

Vestiges of War

THE PHILIPPINE-AMERICAN WAR
and the
AFTERMATH *of an* IMPERIAL DREAM
1899 - 1999

EDITED by ANGEL VELASCO SHAW *and* LUIS H. FRANCIA





American Friend
mixed media (drawn)
101.6 x 152.4 cm

Defining Women
two of a series
b+w photo artwork
each photo 50.8 x 40.6 cm

Kindred Distance

YONG SOON MIN

... to brush history against the grain¹

The more a thing is torn, the more places it can connect.²

I was a Cold War baby, conceived during the Korean War and born several months before its end. The Korean War, the first of many Cold War conflicts that the United States would perpetrate, proved to be a significant early event in the progress of U.S. global hegemony that has defined the second half of the twentieth century. More than just a coincidence of dates, the war's residual effects have shaped and informed my life and my art work. It is seemingly assimilated into the very core of my subjecthood.

In 1953, near the close of the war and two months before I was born, my father emigrated to the United States. An American officer named Elliot, whom my father served as a translator, helped him gain a scholarship to attend college. The rest of the family—my mother, my brother, and myself—would not be reunited with him for seven years due to the restriction on emigration imposed by U.S. puppet president Syngman Rhee (Korea's version of Ferdinand Marcos). It was not until Rhee was overthrown by a popular uprising in April of 1960 (much like that of the Philippines' "people power" that overthrew Marcos)³ which I witnessed as a seven-year-old in the streets of Seoul, that our family was finally able to leave South Korea and reunite.

This personal and political story of my family's background has been told in some of my artwork such as *American Friend*, *Back of the Bus*, *Talking Herstory*, and *deCOLONIZATION* with the aid of family photos.

I seem to have made the adjustment to the new life in the States more quickly and easily than the rest of my family. I also demonstrated a greater attachment to the past in terms of my self-designation as the keeper of the family photo album. I knew its contents intimately and often conjured elaborate stories for the many heroes and heroines depicted. At some point I realized that our family's story paradoxically speaks volumes about photographs that are missing. All of the existing images in our family's first album were from the time after the war and, for the most part, post



Above:
Back of the Bus
drawing
1984
76.2 x 101.6 cm

immigration. The first time I saw my parents' wedding picture was at my aunt and uncle's house soon after their immigration from South Korea in 1968. I was startled to see such a large formal portrait of my parents in traditional wedding costume—an image I had never seen in our own album.

When asked about the missing photo, my parents pointed out that it was one of the many casualties of the Korean War. With the swift and deep penetration of the North Korean forces into the South in the early months of the war, residents of Seoul had to evacuate with little advance notice. My parents, with my older infant brother and sister in tow (before my birth), left behind almost all of the family belongings which were later destroyed in the U.S. bombing raids over Seoul. When pressed, my parents have periodically spoken of some of the hardships that they, like countless other war refugees, endured. After only a week together, my father left my mother behind in the countryside while he fled farther south since the risk of being captured by North Korean forces close to enemy lines was greater for a male of fighting age, which he was. My mother remembers taking refuge in empty houses in the countryside during the brutal winter months, and constantly scavenging for food. She has often spoken of her affinity for the movie, *Dr. Zhivago*, especially of the winter scenes the family spent in refuge. She recounts collecting rice stalks in the frozen fields and husking them by hand in order to obtain some kernel of rice for food. Her frail three-year-old daughter, Byoung Hi, perished in the second year of the war and was buried in an unmarked grave by the roadside. There are no images of her, only my parents' recollections, to preserve the memory of an older sister I have never known.

