

Yong Soon Min

United States

Los Angeles-based installation and conceptual artist Yong Soon Min came to the United States in 1960 at the age of seven. In response to her feelings of being unsettled – her sense that she occupies a place not of but between cultures – she has regularly created politically aware art concerned with the suffering of Asian diaspora peoples. For example, in the powerful *DMZ XING*, 1994, Min etched into glass the tales of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Korea. The immigrants' often heart-rending narratives imbued the installation with a social and historical awareness that is central to Min's point of view.

In Min's solo exhibition at Art in General, New York, in 1998, she examined the consequences of both public and private history. The main work in the exhibition, the installation *The Bridge of No Return*, 1997, consisted of a long S-shaped steel structure over two metres high and seven metres long. Struts supported the work's wire fencing, from which seemingly random words and phrases were hung, as well as a sequence of one-handed clocks that ticked aimlessly away. *The Bridge of No Return* was a

striking, even forbidding, work of art with evidently severe associations – even for the viewer unaware of the particular historical events informing it.

The installation's title refers to an actual bridge located at the 38th parallel, where at the end of the Korean War prisoners were presented with a life-determining choice. Each prisoner was allowed to decide to go either to North Korea or South Korea; however, the decision was final – once the bridge had been crossed, the other side was forever closed.

Min sees *The Bridge of No Return* as documenting many dualities: male and female, capitalism and communism, North and South Korea. She constructed the fence with two clearly contrasting views. On the North Korean side, for which Min used the colour blue to suggest masculinity, the clocks bear images taken from the government's press archive concerning the demilitarised zone: the magnolia (the official flower of North Korea); massive formations of people in stadiums; and a propaganda shot of Kim Il Sung – North Korea's deceased leader – making his way through a rice field. Texts on the clock faces explain and elliptically allude to the particular

circumstances of the time. Additionally, these images are underscored by phrases including 'such sanctuary', 'dependency' and 'degree zero', which are printed onto magnetised strips and placed on the top half of the fence.

By way of difference, the South Korean side of the fence is represented by a series of pink images reproduced on the face of clocks: the Rose of Sharon (the official flower of South Korea); photographs of Seoul's Sampoong Department Store, which collapsed in June 1995 and killed hundreds; and traditional cookies and pastries. Texts placed on the clock faces speak of the department store tragedy and practitioners of intuitive knowledge such as fortune tellers and shamans, while the magnetised strips carry ambiguous words, including 'repulsion', 'polarities' and 'half full'.

Despite the impersonal language in *The Bridge of No Return* the sum of Min's binary oppositions underscores her belief that the Korean War resulted in a series of tragic, seemingly unalterable consequences for the individual. While the rhetorical, static joy of North Korea's social and economic organisation exists in very real opposition to the blurred, blinded happiness of South Korea's capitalist adventure, the two countries are in fact part of a larger whole. The bridge is actually a fence, whose division creates the dualities which Min symbolically describes.

Other works on show included *Bellytalk*, 1997, a grouping of seven large colour photographs based on a University of Washington project employing the use of light boxes in campus bus shelters. Volunteers wrote about particular moments in their lives on transparent paper arranged in a spiral pattern. The text was then laid over a picture of the participant's stomach and photographed.

The stories in *Bellytalk* are very personal and often moving. One woman, a faculty member in the women's studies department, wrote: 'I know I have



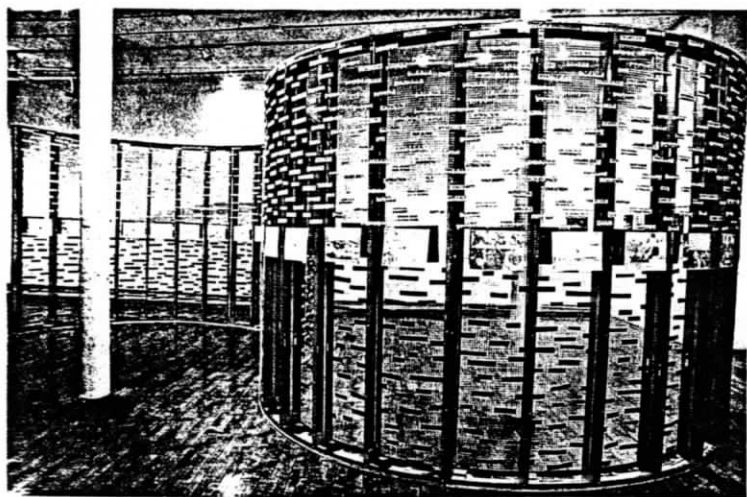
YONG SOON MIN, *Axis*, 1998, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable.

auto-immune illness, that people ... die of the same syndrome I am living with. This does not make me angry at my own lovely belly.' Here Min has given people the chance to make sense of their private lives in the public domain. The photographs of each speaker's belly provide a physical ground from which the described events emanate. Min has fashioned a strong public statement – one intended to connect the narratives of us all – from the inner lives of non-artists.

Axis, 1998, a mixed-media installation, presented a witty and politically insightful view of the globalisation of business. Min travelled through Los Angeles, photographing signs and logos that incorporated words such as 'world' and 'global'; these images were then projected onto the gallery walls of a room hung with plastic globes. The projector rotated so that the images 'travelled' from one wall to the next, emphasising the extent to which internationalisation has become part of the business world; the artist is also poking fun at the banality associated with language asserting such internationalisation. Throughout this strong show, Min constructed works that engage us across a broad spectrum, addressing the personal and the political, the geographically specific and the worldwide. In this regard, her art is meant to involve all of us in as many ways as possible.

Yong Soon Min, Art in General, New York, 18 April – 27 June 1998.

Jonathan Goodman



YONG SOON MIN, *The Bridge of No Return*, 1997, mixed-media installation, 244 x 731.5 cm.