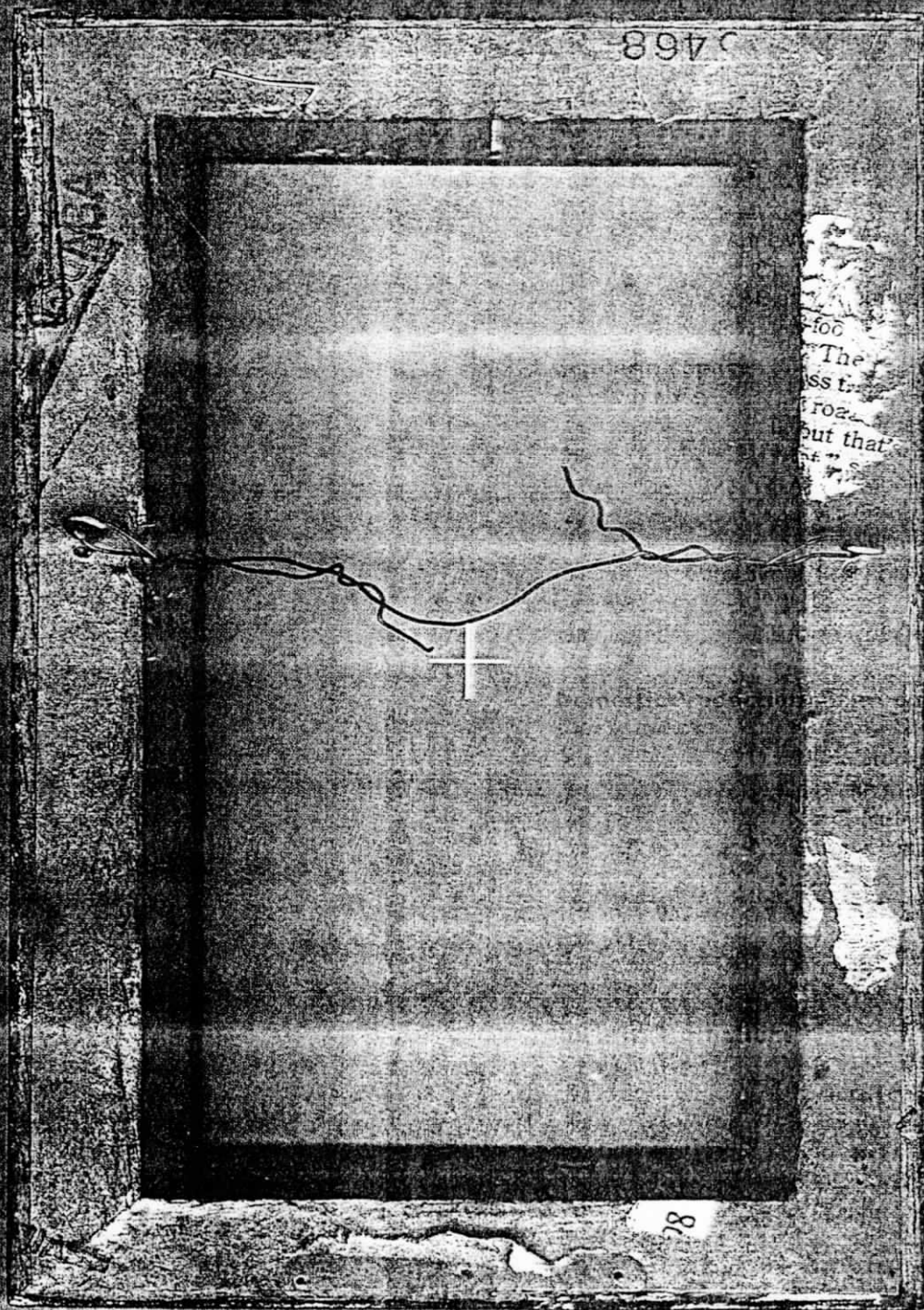


REFRAMINGS

NEW AMERICAN FEMINIST PHOTOGRAPHIES



EDITED BY BETTINE NEUMAYER
FOREWORD BY ANNE WILKES TUCKER

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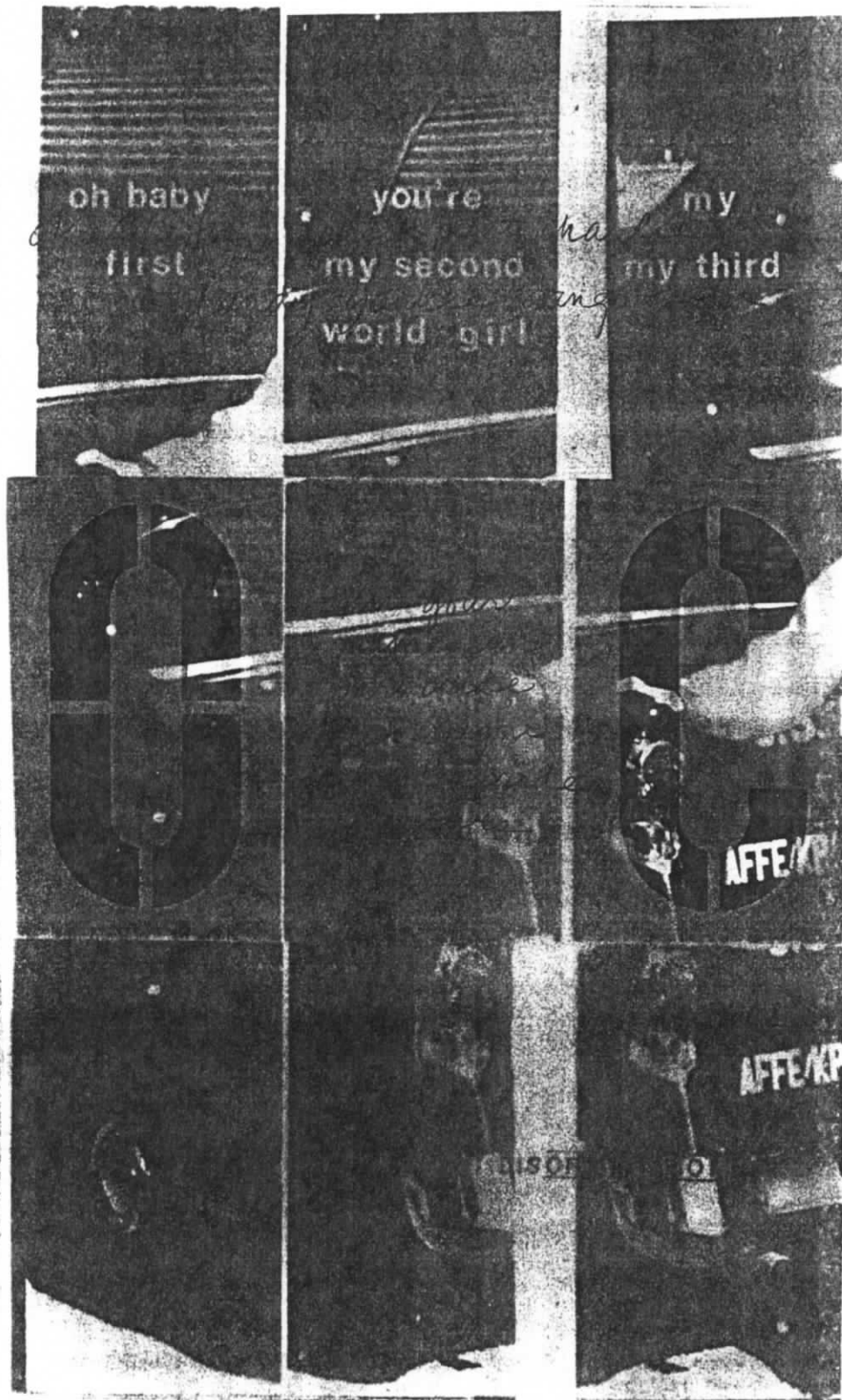
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AND THERE LIVED A GREAT WHITE MAN.

THIS MAN WAS VERY BRAVE, SMART AND DETERMINED.

HE LOVED ADVENTURE.

HE SAILED ACROSS THE OCEAN AND DISCOVERED A NEW LAND WITH DARK-SKINNED PEOPLE.