Like the missing photos in our family album, the Korean War, and the Philippine-American War before it, largely missing from most accounts of U. S. history that I was taught in my formal education here. When I think back on that education, I draw a blank in terms of information about the Korean War or much else that validated my Korean heritage or experience. For instance, my favorite part of a



world history course in middle school was coloring maps of changing nation-states but I don't recall ever coloring maps of Korea or the Philippines. What I now know about the Korean War I had to seek out for myself as an adult. Fortunately, in the mid-1980s, I joined a national organization based in the United States called Young Koreans United (YKU), which aligned itself with the Democracy and Reunification movements in South Korea. The YKU was started by a student leader of the Kwangju uprising who fled capture and persecution in South Korea for his role in this watershed event. He became the first South Korean to attain official political refugee status in the United States. The uprising in Kwangju, a prominent city of a southern province in South Korea, was a mass mobilization to protest and defy the claim to power of Chun Doo Hwan, a military general who became the president soon after this event. He ordered his shock troops to brutally crush the uprising, resulting in hundreds of deaths. This event became the catalyst for the rebirth of the democracy movement in the 1980s which eventually led to the first civilian government in the 1990s. YKU, which disbanded in the early 1990s gave me an unparalleled education on the radical history of Korea, from a Marxist perspective that foregrounded ongoing struggles for social and political equality and justice.

The fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War was marked on 25 June 2000. The war erupted five years after Korea's liberation from thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule, and three years after the Soviet Union and the United States installed separate, hostile governments on either side of the 38th parallel. Although over three million Koreans and nearly thirty-five thousand American soldiers died in the war, the Korean War has been called the *Forgotten War*, the *War Before Vietnam*, and even a *Police Action* by Truman, the U.S. president who led the country into war. He initially underestimated the military preparedness of North Korea and the utter disarray of U.S. Pacific forces in the aftermath of the defeat of Japan. By 1952, however, the United States waged a devastating air campaign as part of its "scorched-earth" policy

Above left:
deCOLONIZATION
mixed media
Installation
1984

Above right:
Talking Herstory
lithography collé
1992
76.2 x 55.85 cm

to not only cut communication routes and supply lines but also to exhaust the population by relentless bombing. Just about everything in North and central Korea was completely leveled. Napalm was, to use Winston Churchill's phrase, "splashed" over the Korean people and landscape.

Unlike the Vietnam War a little over a decade later, there has been little attempt to commemorate or come to terms with this war. (The national Korean War memorial located in The Mall in Washington, D.C. was established in 1995, thirteen years after the national Vietnam War memorial.) And, although the Korean War left an enduring visible vestige, a fault line of ongoing division and unresolved hostility—the DMZ, where part of the thirty-five thousand U.S. troops stationed in South Korea stand on ever-ready alert with South Korean troops—it hardly registers in the "hearts and minds" of Americans, to mimic the government-speak made popular during the Vietnam War.

In 1954, a year after the Korean War ended in an armistice, the first major conference of the five leading world states since 1945 was held in Geneva. Korea was its focus in the first two months, the main issues being elections and the withdrawal of foreign troops. The North proposed nationwide elections and the simultaneous and proportionate pullout of all foreign forces before the elections. The United States and South Korea proposed that elections be held only in North Korea, under Southern law and under U.N. auspices. The North came to negotiate, but the conference ended

Bridge of No Return
mixed media
Installation
1997
2.44 x 7.32 x 1.54 m



in a deadlock, with no movement toward the reunification of Korea.

An event which occurred at the end of the Korean War served as the point of departure for a spatial exploration of the multiple locations of division and displacement. *Bridge of No Return*, the title of a mixed-media sculpture done in 1997, is the name of an actual bridge that stands near the 38th parallel. After the war, it was used to allow prisoners of war one irreversible crossing before the borders were sealed. The bridge still stands today, heavily guarded on both the North and South Korean sides of the DMZ. To me this bridge has come to epitomize the absurd yet undeniable reality of divisions—geopolitical, ideological, cultural, et al.—which render border crossing hazardous, even an oxymoron.

