronicle. It incorporated, among other things, excerpts from the life stories of local Asian



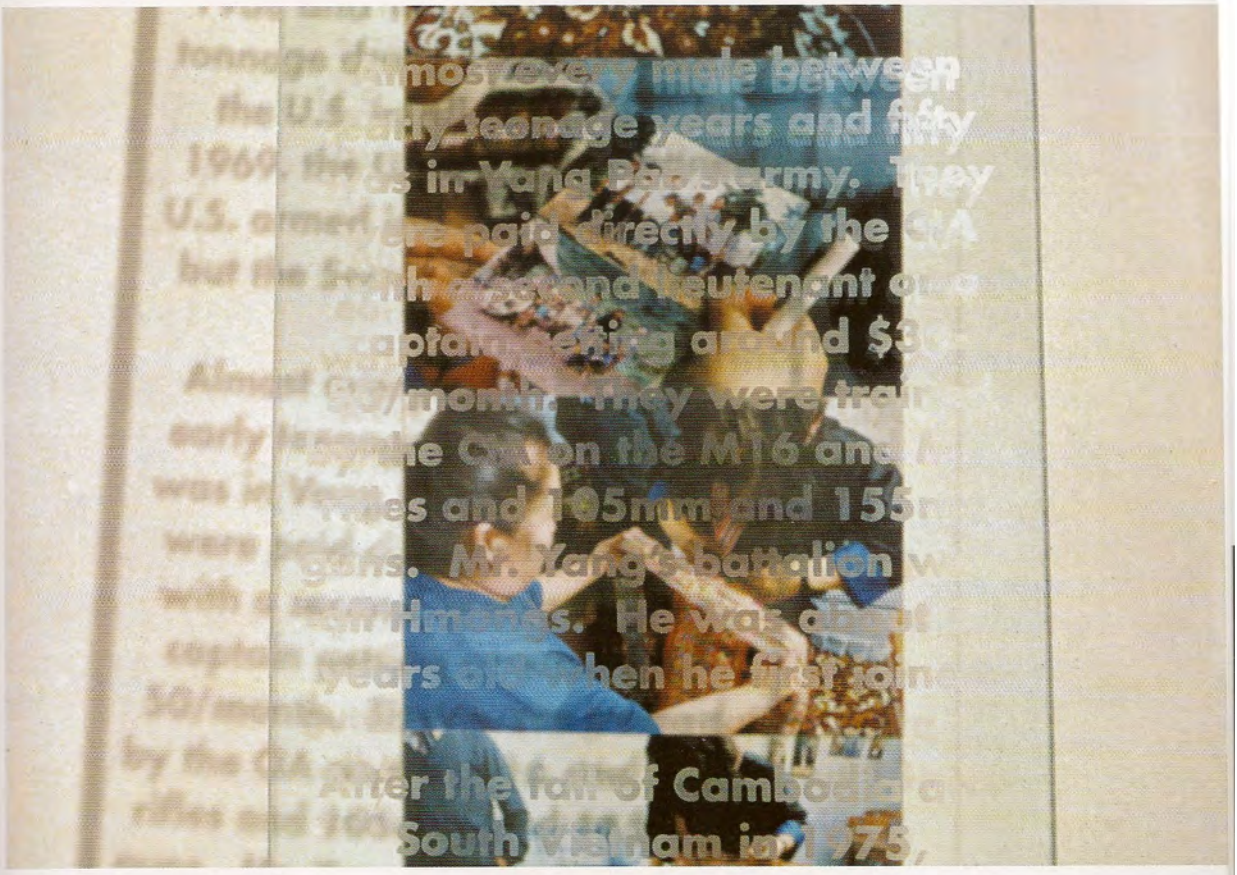
30 Yong Soon Min, *DMZ XING*, interior view. *Courtesy of the artist.*



(opposite)

Yong Soon Min, *DMZ*
detail of glass panels with
and photographs. Courtes
the artist.

Yong Soon Min, *DMZ*
detail of glass panels with
and photographs. Courtes
the artist.



(opposite)

31 Yong Soon Min, *DMZ XING*, detail of glass panels with text and photographs. *Courtesy of the artist.*

32 Yong Soon Min, *DMZ XING*, detail of glass panels with text and photographs. *Courtesy of the artist.*

refugees, historical material on the division of Korea and Vietnam, statistics on war casualties and recent Southeast Asian migration, a recollection of the 1989 visit Min had made to the Korean DMZ, and personal ruminations on the Cold War, including an account of sharply clashing views within her own family over its causes and consequences.