135

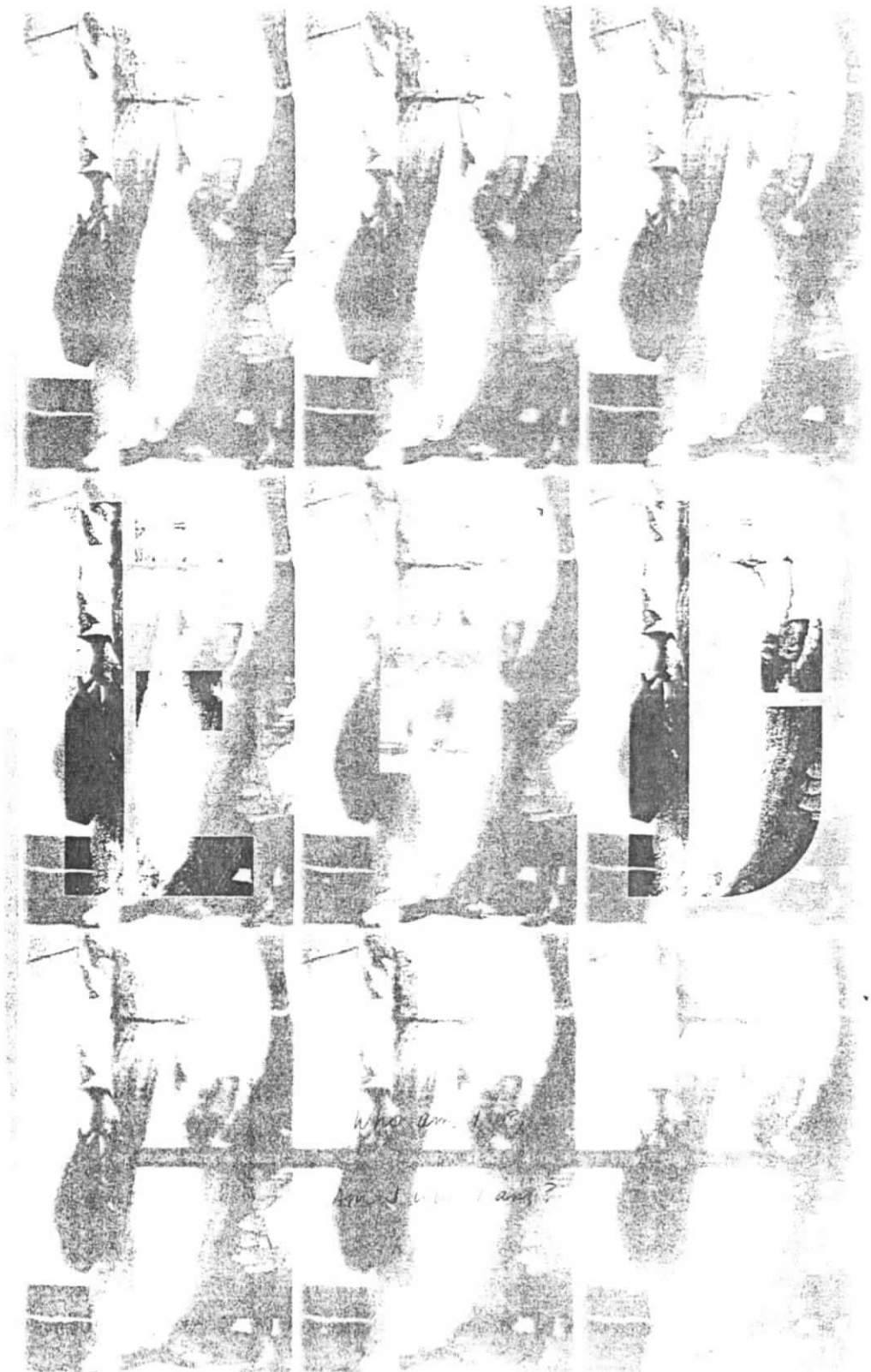


Why were we all smiling so, that bright sunny afternoon? What I most vividly remember of that day is the roar and rumble of all the army trucks.

You clung so tightly to my Z/Ot... You must have been frightened by the commotion around you. You were too little then to understand what was happening.

You never you knew that this was the last time we would be all together. Your father and your uncle were sent to the front. There was no more for me to smile about after the war. I was so

now I have a job and I am especially my job, it is the U.S. army base. We were at the front able to fill our bellies. You didn't see very much of me in those days because I worked such long hours. I left at the crack of dawn to take the cross town bus to the very edge of the city where the base was located and arrived back home in the afternoon after you fell asleep. But you were curious about those strange American-style dresses and the dolls that might you yellow-headed dolls and other gifts from the U.S. You especially liked Ritz crackers! You never seemed to complain much - you were so accepting and



Who am I?