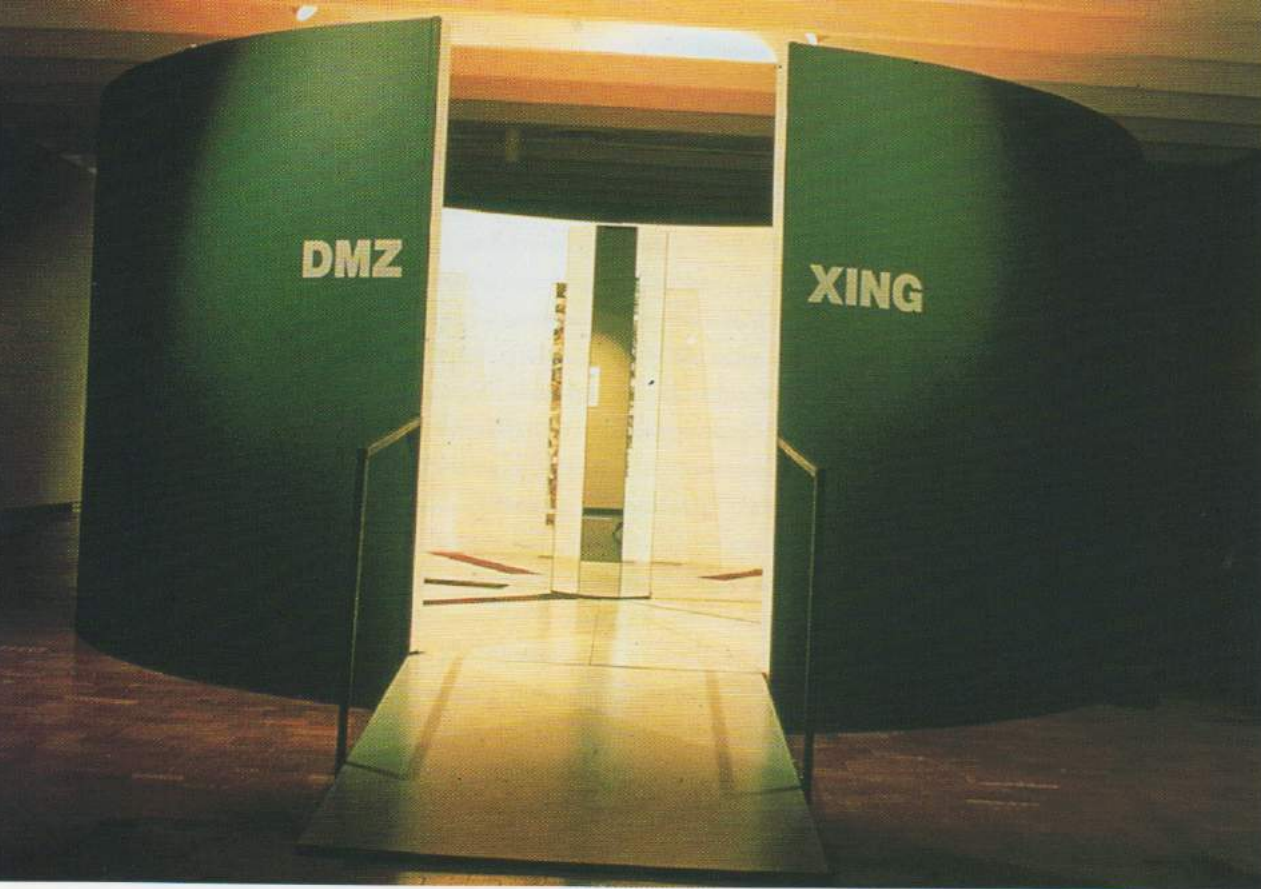
The sculpture consists of a room-sized eight-foot-high curved wall made of mesh wire fencing and based on the yin-yang-like 'S' form. This work uses magnetically attached text, clocks, and images of flowers to symbolically convey the intertwined relationship of the North and South Korea, akin to the polarized forces of attraction and repulsion of a magnetic field. The curved-wall structure creates three physical spaces: the two façades which are traversed one side at a time and an embedded third space that exists in the narrow gap between the two wall surfaces. The two outside surfaces are randomly covered on the top on one side and on the bottom on the other with small magnet pieces that contain words or phrases such as "half full," "half empty," or "tick," "tock" that denote in some cases binary pairs and in others, words such as "always already," "interstitial" that convey concepts of discursive positionality. Along the midpoint of each side, photographic images of flowers, one side pink, the other light blue, line the wall with magnetic pieces of text adhering the images to the metal screen wall. The two sides constitute one twenty-four-hour day: the blue North Korean side begins at midnight and ends at noon; the pink South Korean side starts at noon and finishes at midnight. Each flower panel contains a second hand of a clock, spinning to suggest both the visible passage of time as well as the persistent mutability of location—that of a compass continually marking its variable positions. On the backsides of the banal pink and blue flower images are full color images of "official" images that North and South Korea project about themselves in government and tourism promoting publications. These contesting and contrasting images face each other within the narrow gap of the third space that is visible only at close range.

