FRESH TALK DARING GAZES

Conversations on Asian American Art

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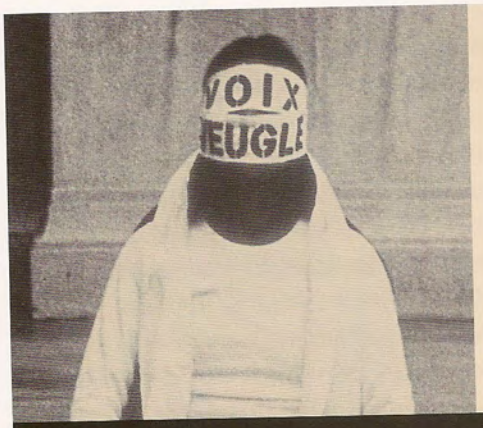

FOREWORD

Lisa Lowe

OUT OF THE WEST

Asian Migration and Modernity

***FRESH TALK / DARING GAZES* COLLECTS THE WORK OF TWENTY-FOUR CONTEMPORARY** Asian American / Asian diasporic visual artists, pairing them with responses provocatively drawn from cultural critics, other artists, activists, and intellectuals. The artistic works include paintings, graphics, photography, installations, and a variety of mixed-media constructions. Their themes encompass geographical movement, the sexuality of Asian bodies, colonization, miscegenation, hybrid forms of immigrant cultures, the loss of home, war, history, and memory. The response pieces comment in ways that are alternately personal, intellectual, aesthetic, and political; written by subjects themselves often parts of African, Latin American, or Caribbean diaspora, the pieces offer diverse entries into the works from locations that may be at some distance from them. In a sense, *Fresh Talk / Daring Gazes* is a set of dialogues, simultaneously visual and textual, gathered around the representation of Asians in the West. As such, these dialogues might best be understood if situated within the modern history of Asian encounter with and migration to the West. We can also consider these artists' works in relation to the debates about the politics of representation that have been so lively in the past three decades.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Asian immigrant settlement in the United States, and in the West generally, is not a new phenomenon—we are well aware of a history dat-

ing back centuries—but since the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which lifted the immigration restrictions and bars to citizenship that existed from 1850 to World War II, there has been a dramatic increase of Asian settlement in the United States. In the past half-century, too, there has been much greater Asian migration worldwide, with significant Asian settlements in the Middle East, in Latin America, in Australia. We inhabit a moment of global migrations in which the degree of contact, conflict, and mixture of Asians with the cultures of the West is unprecedented. The artists' works collected here are a part of this global moment. But of course they do not represent anything like a smooth, even development of cross-cultural mixture. Rather, these works emerge from a modern social formation we might name "geohistorical," to borrow a term from Peter Taylor,[1] one that gives rise to artistic and cultural representations that imagine, remember, and trace the more complex, longer genealogies of colonial encounter, war, occupation, and forced displacements that are antecedents to Asian migration to the West.

In what sense is the "modern" world of which these artworks speak "geohistorical"? And how is Asian migration to the West a constitutive dimension of "modernity"?

It seems quite natural for us to call ourselves "modern." It means following the latest fashions, possessing the newest technologies, participating in modern institutions. It is closely connected to "progress": the idea of development in time, discovery, growth, and expansion. Understanding ourselves as modern assumes the posture of having arrived at a temporal location that permits us to look back, assess, to know differently than before. And this implies that the "modern" did not always exist; it emerged as a mode of being and understanding human community that distinguished itself from other earlier ways of life. It has a history, which is, in part, a history of the Western world and its way of knowing itself through others. Yet the "modern" has been equally made by the worlds that the West has sought to "Westernize." The emergence of modernity is what has been formed in the long history of this encounter.

Writers, philosophers, scientists, and historians have defined the "origins" of the modern in different ways. Historians point to the French Revolution of 1789 as a key event in the shift from feudal aristocracies to democratic nation-states; philosophers herald the Enlightenment and the gradual displacement of religious explanation by secular scientific rationalism. Economists focus on the industrial revolution; sociologists attend to the birth of modern bureaucracies; and political scientists look at citizenship within the modern state. Anthropologists once studied "traditional" non-Western cultures; this assumption that the West was modern in opposition to the "primitive" or "traditional" non-West emerged during the height of European colonial expansion in Africa, Asia, and the Americas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since decolonization and the end of the cold war, most anthropologists no longer assume that "modernity" is the discrete possession of the West; some discuss instead what could be called a transnational public sphere, and study the contacts and hybridities of traditional and modern practices around the world.

Yet while the "modern" is often presumed to be a "positive" development, modern forms of human subjectivity and society have always included cautions against modernization and radical skepticism about the abstract promises of modernity. Industry, sci-

ence, and even democracy have always had their critics, particularly among artists, writers, activists, and intellectuals. These dissident voices have pointed out that although the abstract ideals of modernity have been the pursuit of universal human freedom through modernization, the processes employed in this pursuit—accelerated growth through mass production, urbanization, and colonial expansion—have themselves brought new forms of "unfreedom": new, different forms of exploitation, disease, crime, and inhumanity. These deformations of human freedom in the pursuit of human freedom were observed both in the metropolitan West and in the worlds that the West named "developing." The nineteenth-century discourse of Western civilization that justified European colonialism in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean included a social Darwinist narrative of natural selection that argued there was an inevitable evolution of militant, primitive tribal societies into democratic rights–based ones: the modern West represented the apex of this development. By the turn of the century, and certainly by World War I, writers, intellectuals, and even statesmen warned against the "re-barbarization" of the West, the dangerous return to militant savagery. The belief that Western civilization always brought increasing reason, health, and democracy was contested by both nationalist independence movements in the colonies and by modernist visions of the breakdown of progress and rationality in the United States and Europe themselves. One way of characterizing "modernism" is to suggest that it is the aesthetic, literary, and philosophical representation of the "legitimacy crisis" of modernity.