Am I who I am?

May 21, 1993, Berkeley. Restless, I have left my computer and am meandering around the neighborhood. On a sales rack outside a bookstore is displayed *Real Beauty . . . Real Women*, written by "Avon's International Beauty and Fashion Director." Its cover is decorated with a photograph of four women—two young women of color (African American and Asian American) and two Euro-American women (older and younger). Inside the store, I look at publications on women and aging (I have an impending 60th birthday) and also find there a newly created lesbian section in women's studies—this material had been shelved under gay studies till now. I browse through Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, and discover Lucy Stone speaking her mind in 1855: "It is very little to me to have the right to vote, to own property, et cetera, if I may not keep my own body and its uses, in my absolute right." Did Lucy Stone possess the sense of certainty of such an "absolute right" that she might know its loss? Did she and her feminist friends talk about how social constructions of women's bodies become internalized, and how hard it is to stay conscious of such influences although one may be resolute about political goals?

How have attitudes of American feminists to their own bodies changed over the last century and a half?

I come home to find a phone message concerning a photograph by Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie that I had loaned to the Heard Museum. It makes me recall a conversation with her in 1992, when she was considering having both her calves tattooed with a design modeled after that of a nineteenth-century Seminole tattoo for men. I remember, also, a long discussion with Margo Machida, who told me that the assertive ways in which she depicted her body in her autobiographical narrative paintings often offended Asian American men, that assertion went profoundly against the grain of many men's expectations of (and desires for) Asian American women.

How does a woman artist these days represent her own body, and how is that act read by herself and others, in the various cultural traditions of the United States and elsewhere?

As I begin this essay, I feel the resonances in my life of *Sounding the Depths*, a 1992 collaborative installation of sounds, videos, and images by Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. On the museum walls Cummins and Walsh had placed large color photographs of harshly lit, fragmented images of unruly bodies (their own)—bellies and breasts on which were superimposed giant, teeth-bared, wide-open mouths, a reference to Sile Na Gig, the ancient Celtic icon of female sexuality, with its gaping vagina. I had been asked to contribute an essay to

their catalogue and, as I grappled with that task at long distance, I began to widen my discussion of representations of the body to include not only the two Irish women's explorations but also those of Sutapa Biswas, of England, and Suzanne Lacy and Yong Soon Min, of the United States. Through a combination of intimate knowledge of their work and lengthy conversations with them over the years, Lacy and Min have come to represent for me in a rather personal way the breadth of the histories and shifts in attitudes among American women artists toward representations of the body.

In my catalogue essay for *Sounding the Depths*, I quoted from the letters that Cummins, Walsh and I had exchanged about the thinking behind their imagery. In the context of Catholic Dublin—a world in which abortion and divorce are illegal—Walsh stated, "[T]he word body is about autonomy, it's the only thing we really have," and Cummins wrote, "I love to use Virginia Woolf's words, 'as a woman I have no country,' but I like to say, 'as a woman my body is my country.' I used this paraphrase during the dreadful anti-abortion campaign in 1984. When we were being told what we could or could not do with our bodies, our country was being invaded."¹

In my essay on Cummins and Walsh, I wrote of parallels that I sensed between their work and the photographic collage experiments of Sutapa Biswas.² For her 1991 Vancouver installation, entitled *Synapse*, Biswas, a London-based artist of Indian heritage, presented life-size black-and-white photographs. This series show the nude Biswas standing, sitting and lying down. Superimposed on her body or cradling it are images of Indian landscapes, people and classical religious cave sculpture (which Biswas had taken while on a visit to India)—these had been projected as slides during a studio "shoot" and the collective image photographed. The particularities of her perspective had allowed Biswas to merge her own body fluidly and easily with those of Indian goddess sculptures. The result was a striking and unabashedly physical self-assurance to her self-representations.

In this *Sounding the Depth* catalogue, together with Biswas' work, I also included work by two American artists, Yong Soon Min and Suzanne Lacy. Lacy's 1976 series, *Falling Apart*, is composed of a roughly torn photograph of herself—a small-breasted, slight figure leaping on raised toes in an undefined space, hair flying, arms outstretched, legs apart—the two halves of her image interrupted by a photograph of raw intestines. Despite the implication of the work's title, the mood is one of ritualistic abandonment. The piece was generated in the context of an intense white feminist community in Southern California and its style shows the exuberance as well as anger of much early American performance art. Lacy is one of the several major Euro-American women performance artists (Carolee Schneemann and Rachel Rosenthal are two others) who have placed the

¹ Moira Roth, "Two Women: The Collaboration of Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh, or International Conversations Among Women," in *Sounding the Depths* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 6, 15.