Meanings are generated as much by the symbolic realm of the overarching structure and its attendant materials as by the profusion of language and representations cast within an aggressive narrative drive. In her catalog essay about the function of words in

Far left:
Bridge of No Return
detail

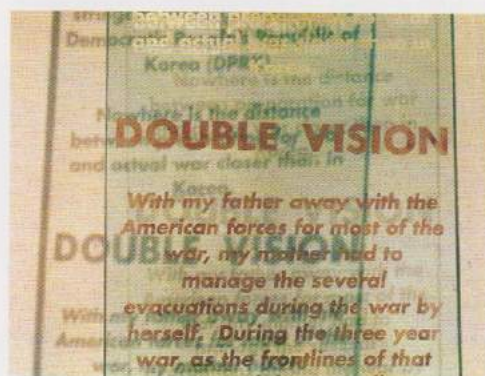
Left:
Bridge of No Return
detail





DMZ XING
entrance
wood structure,
mixed media
Installation
1994
243.84 cm diameter

Right: Detail



the work, Elaine H. Kim comments, "(A)t times Min's text undercuts the images; at other times, the words speak besides, although not necessarily about, the visual material. The words themselves are like discreet magnets, hidden forces holding up the double-sided images."⁴

Another artwork, *DMZ XING*, 1994, focuses on the parallels and intersections between the histories and the legacies of the Korean and Vietnam

wars, the two Cold Wars that the United States lost. The double entendre of the title of this work alludes to this cultural, historical, and political "xing" or crossing as well as the negating or destructive effect of the DMZ that afflicted both Vietnam and Korea. I began work on *DMZ XING* by interviewing a number of Southeast Asian refugee families (Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese, Amerasian, and Cambodian) who were serviced by the Connecticut Federation of Refugee Assistance Association. What began as an oral history project to gain a better understanding of this often marginalized sector of Asian America eventually took shape as a public installation which integrated their stories within a broader context of the history of the Vietnam War and its relationship to the Korean War and my stories as a Korean-American.

DMZ XING consists of a sixteen-inch-diameter rotunda that is to be entered. The interior contains a centrally placed octagonal column of mirror which functions like an all-seeing and reflecting panopticon. Along the edge of the circle stand sixteen tall glass panels etched with texts alternating between refugee family stories which also incorporate color photos taken from the interview sessions, historical information

about the wars and the immigrant experience, and my own narratives. A centered mirror column and the outlying curve of glass panels are linked by six channels cut into the wood floor which project intense red light. The light flickers on and off, suggesting that all who enter this zone are put in a heightened sense of alarm and readiness. The length of the channels is graduated so that, as one reaches the end of the circular narrative, the sense of heightened tension subsides.

The Vietnam War was never officially declared while the Korean War was never officially resolved. In the case of Vietnam, the same Geneva conference in 1954 established accords in which the United States opposed the indigenous liberation/communist movement. Although the Vietminh forces under Ho Chi Minh won a decisive victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu, the world leaders at this conference persuaded Ho Chi Minh to accept a temporary partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel with elections to reunify the country in two years. The South under Ngo Dinh Diem, with U.S. backing and enormous financial aid, denounced the Geneva accords and refused to participate in the reunification elections. The division of Vietnam hardened, leading up to the war. This echoed U.S. actions in Korea since 1945, the date of Korea's liberation from thirty-five years of Japanese colonial rule. At this point the United States supported the anticommunist forces in the South, thwarting all efforts to conduct nationwide elections which would have assured leadership by the communist forces under Kim Il Sung. This turn of events precipitated the Korean War.