By World War II, in a world shaken by fascism, the Holocaust, and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, discussions of the links between civilization and barbarism had articulate spokespersons among both conservative and radical critics in the West, from the poet T. S. Eliot to the Frankfurt School in Germany. On the one hand, in *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (1949), Eliot lamented the decline of high culture and declared Western civilization to be at risk of encroachment from both non-Western peoples and democratic mass society. On the other, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno warned that human life would become completely degraded when all traditional activities were reduced to commodity form or to their exchange value in the marketplace, but they put the responsibility for this on modern industrial economy. For Horkheimer and Adorno, modernity had replaced the earlier barbarism of superstition with a "new" barbarism that included new forms of misery, terror, and inhumanity. This irreversible link between modern progress and new forms of terror led Walter Benjamin to declare that there is no document of civilization that is not simultaneously a document of barbarism.[2]

The contemporary Asian artists in the West collected here give us particular windows onto the contradictions of modernity, the simultaneous imbrication of civilization and barbarism. Albert Chong, an immigrant from Jamaica, creates sculptures out of everyday objects and materials that allude to his African and Chinese ancestry, to slaves and indentured laborers in the Caribbean. In his series *Tales of Yellow Skin,* Long Nguyen depicts a man whose arm probes his own flayed yellow flesh. Do-Ho Suh creates installations—row after row of headless, uniformed students—that represent the surveillance and reduction of human activity within authoritarian spaces. Survivors of the Vietnam War, of colonialism

in the Philippines, or of the bombing of Hiroshima, artists like Pipo Nguyen-Duy, Carlos Villa, or Mitsuo Toshida, cast the modern predicament as layered, contradictory, unresolved. As migrants to the West, they are, as Dilip Menon nicely puts it, "hitchhikers on the grand narrative of western civilization," or "illegal immigrants in the project of modernity."[3] All of the artists' works collected here suggest that modernity includes *both* the promise of human freedom through modernization *and* the historical contradictions that make that human freedom irregularly and unevenly experienced across the globe. Their visions require us, I think, to reconceive our history of the modern—as the progressive achievement of human freedom—so that it includes the criticisms articulated by its contemporaries and its heirs, so that it exposes modernization as a form of Westernization. While electronic media and mass migrations within the past three decades have created an unprecedented, discernible sense of global community, it is evidently not as if the world has suddenly become "global" at the end of the twentieth century. What we have come to call the "modern" world has always been "geohistorical." The emergence of the modern world is a complicated story that braids together promise and destruction, humanity and inhumanity, barbarism and civilization. Modernity varies in time and location, it takes place differently in rural Vietnam than it does in Tokyo or Berlin; there are multiple modern spaces related through logics at once political, economic, and cultural. Each space and temporality—from Indonesian sweatshops to the Whitney Museum—figures in the making, sustaining, and transformation of the modern. It includes the transnational businessman, the subway conductor, and the farmwoman, and is observed unevenly from the different perspectives encompassed by it. It cannot be captured simply, or totally, by a single perspective on who, what, or where is the modern, but requires more complicated reflection on how a singular vision has come to predominate, how a certain model of humanity has come to be accepted as the ideal of cultivated personhood in the modern community.

These artists' works, and the response pieces by other "hitchhikers" and "illegal immigrants," testify that the modern, within the longer duration of its emergence, has always been geohistorical and has been made and remade both "inside" and "outside" of the West. Depicting the processes of Asian encounter with the West, these works displace the West as the exclusive subject of the teleology of civilization, and they reveal different historical pasts with other subjects, communities, and histories. These artworks, to elaborate a concept from the English cultural critic Raymond Williams, constitute a modern "structure of feeling," a medium that gives us a record of "the culture of a period," a site in which a society in ferment reflects upon itself. A "structure of feeling" is not simply the affective world of a society; it is a crucial place for an epoch's self-criticism.[4] These artworks, as a modern structure of feeling, translate the consciousness of geohistorical modernity. They offer an alternative "map" of the modern: as global, as cosmopolitan, as unevenly yet simultaneously experienced across the globe. Yong Soon Min's photographs of Korean women's bodies marked as U.S. territories or Sung Ho Choi's installation of a suitcase with kimchi jars stuffed with clippings from the *New York Times* convey the complicated legacy, for Korean Americans, of the uneven power between the United States and Korea. They call to our attention other memories obscured by the singular history ruled a uniform concept of the citizen of the U.S. nation.

Asian immigration to the United States before World War II was greatly restricted by laws that named Chinese, Japanese, South Asians, and Filipinos as "aliens ineligible to citizenship," thereby including Asians as workers in the economic sphere yet barring them from participation in the cultural and political spheres. At the same time, Asia was a site for U.S. expansion—from the colonization of the Philippines, to the military occupation of Japan, to the wars in Korea and Vietnam. A social movement organized by Asian Americans emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the context of the civil rights movement and other ethnic studies initiatives, as a project for educational space, social transformation, and civil rights. Coming out of this social movement, Asian American studies has been concerned with bringing forward the buried history within which, prior to World War II, Asian immigrant laborers were racialized and barred from citizenship as "nonwhites" in relation to the economic need for low-wage non-citizen labor. The social movement has been concerned to extend the civil rights of Asian immigrants and political representation of Asian Americans and to work for their inclusion in all spheres of civil society. In relation to cultural and artistic representation, the movement has struggled for access to means of representation in order to create alternatives to the stereotypical or fetishistic images of Asians as barbaric, sexualized, or unassimilable foreigners.

We might say that the artists' work collected here comes out of the cultural politics of the 1960s and 1970s, by which I mean that a collection such as this precisely marks a distinct gain in access to modes of cultural and artistic representation. This access is certainly a result of the struggles of that social movement. At the same time, this collection indicates some significant departures from an earlier Asian American project—not only because the artists are not exclusively "Asian American" but are from the global Asian diaspora, but also because we can observe that the aesthetic strategies collected here diverge from that of countering negative images, something that had been named as a necessary task of the earlier historical moment. This is not to say that the need to counter anti-Asian stereotypes has disappeared, but rather that within the past three decades, the profile of Asians within the West has so greatly diversified that there has been something like a shift in the politics of representation. I am reminded of Stuart Hall's very important essay "New Ethnicities," in which he commented about a shift in Black cultural politics within Thatcherite Britain. Hall wrote that there is no sense in which a new phase in Black cultural politics—"a shift from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself"—could ever replace the earlier one. It is rather that "as the struggle moves forward and assumes new forms, it does to some degree displace, reorganize, and reposition the different cultural strategies in relation to one another."[5] For Asian immigrants and Asian Americans at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the critique of the politics of racial representation within a single nation-state has not disappeared, but persists simultaneously with new strategies that seek to address the changing status and diversification of Asians within the global economy.