² Moira Roth, "Reading between the Lines: The Imprinted Spaces of Sutapa Biswas," in Sutapa Biswas, *Synapse*, a self-printed artist's book, Vancouver, 1991. A more easily accessible catalogue is *Synapse: New Photographic Work by Sutapa Biswas* (London: The Photographers' Gallery; Leeds: Leeds City Art Galleries, 1992).

California beach and, in black, in an elegant indoor public space in Minneapolis. Memories, too, of Lacy's more idiosyncratic personal appearances as a young vampire complete with false teeth; her more somber transformation into an older woman; and the series in which she appears nude, ironically pairing herself with the breasts, thighs, and legs of a raw chicken.

I have been equally inspired by Yong Soon Min's highly original blending of contemporary cultural debates with autobiographical experiences. Recently she has been collaborating with Allan deSouza (at first her lover, now her husband). They draw on their personal relationship, on their diverse cultural-racial backgrounds (she is Korean American, he Indian English), and on their theoretical and activist involvements in Anglo-American debates over cultural and sexual differences.

I remember my shock and wry amusement when I first saw a picture of Min inflating a condom into a sausage-shaped balloon and blowing it toward deSouza. On other images of their bodies—sometimes intertwined, sometimes separated—they have written fragmented narratives, a series of words and phrases that revolve around the possibility or not of love and individual relationships in a world rife with racism and colonial history.

Throughout Min's art, autobiographical material has served both as a major inspiration and a source for imagery, but increasingly she is working directly with the body—hers. Why the shift? In my Dublin essay, I quote from a statement of Min's: "It seems . . . that the body in all its contestations cannot be ignored in the constructions of IDENTITY and DIFFERENCE. With the AIDS crisis, there is a great sense of urgency that we formulate new strategies to reclaim our bodies to counter all the misappropriations as well as to point to healthier constructions of sexuality and desire."³ In my catalogue essay I included Min's 1991 *Demilitarized Desire*, in which she presented a fragmented, compact image of herself, her arms folded across her breasts, only the lower part of her face showing. Across the body she had stamped "WHERE."

Demilitarized Desire, Falling Apart, Sounding the Depths, Synapse—an intriguing range of titles for women artists to use in representing their own bodies.

I subtitled my Irish essay, "An International Conversation Among Women." I wrote that for the Irish, English, and American artists in the exhibit the body was a site from which they could speak their minds as well as voice their feelings, for all the artists were knowledgeable in contemporary theories of representation. This moment of bringing together thinking and feeling about the body is an interesting time, if—a big proviso—a lively

³ Roth, *Sounding the Depths*, 17.

190 Yong Soon Min
Demilitarized Desire, 1991
video/laser print



balance can be achieved between the two. All too often, at the moment, there is an acrid polarization between social constructionist theory and essentialist celebrations of the body.

My recent experience with writing on Cummins, Walsh and Biswas, and Lacy and Min, gave me a fresh framework for thinking about American women's representations of the body, particularly in the photographic medium. For Cummins, Walsh, and Biswas, their work was informed by a coupling of ancient cultural associations of women and power and contemporary theoretical discourse about women and their bodies. The older cultural associations seemed to me less directly available for American women. Also, North American feminist history is dissociated from the standard political sphere in a way that the Irish and English feminist histories are not, given the more overt connections between feminism and socialism in those countries. Finally, our twenty-year history of feminist art has demonstrated profoundly ambivalent attitudes toward the female body, producing shifts in attitudes more extreme than anything seen in Europe. American women have been affected by the sexual revolution of the 1960s; by the feminist battles in the 1970s over the issues of abortion, rape, dieting, and notions of beauty; by analyses of media imagery; and by the homage paid in American culture to youth and the concomitant fear of age. Many of us have been deeply affected by the theoretical texts of recent years concerning the problematics of representation around the female body—and lurking behind all this is the entrenched puritanical discomfort with the body and sensuality.