During the 1950s, the United States supported the corrupt and autocratic rulers in both South Korea and South Vietnam (and later Marcos in the Philippines) as part of a foreign policy informed by the Cold War notion of a domino theory in which the spread of communism had to be held in check at any cost lest one country's fall to communism lead to another's. With this ideological smokescreen, the United States refused to accept indigenous developments of national liberation movements.

Another harrowing parallel to the horror and scale of the atrocities of the well-documented 1968 My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War were the recent revelations of war crimes committed during the Korean War. On 30 September 1999, the Pentagon declared that it would launch a full-scale investigation into allegations that U.S. infantrymen massacred several hundred South Korean civilians during the opening weeks of the Korean War. This abrupt about-face comes after years of stonewalling attempts to shed light on claims made by Korean survivors and victims' relatives as well as U.S. veterans. South Korean civilian refugees, most of them women and children and old men were pinned under a railroad tunnel in a hamlet named No Gun Ri where they were fired upon by U.S. troops. The captain of the regiment, who is said to have given the orders to open fire, is reported by infantryman Eugene Hasselman to have said, "Let's get rid of all of them." Hasselman goes on to say, "We didn't know if they were North or South Korean.... We were there only a couple of days and we didn't know them from a load of coal." (*Los Angeles Times*, 1 October 1999). Bruce Cummings, a noted American historian and author of *The Origins of the Korean War*, predicts that this case will lead to information about other similar incidents in the Korean War.

Another equally obscured atrocity committed by the U.S. troops occurred during the Philippine-American War. In March 1906, troops under Gen. Leonard Wood's command trapped a large group of Muslim Filipinos, mostly women and children,



Far right:
Geography of Desire
entrance, site-specific
collaborative room
installation with
Allan deSouza and
Luis H. Francia,
mixed media
1993

Right: Main Doorway

in the extinct volcanic crater of Mount Dajo [in Muslim Mindanao] and fired upon them from ships off the coast as well as from a safe distance in the heights above, for four days until all 900 were reported dead. A similar massacre at Bud Bagsak in June of 1913, led by Gen. John J. Pershing, resulted in the deaths of about five hundred Muslim Filipinos.

While the much-heralded New World Order of global capitalism has arguably blunted Cold War ideology, the vestiges of the Korean War retain a remarkable resiliency. Wars end but hostilities have an immeasurable half-life affecting subsequent generations not directly involved in the wars. My story of an inextricable personal/political connection to this chapter in Korean history is common to many of the current Korean generation. The trauma of the Korean War lives on in the establishment of separate countries, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north and Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south, tens of thousands of divided families, orphaned children, an entire generation raised under oppressive authoritarian military rule, and the diaspora of Koreans, mostly to the United States.

The lure of the "American Dream" is another enduring vestige of the war and U.S. global domination. That the American Dream affects Koreans and Filipinos alike was the basis for a collaborative installation (with Allan deSouza and Luis H. Francia) presented at the Fourth Baguio International Art Festival in 1993. The piece, titled *Geography of Desire*, consisted of a red schoolhouse called a "School of Desire." All who ducked to enter the lowered threshold saw a blackened interior stenciled in gold transnational corporate logos. Numerous lessons and critiques of desire were offered, such as the lines written in chalk on a blackened wall from Luis H. Francia's influential essay, "Memories of Overdevelopment"; "Black Market: Comprador Catalog," an opiate-like collection of seductive fashion advertisements lifted from pages of glossy U.S. magazines; another book entitled "Dream," a book which begins with images from the Los Angeles riots and is followed by pages which are progressively burnt; and a wall-panel reproduction of a historical image depicting



a schoolmarm teaching barefoot Filipino children an updated lingua franca of the "ABC's of New World Order" (such as AIC [advanced capitalist countries], IMF [International Monetary Fund] and NIC [newly industrialized countries]).