The influx of new Asian immigrants in the past three decades has made it more or less axiomatic to state that Asian Americans and Asian immigrants are a heterogeneous group in terms of national origin, class, gender, sexuality, language, religion, and generation. This has led scholars to be critical of racial essentialism and cultural nationalist formations of

identity within the context of a single nation-state, and it has led activists to question whether ethnic identity always and in every instance leads to a progressive politics aimed at social transformation. At this point, scholars are reconceptualizing the phenomenon of Asian migration to the West in order to grasp the role of this migration in the emergence of a global or transnational economy. The object of this effort is to supplement a notion of Asian American formation within one nation-state with an understanding of the multiple contexts of colonialism and its various extensions within the uneven development of the global economy, in order to inquire into the significance of the "Asian" within local situations and material conditions—in Asia, in the Asian diaspora in the West, as well as in the Asian diaspora in the non-West. To be quite concrete: Asian migration has been closely tied to both labor and capital flows within the emergence of the transnational economy, and it is no longer possible to generalize a single profile of "the Asian American." Whereas the U.S. economy before World War II used Asian male non-citizen labor, the United States now participates in a transnational economy that currently exploits the labor of Asian and other neocolonized immigrant women. But this transnational economy also employs Asian managers within Asian-owned factories in the Mexican export-processing zones, or *maquiladoras;* Asian capital develops the tourist industry in Hawai'i; and middle-class Asian Americans are enfranchised and have access to higher education throughout the United States.

In the face of the radical nonidentity of Asians globally, we have developed new understandings of the role of Asians within transnational capitalism, rather than relying exclusively on earlier models of cultural or nationalist identity. This requires understanding that local specificities mediate and are indices of global conditions, and that while Asian migrancy is an index of the present social formation of transnational capitalism, it is dialectically linked with the forcible lack of migrancy of other groups in different parts of the world, whether women in Africa or Latin America or the unemployed or incarcerated Black population within the United States. That is, transnational capitalism currently links the diasporic movements of Asian labor and capital with the non-migrant women who cannot escape the patriarchal violence of an authoritarian state or the local communities that have been dislocated from indigenous forms of economy. These groups are "the other of the question of diaspora," as Gayatri Spivak has put it; subaltern women of the South, incarcerated communities, or unemployed racialized communities are the "other" of the Asian migrant.[6] Within a global cartography in which capital is consolidated in the North through the exploitation of the South, the Asian bourgeoisie becoming migrant in the West is now less a "minority discourse" and more part of a narrative of the consolidation of transnational capitalism. The dialogues between Asian and non-Asian artists and critics constitute a crucial resistance to this consolidation.

Thus, the works collected here—alternately beautiful, haunting, disturbing, inspiring—and the response pieces to these works together call for another understanding of history, one no longer ruled by a concept of the human whose movement and destiny conforms to that of the West. The works insist that we uncover and imagine the episodic, diverse perspectives of other humanities that lie beneath the assumption of Western personhood as the universal human. So replete is our understanding of art with assumptions about the

centrality of Western civilization that it has been difficult to imagine and visualize the history and presence of other subjects, memories, and communities. Within this context, the artists collected in *Fresh Talk / Daring Gazes* provide us with alternative visions, complicated reflections on the emergence of modernity, in which what has been previously foreclosed as invisible is forever saturating the what-can-be-seen. These artists visualize and imagine other humanities within the received tradition of the human.

Figure 21.
Arlan Huang, Tomie Arai, Karl Matsuda, Mary Patten, Phil Gim, William Leong
Arriba, Chi Lai, Rise Up, 1974, Ronan enamel, approximately 55 x 60 ft. City Arts Mural, Mural Director Alan Okada.
(PHOTO: KEN GOLDEN)

Paik, who were participating in the internationalist-oriented, though still decidedly Western, fluxus movement in the 1960s. Nevertheless, some of the issues and concerns facing today's Asian American artists are similar. We are reminded of how an Asian face was viewed as incompatible with teaching English and as appropriate for teaching "oriental history" in the 1930s when Yong Soon Min asks, six decades later, "Why should my work not reach as broad an audience, in principle as, say, the work of Baldessari? How is it that my Western contemporary art training, [which is] surely embedded in the work, [can be] rendered so alien by my subject matter and by . . . perceptions of me [as a racialized Korean American?]"[42]

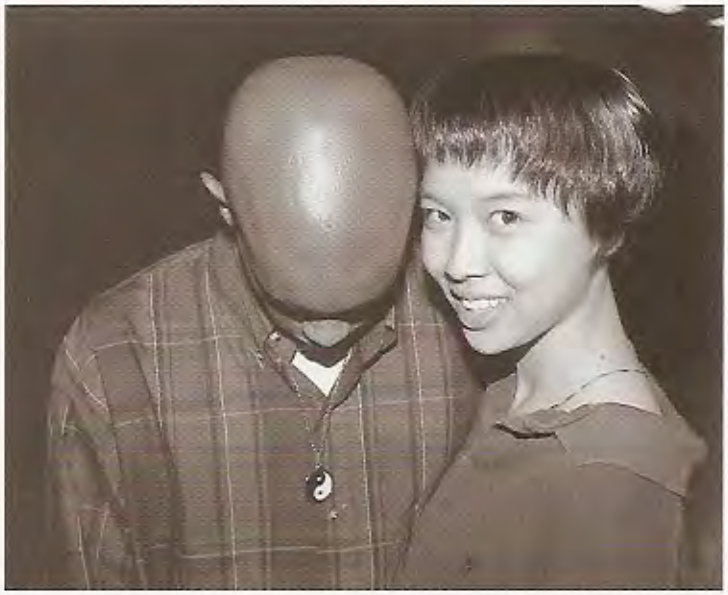

Figure 25.
Pok Chi Lau
May and Quincy at the Asian American Film Festival, Wichita, Kansas, 1993, black-and-white photograph, 8 × 10 in.