And then there is the matter of history. For the most part, the current burst of critical thinking has not been accompanied by a full-blown knowledge of the women's art movements of the past twenty years. There is still a dearth of publications on this; the first serious survey of the 1970s has only now (1994) been published.⁴ There is also an imbalance in research on Euro-Americans' art and that of women of color, and lesbian art history still remains uninvestigated in any depth. We are still waiting for serious international comparative studies. All this comes to mind particularly when one considers contemporary feminist photographers' responses to the body, and their relationship to the yet unwritten history of representations of women's bodies—in performance, painting and sculpture, photography and video—since 1970.

I think about these issues in my teaching as well as in my writing. I am on the faculty of Mills College, where we have only women undergraduates, and thus I am particularly aware of the circumstances in which women art

⁴ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds. *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994).

"Racism is a visual pathology,"¹ notes African American artist and philosopher Adrian Piper, and Asian Americans have been victims of the visual pathology of racism since coming to this country in the 1800s. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century hysteria of Asians taking over the United States was named the "Yellow Peril," for the perceived color of Asian skin, and a famous caricature from World War II, entitled "How to Spot a Jap," gave explicit visual instructions on perceiving the supposedly distinct physical differences between the benevolent Chinese, who were allies of the United States in World War II, and the evil Japanese.

Throughout the twentieth century Asians and Asian Americans have been rigidly stereotyped in popular literature such as Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* series, and in film and television, from the sexless inanities of Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto to the superhuman martial arts achievements of Bruce Lee. Asian women in particular operate under the burden of meeting the double expectations perpetuated by the popular media—to fill the mythical shoes of seductive temptresses such as Anna May Wong and Suzie Wong while simultaneously upholding the legend of the docile and subversive geisha girl.

In the work of the Asian American women artists examined here, photography allows each artist to reclaim her identity and her self-image in the face of aggressive stereotyping. The mechanical medium of photography allows these artists to fight fire with fire, utilizing the language and power of the photographic image to correct imbalances in representations of Asian Americans. The artists often directly confront and dispel false images, exposing the lie of stereotypes and one-dimensional caricatures through manipulation and appropriation of source material. They also create a new visual legacy for Asian Americans by defining themselves on their own terms, in their own visual language, and by countering and contradicting the fallacies of popular culture and the predominant beliefs these fallacies reflect.

Betty Lee

Chinese American photographer Betty Lee, currently living and working in Los Angeles, uses photography, text, images from Chinese and Hollywood films, and archival photographs to redefine images of Asian Americans. Born and raised in Illinois, Lee discovered at an early age the contradictions and complexities of the mediated image. In a letter to the author written in 1993, Lee stated, "I am in love with the power of the photograph because as a child it was the best means I had to the outside world. In a small town in the Midwest we were the only Asian family in our community. I spoke

¹ Adrian Piper, "The Critique of Pure Racism," *Afterimage* 18, no. 3 (Oct. 1990).

violence. Through this process she gave voice to the women in the shelters while dealing with her own misconceptions about battered women. Of this work she has said, "I confronted my own myths about domestic violence; instead of fractured, broken women I saw empowerment, sustenance, resolution" (artist's statement). One image in the series, a woman's arms folded defensively over her belly with text that states, "Every 15 seconds a woman is beaten by her partner," simply and forcefully recounts the prevalence of abuse, while the tag line in the corner of the billboard listing the phone number of a local domestic violence hotline offers a chance for escape.

Another piece deals with the cycle of violence from parent to child. Placed in bus shelters in predominantly Asian American neighborhoods in San Francisco, the piece includes an image of a wide-eyed Asian child with the statistics, "91% of abused women say that their children have seen their beatings. 63% of all abusers have seen their mothers abused or were abused as children. They Look, Listen, Learn, and Repeat." In her statement, Tani wrote, "We decided that an image with a child was important in licking domestic violence—a controlling tactic between partners—with child abuse and the cyclical nature of learned behavior along with emphasizing the effect family violence has on the entire family." Tani noted the collaborative nature of the decision-making process as well as the extensive consideration of the broader social concerns that led to the creation of the piece. Both process and result in the Women's Work project meshed with Tani's existing concerns for using creative work as a means for social commentary, empowerment, and cooperative image-making.