For many Korean Americans, the L.A. riots of 1992 sorely tested their "American Dream" of materialism, mobility and modernity.⁵ Since the dramatic economic transformation of South Korea in the 1980s, the lure of America has been based on more than strictly economic aspirations—as was the case with my parents seeking an alternative to the bleak reality of a war-torn Korea of the 1950s.

In July of 1998, I visited the DPRK as part of a small invited delegation of Korean American feminists. Having made several trips in the past to the borders of North Korea, from the Chinese side in the north and from the South Korean border at the DMZ, I considered it a momentous occasion to actually set foot in this remote territory that is difficult to access for U.S. citizens such as myself and is off-limits to South Korean citizens. I found myself constantly trying to decipher and gauge from things and events large and small my sense of similarity to and difference from my fellow Koreans in the north. All the while, I struggled against an encroaching sense of intense alienation and disorientation. Indeed, fifty years of division have created another "bridge of no return."

The Korean War and its legacy is an inheritance that is at once a burden, emboldening

me at the same time with a sense of responsibility to keep this history vital in seeking and creating new connections and possibilities. Especially when "everyone except Koreans and Korean Americans, it seems, would just as soon forget."⁶

In grappling with the history of the Korean War in my work, I attempt to excavate "counter-memories" and "counter-histories," sites of residual histories where division and difference, demilitarized desire, and decolonized body politic animate the imagination. I wish to activate history in order to better understand and change the present by placing it in a new relationship with the past. My engagement with history is political not only because it is shaped by present politics but also because the dissemination of new histories is a political action with historicized consequences. Knowledge is produced about the past, not simply recovered. History is powerful because knowledge about the past helps to construct knowledge in and for the present—and knowledge, as we know, is power. The Korean War, then, represents a history of the present.

MY BODY LIES
OVER THE OCEAN
MY BODY LIES OVER THE SEA
MY BODY LIES OVER THE DMZ
OH BRING BACK MY BODY TO ME
BRING BACK, BRING BACK, OH BRING BACK MY BODY
TO ME.⁷

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.
2. Meredith Stricker, "Island," *Looking for Home: Women Writing about Exile*, eds. Keenan and Lloyd (Milkweed Editions, 1990), 273.
3. Syngman Rhee's presidency (1948-60) is toppled by a massive protest which erupted on 19 April when tens of thousands of college and high school students march toward the South Korean presidential palace to protest rigged elections and government corruption. Demonstrations spread across the country when police fire upon and kill 130 students. One of the students killed is a medical student who boarded in our Seoul house. Within one week, Rhee is deposed and given exile in Hawaii.
4. Elaine H. Kim, "On Yong Soon Min's Bridge of No Return," *Yong Soon Min* (exhibition catalog, Krannert Museum and Temple Gallery, 1997): 7.
5. Concepts derived from: Nancy Ablemann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).
6. Kim, "On Yong Soon Min's Bridge of No Return," 5.
7. Excerpt of text in "Defining Moments," a six-part black-and-white photo series from 1992. The text is etched on the glass cover which overlays the first image, my silhouetted body. This work was made in response to the Los Angeles riots of 1992, called Sa-i-gu by Koreans, which literally translates as 4-2-9, 29 April, the first day of the riots that resulted in the mass burning and looting of businesses, mostly those owned by Korean Americans. This work chronicles the often uncanny conjunctions between formative events in my personal history and those of major historical events for Koreans and Korean Americans such as Sa-i-gu, which also happens to be the date of my birth, as well as the end of the Korean War which, as mentioned earlier, corresponds to my birth year, and so on. Blending historic documentary images with that of my face branded with the words DMZ and Heartland, and creating visual linkages of personal and political histories onto the body, is to suggest the notion of an embodied, intimately claimed and possessed knowledge and understanding, in this case, of history.