tive, caused others to consider for the first time the possibility that they might in fact be "Americans," as opposed to perpetual foreigners always kept apart from the core representation of American cultural life because "Asian" and "American" were considered mutually exclusive. According to critic and curator Eungie Joo, "For better or worse, the perverse attention of the popular media, academia, and government in the aftermath of *sa-i-gu* took an already broken record and smashed it into shards, so that more facets were unwittingly exposed to view."[48]

Increased visibility for Asian Americans as Americans after *sa-i-gu* coincided with discussions of "multiculturalism" that had already begun in the arts establishment in New York by the late 1980s and resulted in greater receptivity to Asian American art. In 1990, *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity* was collaboratively organized by the New Museum of Contemporary American Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art in New York.[49] This exhibit addressed questions of identity and representation in art and was meant to embrace ethnic diversity and to address issues of gender and sexual orientation. Lacking precedent and perhaps overly ambitious, the show was criticized even by sympathizers as "over-stuffed" and sloppily installed and as offering "only the most cursory glimpse of the work of the 140 or so participating artists . . . represented by only one or two works, so [that] complex careers were often reduced to a single statement."[50] While *The Decade Show* increased the visibility, however briefly, of many artists of color, including Asian American artists such as Tomie Arai, Albert Chong, Ken Chu, Y. David Chung, the Epoxy Art Group, Pok Chi Lau, Yong Soon Min, Tom Nakashima, and Martin Wong, the exhibition catalog "underscore[d] some of the best intentions and achievements of multiculturalism in the arts as well as some of the thorny problematics," including "multicultural segregation." In the words of one

Figure 28.
Tom Nakashima
The Day of the Arrows, 1990, oil and gilding on canvas, 114 × 168 in. Courtesy of Bernice Steinbaum Gallery.

participant, "The overall segregated arrangement of the curatorial essays reinforced the notion that everyone has their own turf, particularly artists of color. Curators of color . . . only [wrote] about their own racially identified group of artists."[51]

Galvanized by the possibilities for Asian American artists suggested by *The Decade Show*, New York artists Ken Chu and Bing Lee began talking about what it would take to start a contemporary Asian American art museum. In July 1990, they were joined by Margo Machida, and Godzilla: Asian American Art Network was founded. The fabled creature of 1960s Japanese monster movies, Godzilla was a giant lizard that mowed down whatever was in its way. The group's goal was creative and subversive arts advocacy and education and the establishment of a network of artists. According to art critic Alice Yang, the name Godzilla "indicates the activist stance of its founders . . . counter to the stereotype of passivity associated with Asian people."[52] About one hundred people participated in the group's regular gatherings. During its four years of operation, Godzilla hosted meetings where artists presented slide talks about their work, established and maintained a slide registry and served as a referral and resource bank for curators and funding agencies, published a newsletter with exhibit listings and articles on relevant issues, organized two exhibitions of Asian American art and contributed to other exhibitions,[53] and sponsored panel discussions on such topics as "Is there an Asian American aesthetic?" On the West Coast, meanwhile, artists Betty Kano and Flo Oy Wong organized a group of Asian American women artists in the late 1980s. They began collecting slides and establishing a network of artists for mutual support and group shows.

By the early 1990s, publicly supported museums were searching for untapped sources of new money, as the previous decade's investor speculation in art that had resulted in so

Figure 31.
Flo Oy Wong
Lew Dung Quock, from "made in usa. Angel Island Shhh," 1938, acrylic and construction on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.
PHOTO: BOB HSIANG

much commercial success for some artists was beginning to fizzle. Inspired by stories of Asian wealth and the hypervisibility of Asian, as opposed to European, immigrant economic activity in the United States, museum directors in major U.S. cities began looking to Asian American communities for financial support. Art museums that had paid minimal attention to Asian Americans throughout the century suddenly began inviting them to their gatherings and trying to find wealthy people to invite to join their boards of directors. The Asia Society, which had traditionally sponsored cultural events addressed mostly toward Westerners interested in the high arts of ancient Asia, began to pay attention to Asian Americans in the early 1990s, and the Queens Museum of Art, which is located in one of the largest and most vibrant Asian immigrant communities in the United States, expressed interest in the idea of showcasing Asian and Asian American art.

In 1993 and 1994, two groundbreaking exhibits of Asian American art were launched at the Asia Society and the Queens Museum, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* and *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art*, respectively. *Across the Pacific*, which was curated by Jane Farver and Young Chul Lee, opened first in Queens and then at the Kumho Museum in Seoul in 1993.[54] *Across the Pacific* included the work of Korean American artists Mo Bahc, Sung Ho Choi, Y. David Chung, Michael Joo, Byron Kim, Hyung Su Kim, Jin Soo Kim, Young Kim, Jin S. Lee, and Yong Soon Min and Korean Canadian artist Jinme Yoon, as well as eleven Korean American and Korean Canadian films and videos, curated by Hye Jung Park and Christine Chang and including Christine Chang's *Be Good My Children* (1992), Helen Lee's *My Niagara* (1992), Michael Cho's *Animal Appetites* (1991), and Yun Ah Hong's *Memory/All Echo* (1990). *Asia/America*, curated by Margo Machida, opened in New York in early 1994 and

Figure 34.
Ik-Joong Kang
8490 Days of Memory, 1996, chocolate, plastic, and mixed media, 9 × 4 × 4 ft. (statue), 3 × 3 × 3 in. each (plastic cubes, 8,490 pieces). Collection of the artist.
(PHOTO: GEORGE HIROSE)

over the following two years traveled to Tacoma, Minneapolis, Honolulu, San Francisco, Boston, and Houston. The exhibit featured artists Pacita Abad, Tseng Kwong Chi, Sung Ho Choi, Ken Chu, Y. David Chung, Marlon Fuentes, Jin Soo Kim, Hung Liu, Yong Soon Min, Takako Nagai, Long Nguyen, Manuel Ocampo, Sisavath Panyathip, Hanh Thi Pham, May Sun, Masami Teraoka, Toi Ungkavatanapong, Zarina, and Baochi Zhang. Both exhibits emphasized links between Asian American artists and Asia: *Across the Pacific* attempted to suggest lines of affinity between Korean *minjung* art (art "for the people" created during the South Korean social movements of the 1980s) and Korean American art. *Asia/America* featured the work of artists who had been born in Asia and were working in the United States and focused on themes of homeland and displacement. Neither show addressed the question of how Asian and Asian American art is related to American art. Still, both exhibitions generated excitement in Asian American arts communities because they seemed to indicate that art expressing heterogeneous Asian American aesthetic, political, and personal concerns was finally beginning to receive serious attention in discourses on U.S. culture.