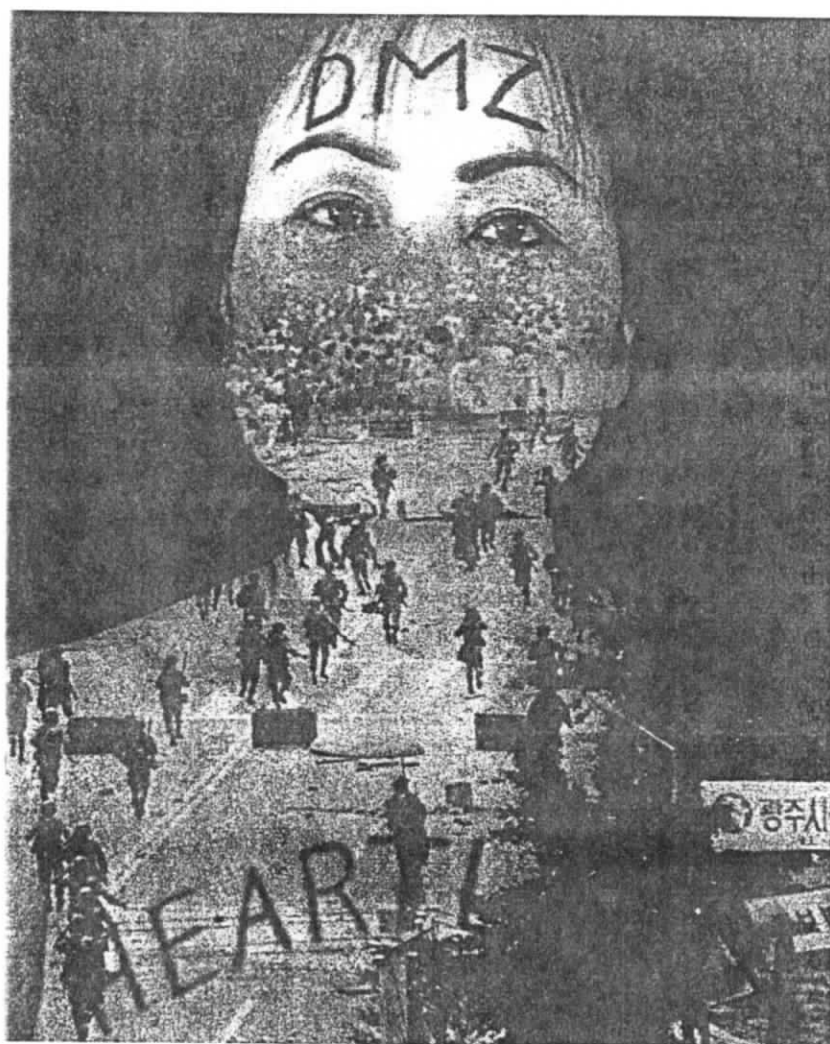
Yong Soon Min

Korean-born artist Yong Soon Min immigrated to the United States as a child, thus making her a member of the "1.5" generation, the term for Korean Americans born overseas but primarily raised and educated in the United States. This generation feels it is somewhere in between their parents' generation, which grew up in Korea, and those Korean Americans born and raised in the United States.

Addressing her generational hybridization, Min's proactive and politically charged work deals with issues of identity, acculturation, and self-articulation, attempting to present a true and accurate portrayal of concerns of the Asian American community. She states, "In order to ensure that our distinct voices are heard in the groundswell of a multicultural chorus, we must stand our ground and assert the value of our own personal and collective experience."⁵ In *Defining Moments* (1992, series of six gelatin silver prints, 20" × 16") Min uses a silhouette of her own head and upper

⁵ Yong Soon Min, "Comparing the Contemporary Experiences of Asian American, South Korean and Cuban Artists," in *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, ed. Shirley Hune, Hyung-chan Kim, Stephen S. Fujita, and Amy Ling (Pullman: Washington State Press, 19XX), 285.

268 Yong Soon Min
from Defining Moments, #4
Kwang Ju Massacre, 1992
 black-and-white photograph,
 20" x 16"



body overlaid with images of significant events in her personal and cultural history, including the year of her birth, which also marked the end of the Korean War; the date of the Kwang Ju student uprising in Korea in the 1980s; and the date of 1993's Los Angeles civil unrest, which occurred on Min's birthday. She notes the connection between her personal history and a broader Korean experience, stating, "The importance of history in formu-

lating my own identity is undeniable. Once I felt I had a grasp of alternative history, a history of my Korean roots that was denied or suppressed, that there was a role model, it gave me incredible strength. You realize that you have this connection and that you are a part of this continuum."⁶ By using her own body in *Defining Moments* as a site for historical events Min literally remaps her identity, finding within her own physical existence the history and memories of her culture's conscience.