It also was the artist's intent to jolt audiences by making the process of engaging with the installation physically uncomfortable. To this end, Min sought to induce a visceral sense, through the viewer's encounter with the piece, that "there's a reality to what the refugees went through and what [she] went through as an immigrant."[80] After entering via a sloping ramp gently leading inward through a floor-to-ceiling gap in the surrounding wall, viewers immediately found themselves subjected to the blindingly intense illumination that flooded the interior of the rotunda-like structure.

As spectators moved clockwise around the curved space, at timed intervals searing bursts of crimson light shot up through metal grates recessed beneath the floor.[81] The spectator was therefore made to undergo a level of bodily and mental distress intended to suggest the states of those compelled to come to terms with lives entangled within traumatic and tumultuous histories—a disconcerting experience that one local reviewer likened to an interrogation room. In discussing her use of the flashing red lights, Min asserted that she "wanted . . . [it] to be alarming. . . . [The] DMZ is a very disturbing concept; . . . in Korea it is a very highly charged zone."[82]

Although Min designed *DMZ XING* to induce significant unease, she also meant the installation to be poetic and suggestive, a metaphorical space transcending simple didactic and journalistic readings. Thus, she made extensive use of the transparency and the reflective properties of glass and mirrors to suggest the elusive, fragmentary, and evanescent character of personal and historical memory. The mirrors also allowed visitors to see their images refracted within them, thereby suggesting how their own lives are implicated in these histories. Depending on the angle of reflection and the viewer's constantly changing position while navigating the environment, different combinations of narratives and images would emerge, altering and shifting repeatedly as the space was traversed. By ensuring that the written material could not be effortlessly grasped—indeed, as visitors sometimes complained, it was extremely difficult to decipher, given the shallowness of the incised inscriptions and the multiple reflections and shadows cast on the panels and surrounding wall—spectators were made acutely aware that they were also engaging in acts of reconstruction and interpretation when encountering the texts.[83] Min related to a local reporter at the time, "I did want the narrative with the glass to function in a way that alludes to how difficult it is to interpret history, so-called official history and things that are recollected."[84] By having viewers strain to take in the information on the panels, Min hoped they would begin to question more closely what was being seen and said, much as the artist had also been enjoined to rethink her own perceptions of the period while working on the piece.

While many of the accounts that Min chose to include in the installation speak of the hardships of refugees, suffering is by no means all that the artist conveys. This multilayered piece equally reflects individual transformation and rebirth—the perseverance, hardiness, and determination of

those who managed to re-create their lives in a different country and culture, despite the often deep traumas they were forced to endure. To be sure, the artist's own attitudes and convictions were also affected by her work on this project and the vivid testimonies of those who had suffered enormously in these harrowing times. In light of graphic evidence regarding deplorable things done in the name of Communism, Min was challenged to re-examine some of her own longstanding ideological sympathies in more nuanced and self-critical ways. One of the accounts that prompted such reconsideration is the emblematic story of the Srun family of Cambodia, who were persecuted during the regime of the Khmer Rouge and eventually fled the country.

With their 1975 victory, the xenophobic Khmer Rouge immediately began to restructure Cambodia (or Kampuchea, as it was temporarily renamed) into a Maoist-inspired vision of a preurban, pre-Western agrarian utopia. Initiating an extraordinarily brutal reign of terror, they emptied the cities virtually overnight, destroying the country's infrastructure to transform the economy radically into one based on agriculture. Anyone showing signs of higher education, wealth, or "Western sophistication" was subject to death; those suspected of being ethnic Vietnamese or ethnic Chinese also fell under dire suspicion. Under this horrific regime, up to 4 million of the country's 7.5 million people are estimated to have been murdered or died of overwork and starvation in the countryside, their massed skeletons later found piled high in open graves. During the short but extraordinarily harsh period of Khmer Rouge rule, numerous Cambodians were impelled to escape this genocidal rampage by making a dangerous overland trek into neighboring Thailand, where they joined Laotians in a string of refugee camps arrayed along the border. While the camps offered relative safety, many from this devastated generation would remain there for years before being allowed to come to the United States.