Smaller exhibitions of ethnicity-specific art organized by Asian American artists included *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* (1990–91), an exhibit featuring Asian Canadian photo, film, and video artists, and *The Curio Shop* (1993), an exhibition organized by Godzilla at Artists Space in New York. Some critics complained that these exhibitions featured mostly descriptive work geared toward "correcting" racist stereotyping with "authentic truths" that locked art into a closed circuit of dominant representations. Eungie Joo writes that artists "understood to be dealing with 'the politics of identity'" were receiving much attention by the late 1980s, many of them subject to "ill-fitting interpretive contexts favor-

for black subjectivity" but is not solely dependent on race and ethnicity, however important to an artist's personal identity. "Black cultural subjectivity in art . . . becomes design, word, act, attitude. . . . We can look at the art itself, its multiple worlds of meaning, its place in the social production of black identities."[68] As artist Raymond Saunders has commented, "Color is the means and not the end."[69]

Like African American cultural critics, Chicano art historians have argued for the reinsertion of elements such as narrative, decoration, figuration, and allegory into art. Alicia Gaspar de Alba emphasizes the importance of the vernacular, what she calls the *rasquache*, in Chicano art, which subverts the dichotomy between high and popular culture. Emphasizing the viewer's importance to contemporary Chicano art, she notes that thousands of *raza* across the United States never felt addressed or represented in an art museum until they attended the *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation 1965–1985* exhibit, which ran from 1990 to 1993. For them, *rasquachismo* could become a weapon and a tool, as "a theory and praxis of popular pleasure as a uniquely working-class strategy of resistance to dominant aesthetic codes in the art world, otherwise known as the 'Quality' issue; . . . alter-Nativity, an antinativist approach that contests the ethnocentric academic practice of categorizing marginalized indigenous cultures and 'subcultures' or objects of discovery . . . [and that] underscores the relationship between 'other' and 'native.'"[70]

Instead of viewing Asian American art as either soullessly copying "American" art forms or imperfectly replicating "real Asian art," perhaps we can think of it—and of American art in general—as a mixture or partial fusion of different visual languages, and critical assessments can at last move away from the economy of the copy to the narrative of similarity. Located on the untranslatable, incommensurate in-between, in the interstice between mainstream and Asian American (as opposed to Asian) cultural traditions, perhaps Asian American art can be thought of as a site of creation, contradiction, and conflict emerging from the continual collisions and transformations that comprise Asian American cultural experiences.[71] Perhaps the question to ask is how Asian American art has expressed and continues to express a hybrid or even mutant culture that engages, extends, and transforms American art.

Many Asian American artists express their dismay that both mainstream and Asian American art critics and curators are reading their work as literal expressions of biography or sociology.[72] Noting that autobiography is too frequently used to authenticate their work, as if speaking from personal experience were the only allowable position, they say they want viewers to think about not only *what* they are doing but also *how* they are doing it.[73] Yong Soon Min complains that the Asia Society organizers placed obtrusive, interfering wall labels very close to each work at the *Asia/America* exhibition. This wall text, which included bullet-point lists of biographical details about the artists and the artists' statements, was reminiscent of the informational captions displayed in natural science or ethnography exhibitions. According to Min, some of the participating artists objected to the wall text because they feared that their work would be flattened by "curatorial editorializing" aimed at accommodating mostly white viewers to whom the work was unfamiliar and opaque: "It can be seen as a capitulation to the lowest expectation from this or any other audience. In the hyperbole of one viewer, '[A]t the preview, I watched the Manhattan press corps shuffle from label to label, as though paralyzed by doubt.' Might these la-

bels inadvertently suggest that the works are so alien and so incommensurate with other contemporary art that they need the extra information to bridge the otherwise unfathomable gulf?"[74]

In objecting to "the burdensome overlay of encapsulated information," Min does not argue for a "return to the modernist emphasis on [the] primacy of form" over content but rather for recognition that art locates the personal "within the cultural, social, and historical forces that construct the self [and in] relation to the historicized collectivity."[75] Indeed, many Asian American artists demonstrate how formal innovation and complexity can be integrated with "message" and content and how content leads to or even requires formal innovation. Sometimes this involves inventing new forms by blending various formal approaches. Y. David Chung brings together elements of German expressionism, African and African American folk stories, social realism, Japanese *anime*, and Korean folk art to express the collision of past and present, Korea and America as experienced by the young immigrant. Shahzia Sikander combines Western pop and folk art forms with traditional Indian miniature painting to express themes of contemporary dislocation. Manuel Ocampo mixes his interpretations of baroque, kitsch, and pop art to challenge distinctions between Western and non-Western or high and low art and to critique Catholicism and U.S. imperialism in the Philippines. Using paper, paint, plaster, and hair and pieces from an old rug, Allan deSouza creates "landscapes" that call into question the hypostatized "homeland" yearned for by many immigrants. Graphing together architectural catalog models and industrial designers' ergonomic templates of the female body to demonstrate

Figure 39.
Sowon Kwon
average female (4), 1995, blueprint on linen, 8 × 8 ft. Courtesy of the artist.
(PHOTO: SEUNG H. KWON)

Plate 12. Yong Soon Min
Red Shoes, 1999. Installation with approximately 100 pairs of shoes, 15 x 3 ft. Courtesy of the artist. (PHOTO BY THE ARTIST)

A SITE-SPECIFIC PIECE LOCATED IN the botanical gardens of the Philippine city of Baguio, *Red Shoes* is a pointed commentary on the legacy of Imelda Marcos, the ostentatious, shoe-collecting wife of corrupt dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Over 100 pairs of red-painted shoes are pressed into a dirt path, forming a "river of blood," a reference to the bloody toll of the political repression that characterized the Marcos regime (culminating in the assassination of political rival Benigno Aquino, Jr. in 1983). The use of shoes is a clear reference to Imelda's signature excess and the political and financial corruption that supported them. The fact that there is "blood" on the shoes sends an unambiguous message of culpability. However, the piece is more than just a critique. By placing the shoes on a well-traveled path, Min encourages viewers to walk on them, giving the work another, more poignant meaning. The empty, "bloody" shoes take on a more human aspect, becoming stand-ins for the footsteps of people who lost their lives under martial law. Viewers become participants, actually walking in the "footsteps" of the victims, and the piece takes on another significance, not only as political commentary, but also as a kind of memorial, an urging not to forget.