The artist's book *Occupied Territories* (1991, accordion-style book, 3" × 5" pages), created in collaboration with Allan de Souza, further uses the body as a place of political and social significance. Throughout the book are photographs of Min's and de Souza's nude torsos, smooth and hairy, printed in positive and negative, which are overlaid with coiled barbed wire and typewritten text. Referring to Min's and de Souza's respective origins as Korean American and South Asian via England, the text on one page reads, "From the far corners of Asia / with our own histories / territories of occupation and division / internally exiled / on either side of the Atlantic." Again in this piece Min and de Souza emphasize the merging of the personal and the political, articulating their perspective as Asians of the diaspora.

Min's large-scale installation work, which uses photography as one element among many, also traces personal history as a means of examining social and political concerns. In *deCOLONIZATION* (1991, mixed media installation), images include a repeated print of a Korean woman and little girl, with the men in the original family picture cropped out, and a photograph of a girl in traditional Korean dress standing in front of a military vehicle. A Mylar overlay spells out the word OCCUPIED in cutout letters, while the text partially reads, "I'm your mama san, miss saigon, mail order bride—I'm yours." Here the litany of stereotypes obscuring the photograph suggests the imposition of Western thought on Asian cultural values. Another overlay relates a letter from mother to daughter recalling the beginnings of a military action near their home that changed their lives, again implying the merging of personal and global history.

Min also uses photography as a metaphor for the socialization of values and mores in *Make Me* (1989, four-part photographic installation, 20" × 16" each), which manipulates photographs of Min's hands and face by splitting, mirroring, and joining the two halves of the image to form a distorted portrait. Cut-out block letters over the rearranged visages spell out the phrases "model minority," "assimilated alien," "objectified other," and "exotic immigrant." These phrases, combined with various hand gestures suggesting silence, submission, and pulled-up "oriental" eyes, indicate the suppressed anger and frustration caused by the words literally carved into Min's image.

⁶ Yong Soon Min, "Home Is Not a Birthplace . . .," *Korean American Community* (July 13, 1991).

Broader Applications

In addition to their individual creative production, Lee, Tani, and Min are also involved with various artists' organizations in their respective home bases. Through these organizations they expand on the progressive concerns evident in their creative work, giving these beliefs broader social and political applications. In California Lee is a board member of the Society for Photographic Education's Western Region and served as an organizer for the 1992 Western Regional Conference. She has spoken widely on issues of identity and the creation of a collective self-image at venues throughout the country, including the Conference on Visual Literacy and the College Art Association's 1993 conference.

In San Francisco Tani is a member of the Asian American Women Artists' Association (AAWAA), an artists' organization that works for the visibility and support of its associates. In collaboration with art historian Moira Roth, Tani is active with *Visibility Press*, a small press that has published limited-edition catalogues of artists Bernice Bing, Betty Kano, Brian Tripp, and Flo Wong. Through these activities Tani merges her aesthetic and social concerns, as a cultural worker promoting the advancement of the Asian American artists community.

In New York City Min is active in *Godzilla*, the Asian American artists' collective that publishes a newsletter, holds monthly meetings, and advocates for Asian American visual artists. Among their activities last year was a successful protest surrounding the absence of Asian American visual artists in the 1992 Whitney Biennial. As a result of their actions, artists exhibiting in the 1993 biennial included Asian Americans Christine Chang, Shu Lea Cheang, and Kip Fulbeck, among others. Min also cites the significance of the Min Joong (people's art) movement in South Korea as a model for artist-activists who combine collective political action with the creation of a progressive cultural aesthetic.

In their creative work and their work in the artistic community these artists have begun to reverse some of the damage wrought by popular culture on the image and identity of Asian Americans. By reappropriating the language and power of the photograph, and by manipulating negative imagery, pop culture icons and stereotypical representations, they have turned the tables on their oppressors. They have taken the means of their degradation and redirected them, turning them around and creating a new lexicon and iconography of an Asian American aesthetic.

For these artists photography becomes a weapon for righting the indignities of the long history of wrongdoing against their community. Their mastery of the master's tools gives them the ability to present a more accurate, eloquent expression of Asian American histories and voices.