The ultra-nationalistic Khmer Rouge would also launch assaults on newly unified Vietnam in the name of atavistic fifteenth-century territorial claims; the Vietnamese army invasion in 1978 forced the Khmer Rouge into a long-running and ultimately unsuccessful guerrilla war which continued until the late 1990s. The Srun family, as Min's text relates, were middle-class people of part-Chinese descent and were thus targeted for persecution. After losing numerous friends and relatives and being stripped of their home and possessions, they were able to flee to Thailand in 1979, follow-

ing the Vietnamese invasion. Languishing for three years in a Thai refugee camp, they departed for the United States under the sponsorship of a Lutheran agency and were resettled in Hartford.

The process of creating *DMZ XING* also yielded unexpected insights for Min into the traumas and divisions caused by war and ideological conflict within immigrant families, including her own. As she recalls in one of the texts, hearing the narratives of survivors of the Indochinese wars inspired her to revisit her own memories of the 1960s, a pivotal time in her intellectual and political development. While her parents were staunch anti-Communists who supported the U.S. involvement in Asia, during her first decade in the United States, Min was educated in public schools where many of the teachers opposed the war then raging in Vietnam. Like many of the children of refugees she interviewed who were born or raised in the United States, Min had great difficulty understanding the attitudes of her parent's generation about those times. Through her dialogues with these Southeast Asian refugees, many of whom were also anti-Communist, however, Min gained a heightened empathy for her father's position, though she did not necessarily adopt it as her own. Having herself never witnessed the Korean War, the artist reflects, "It certainly helped to try to step out of my own privileged perspective and try to imagine a different kind of relationship to that war."[85]

In *Heartland*, one of the last panels prior to exiting the piece, Min offers a deeply felt affirmation of the importance of memory to everyone who has suffered through social trauma and loss. Overlaid on an intense portrait of the artist gazing directly at the viewer, the text inscribed on the panel reads, "For those of us whose histories have been marginalized, or who have been colonized or displaced, or have lost a 'heartland,' memories are all we have. . . . They must be preserved and activated to renew their meaning and relevance. We must re-remember and reinvent, and create new contexts for understanding our histories and ourselves. . . . This is the healing process that we . . . initiate out of necessity. . . . A line runs through my memories, intersecting histories. Crossing, relocating, locating, connecting . . . Korea and Vietnam intersect and parallel at the DMZ."[86] In ways similar to how the past is actually recollected, here personal and social memory are not portrayed as constant, fixed truths to be simply retrieved, but remain mutable, open to active reconstitution by each individual within the social context of the art gallery. However, unlike many contemporary public ceremonies,

rituals, and monuments that are presumed to be rooted in common beliefs and understandings of what is expected from participants, and are thereby intended to cement social solidarity and cohesion, an installation like *DMZ XING*, with its uneasy mixture of ambiguity and confrontation, makes little accommodation for conventional emotional or intellectual closure and renewal.

To produce a work of art that functions as a public memorial, albeit a very temporary one, and to do so in a context that is primarily arts oriented, is to bridge what commonly are distinct realms with quite differing needs, conventions, and expectations. Whereas, for example, the central purpose of most exhibitions in history and anthropological museums is to make what is depicted more accessible to the general public, a work like *DMZ XING* avoids any clear-cut resolution and asks more of the viewer. Given the artist's personalized approach, coupled with a discontinuous, fragmentary visual-discursive strategy toward historical narrative and inter-Asian relations, a far more dedicated level of engagement is required. As is noted in the catalogue essay for *DMZ XING*, which characterizes the piece as "a small monument to memory and communication, familial devotion and social rebirth," since the contemporary art-gallery space is, by its very nature, a "self-conscious arena of comparison, analysis, and contemplation," spectators in such a uniquely focused frame are challenged to summon up their own means of coming to terms with what is proffered—particularly, I would add, when engaging with such an intricate transhistorical work.[87]

Hanh Thi Pham · the Vietnam War and refugee memory

An estimated four million Vietnamese combatants and civilians on both sides were killed or wounded in Vietnam, to say nothing of the neighboring Cambodian and Laotian casualties.[88] Nearly fifty-eight thousand U.S. servicemen and women would also die as a result of the conflict.[89] Born in 1954, the photographer Hanh Thi Pham became an involuntary witness to the decades of unremitting warfare between her fellow Vietnamese and to the corrosive impact of the American intervention. While her family had ties throughout her homeland, owing to the division of their nation after the French withdrawal, she was raised in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), the capital of the Republic of South Vietnam—a nation created and erased