Luis Camnitzer

YONG SOON MIN

Defining Moments

TO STUDY ONE'S OWN NAVEL, OR THE ACTIVITY OF LINT GATHERING, HAS ALWAYS BEEN a metaphor and euphemism for waste of time, self-indulgence, and narcissism. Even the mystical interpretations of tunneling into the deeper self to get in touch with the essence of the universe share some of these traits of self-centeredness and self-indulgence.

Yong Soon Min's use of various individuals' bellies and navels in *Belly Talk* reverses these assumptions. The navel becomes, after self-understanding, an organ of outward expression of communication with others. The belly becomes a landscape—*the* landscape—possibly the only territorial property of which one can claim ownership unencumbered by artificiality. Here, body and landscape become an individualized unity. This unity reflects the owner by establishing a relationship with the property of that landscape, as much as the face does, by individualizing the landscape. However, a face is loaded with psychological projections and interpretations, while the belly is bare and nevertheless particular. It is the perfect valley to have resonate with precision the echoes of that equally particular statement emitted (or birthed) from the elements that shape that landscape.

Min's act of landscaping is even more pointed for those of us who have lost our traditional terrains and who, because of uprooting, end up associating any perception of a landscape with foreignness. The original landscape is located in memory and is incompletely

accessible. The "real" original landscape from where we came continues to evolve on its own, unaided by our witnessing. The new landscape that now envelops us remains forever a borrowed one. The murmur of the trees, the color of the air, the smell of the rain, are gone and usurped by strange noises, shades, and odors difficult to order.

In her earlier *Defining Moments* series (1992), a six-part photo ensemble, Min used her face and body to register the traumas that disrupted and reshaped her original landscape and that displaced old myths. She then recorded and mixed the disorders supplied by the new landscape. In her biography, continuity and sanity are provided by her face and body. External events puncture her image but are unable to destroy it. They are "defining moments" because they reaffirm the survival and integrity of Min's image.

In *Belly Talk,* four years later, these moments have become orderly not only through a compression into a spiral of text, but through the veil and administration provided by memory. They become Nazca drawings where the message, unable to blind, is blended with the awareness of a detached perspective. They grow from what started as a scream to a methodology to be shared, one that teaches mature survival.

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Figure 57.
Yong Soon Min
Defining Moments, 1
Six-part black-and-
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Courtesy of the artis

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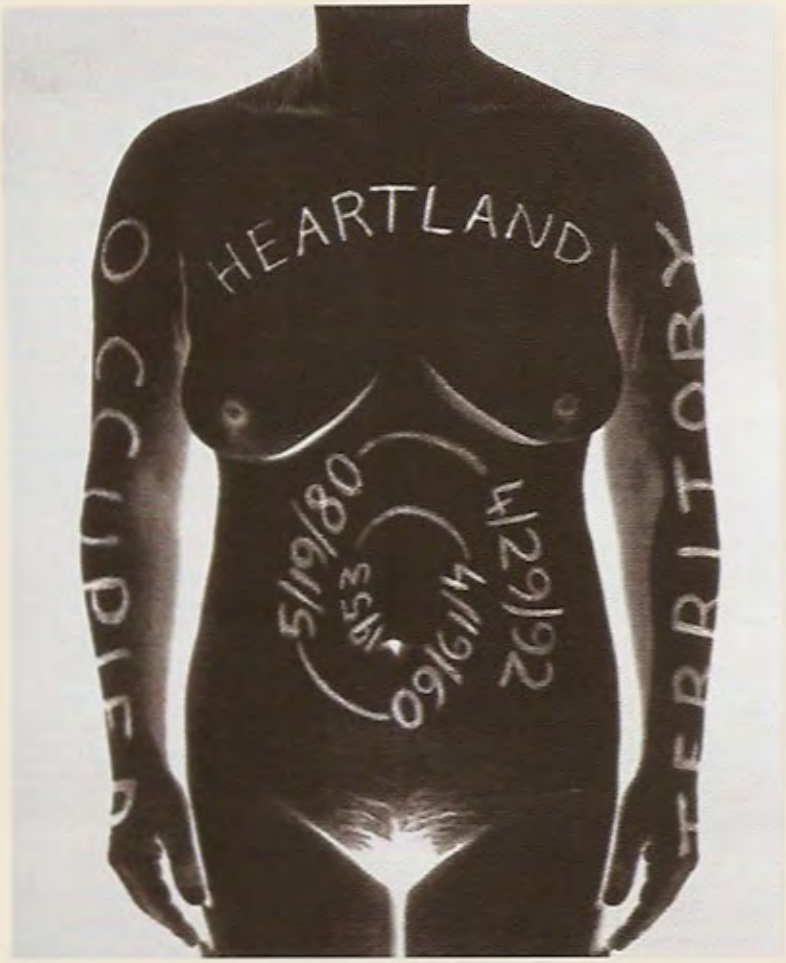

Figure 57.
Yong Soon Min
Defining Moments, 1992.
Six-part black-and-white photograph ensemble, 20 × 16 in.
Courtesy of the artist.

In *Defining Moments*, Min has photographed her own body, inscribed with a series of significant dates that form a spiral across her belly emanating from her navel. Each date holds personal and historical significance, attesting to the intertwining of public and private experiences in the formulation of identity. The year 1953 marks the year of Min's birth and the end of the Korean War; April 19, 1960, is the date of the student uprising that overthrew Syngman Rhee's government, and 1960 is the year Min emigrated to the United States; May 18, 1980, is the date of the Kwangju uprising and massacre, in which 240 students were killed while protesting martial law; and April 29, 1992, is the date of the Los Angeles riots, which had a profound impact on the Korean American community in the United States. Collectively, these dates create a chain of "defining moments" that have shaped Min's life as a Korean American, an artist, and an activist. Emanating from her navel, they form a lifeline of sorts, a link back through time, a way of remembering and commemorating the past. Min positions her body as landscape or homeland, labeling her chest "Heartland" and her arms as "Occupied Territory." Home has become a construct that she embodies rather than occupies.

Suk-Man Kim studied theater at the University of California, Berkeley, and New York University before returning in the early 1980s to Seoul, Korea, where he currently works in theater. Kim has produced *Chilsu and Mansu.* He directed *Mr. Han's Chronicles* and many other plays, both Korean and foreign. Most of his close relatives have immigrated to the United States and currently live in Los Angeles.

Arturo Lindsay is an artist-scholar who conducts ethnographic research on African spiritual and aesthetic retentions in contemporary Latin American cultures. Lindsay has lectured and written extensively on Latin American and Caribbean artists and art. His publications include *Santeria Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art* (1996). He is currently at work on *Black Christs in the Americas.*

Born in rural Alabama, artist and activist **Rick Lowe** has exhibited his work in New York and Los Angeles as well as in Japan and Korea. In 1992, Lowe founded Project Row Houses, a Houston, Texas, public art project involving artists in neighborhood revitalization, historic preservation, community service, youth education, and the celebration of African American history and culture.

Based in England, **Kobena Mercer** has been a visiting professor in the Africana Studies Program at New York University and a guest lecturer in the 1998 Getty Summer Institute in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester. He wrote *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (1994) and is currently at work on a book-length study of contemporary art in the Black diaspora.

Amalia Mesa-Bains is an artist and the director of the Visual and Public Art Institute at California State University, Monterey Bay. Her work has been exhibited at the National Museum of American Art of the Smithsonian, the Whitney Museum of American Art at Phillip Morris, the Studio Museum of Harlem, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, as well as the Kulterhuset of Stockholm, the Contemporary Art Museum of Santa Monica in Barcelona, and the Ikon Gallery in London. She is a MacArthur Fellow and has contributed to the documentation and re-innovation of altar art in the Chicano community. Her writings on museum studies, contemporary art, and art education have been widely published.

Painter / multimedia artist, curator, and writer **Odili Donald Odita** was born in Enugu, Nigeria, and earned degrees in art at Ohio State University and Bennington College. His work has been exhibited in Africa, Europe, and Latin America, as well as in various U.S. cities. He is a consulting editor at *NKA, Journal of Contemporary African Art,* and a contributing writer for *Flash Art International.* Odita is associate professor of painting at Florida State University.

Laura Elisa Perez is an associate professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where she teaches and writes about Latina/o arts and the politics of emerging forms of spirituality. Her forthcoming book is *Altarities: Chicana Art, Politics and Spirituality.*

Griselda Pollock teaches art history and cultural studies at the University of Leeds, where she is professor of social and critical histories of art and director of the Centre for Cultural Studies. Her broad interests include nineteenth- and twentieth-century visual cultures, feminist film studies, and cultural difference and gender. Pollock's recent publications include *Looking Back to the Future: Essays from the 1990s* (1999), *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (1999), *Mary Cassatt* (1998), and *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (1996).

Yasmin Ramirez is a graduate of Columbia University and a Ph.D. candidate in art history at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. She is the curator of Taller Boricua in El Barrio, New York City, as well as a critic who contributes regularly to *Art in America* and *Art Nexus.*

the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as by the Anonymous Was a Woman fund. She was commissioned to curate an exhibition of Korean diaspora art for the Fourth Gwangju Biennial in Korea in 2002. Currently she is professor and chair of studio art at the University of California, Irvine.

Long Nguyen (b. 1958 in Nha-Trang, Vietnam) is a Los Angeles–based painter. He received his M.F.A. in painting and printmaking at San Jose State University. Nguyen's work, which has been exhibited both in the United States and abroad, can be seen in permanent collections at the Oakland Museum of Art and the San Jose Museum of Art. Nguyen has received visual arts awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Fleishhacker Foundation, and the California Art Council. His current body of work is a large series of paintings titled *Tales of Yellow Skin*.

Manuel Ocampo (b. 1965 in Quezon City, the Philippines) attended the University of the Philippines in 1984 and studied at California State University, Bakersfield, in 1985. His work was selected for the 2001 Venice and Berlin Biennales, the 2000 Biennale d'Art Contemporain in Lyons, France, the Forty-third Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., in 1993, and Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany in 1992. Ocampo's work has been included in group shows in Europe, Asia, North America, and Latin America, and in one-person exhibitions in Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne, Milan, Paris, Seville, Badajoz, Barcelona, Montreal, Mexico City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York. Ocampo's painting can be found in public collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, the Sintra Museu de Arte Moderna in Lisbon, the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain in Paris, and the Asian Art Museum in Fukuoka, Japan, among others. In 1995, he was a visual arts fellow at the American Academy in Rome. Thereafter, he took up residency in Seville, Spain, for a period of three years, and then returned to the United States to live in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Hanh Thi Pham (b. 1956 in Saigon, Vietnam) came to the United States in 1975 and settled in Southern California. She earned a B.A. in art in 1982 and an M.A. in photography in 1984 at California State University, Fullerton. She has had one- and two-person exhibitions in New York, San Francisco, and the Los Angeles metropolitan area, as well as in Washington, D.C. She was featured as the tenth annual Fukuoka Asian Artist Today in Japan in 1997 in an exhibition titled *A Vietnamese: Her Body in Revolt*.

Pipo Nguyen-Duy (b. 1962 in Hue, Vietnam) earned a B.A. in economics at Carleton College in 1983 and an M.A. in photography from the University of New Mexico in 1992. He also received an M.F.A. in photography from the University of New Mexico in 1998. He was a fellow at the American Photography Institute at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in 1995. Nguyen-Duy has received awards from the Ohio Art Council, the Oregon Arts Commission, the Lila Wallace–Readers Digest Award Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Getty Foundation. His work has been shown in solo exhibitions in South Carolina, Wisconsin, Oregon, Ohio, and New Mexico, as well as in New York and California and is included in public collections in Japan and Laos as well as in the United States. Nguyen-Duy has curated exhibitions for the Schneider Museum of Art in Ashland, Oregon, and the Galerie Vrais Rêves in Lyons, France. He is currently professor of art at Oberlin College.

Painter and performance artist **Roger Shimomura** (b. 1939 in Seattle, Washington) received his undergraduate degree in commercial design from the University of Washington in 1961 and his M.F.A. in painting at Syracuse University in 1969. He has had over 100 solo exhibitions of his paintings and prints and has presented his experimental theater pieces at such venues as the Franklin Furnace in New York, the Walker Art Center, and the National Museum of American History at the

Figure 28.
Tom Nakashima
The Day of the Arrows, 1990, oil and gilding on canvas, 114 × 168 in. Courtesy of Bernice Steinbaum Gallery.

participant, "The overall segregated arrangement of the curatorial essays reinforced the notion that everyone has their own turf, particularly artists of color. Curators of color . . . only [wrote] about their own racially identified group of artists."[51]

Galvanized by the possibilities for Asian American artists suggested by *The Decade Show,* New York artists Ken Chu and Bing Lee began talking about what it would take to start a contemporary Asian American art museum. In July 1990, they were joined by Margo Machida, and Godzilla: Asian American Art Network was founded. The fabled creature of 1960s Japanese monster movies, Godzilla was a giant lizard that mowed down whatever was in its way. The group's goal was creative and subversive arts advocacy and education and the establishment of a network of artists. According to art critic Alice Yang, the name Godzilla "indicates the activist stance of its founders . . . counter to the stereotype of passivity associated with Asian people."[52] About one hundred people participated in the group's regular gatherings. During its four years of operation, Godzilla hosted meetings where artists presented slide talks about their work, established and maintained a slide registry and served as a referral and resource bank for curators and funding agencies, published a newsletter with exhibit listings and articles on relevant issues, organized two exhibitions of Asian American art and contributed to other exhibitions,[53] and sponsored panel discussions on such topics as "Is there an Asian American aesthetic?" On the West Coast, meanwhile, artists Betty Kano and Flo Oy Wong organized a group of Asian American women artists in the late 1980s. They began collecting slides and establishing a network of artists for mutual support and group shows.

By the early 1990s, publicly supported museums were searching for untapped sources of new money, as the previous decade's investor speculation in art that had resulted in so

Figure 29.
Masami Teraoka
New Wave Series / Kyoto Woman and Gaijin, 1991, watercolor on paper, 22 1/8 × 30 7/16 in. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
PHOTO: LYNDA HESS

Figure 30.
Tseng Kwong Chi
Disneyland, CA 1979, with Mickey Mouse, 1979, black-and-white photograph, 8 × 10 in. Copyright Muna Tseng Dance Projects, Inc., New York City.

Europe and the United States, as well as in various biennials, such as the 1993 Venice Biennale, the 1995 Gwangju Biennale, the 1997 Johannesburg Biennial, and the 2000 Whitney Biennial. Joo has been awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship, the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant, and the Andy Warhol Foundation Prize. His work is in the collections of the Denver Art Museum, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, the Modern Museet in Stockholm, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Along with Do-Ho Suh, Joo represented Korea in the 2001 Venice Biennale. He currently lives and works in New York City.

Jin Soo Kim (b. 1950 in Seoul, Korea), an installation artist, came to the United States in 1974 and currently resides in Evanston, Illinois. Kim earned a B.S. from Seoul National University in Korea. She studied at Western Illinois University and earned an M.F.A. at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1983, where she is adjunct professor of art. Kim's work has been extensively exhibited in Chicago and across the United States, from Maine to Florida and from Los Angeles to New York, as well as in Europe and Asia. In 2001, she completed a permanent outdoor sculpture at Xiadu Sculpture Park, Yanqing, Beijing. She has received fellowships and grants from the Illinois Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her work has been collected by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Madison Art Center in Madison, Wisconsin, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul.

Painter **Hung Liu** (b. 1948 in Changchun, China) graduated from Beijing Teachers College with a degree in art and art education in 1975. She earned a graduate degree in mural painting at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing in 1981, after which she came to the United States and earned an M.F.A. in visual arts from the University of California, San Diego, in 1986. Currently, Liu is the Joan and Robert Danforth Distinguished Professor of Art at Mills College in Oakland, California. Her work has been exhibited in fifty solo and more than eighty-five group exhibitions across the United States and in Asia, including in Bangkok, Beijing, Ho Chin Minh City, Jakarta, Shanghai, Singapore, and Tokyo, between 1985 and 2002. Her work is reviewed in hundreds of newspaper articles and scholarly essays. Liu has lectured and served as a panelist at universities, museums, and art and cultural studies conferences and symposia across the country and abroad.

Yong Soon Min (b. 1953 in Seoul, Korea) is a Los Angeles–based artist and independent curator. She earned a B.A. in 1975, an M.A. in 1977, and an M.F.A. in 1979 in art practice at the University of California, Berkeley, and was selected to participate in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in 1981. She served as administrative coordinator of the Asian American Arts Alliance in New York in 1985–86 and has been a member of the board of directors for the Asian American Arts Alliance, Women's Caucus for Art, Artists Space, the College Art Association, and the Korean American Museum. Since 1987, she has lectured at numerous colleges and universities, including Duke, Harvard, Michigan, Cornell, Williams, Wisconsin, Rutgers, Berkeley, and Parsons. Min has taught at the Rhode Island School of Design, the California Institute of the Arts, and Ohio University and has been invited to lecture at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan, the 2000 Telstra Adelaide Festival in Australia, at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver, the United Nations NGO Forum in Huairo, China, and the Kae Won College of Art and Design in Seoul, Korea. Her work has been exhibited in Italy, England, Portugal, Canada, Cuba, Denmark, Germany, Austria, the Philippines, and Korea, as well as across the United States, including at the Museums of Modern Art in New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, the Whitney Museum, and the Studio Museum of Harlem. Her work has been discussed and reviewed in scores of popular media and scholarly journals. Min has received awards from the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Warren Tanner Memorial Fund, the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department, and

the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as by the Anonymous Was a Woman fund. She was commissioned to curate an exhibition of Korean diaspora art for the Fourth Gwangju Biennial in Korea in 2002. Currently she is professor and chair of studio art at the University of California, Irvine.

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