

INTERACTION

INNOVATION

COLLISION

YEON SHIM CHUNG
SUNJUNG KIM
KIMBERLY CHUNG
KEITH B. WAGNER

FROM 1953

KOREAN ART

PHAIDON



Historic rally in Koreatown

...er supporters attend a community rally and



CHAPTER
13

INTERROGATIONS OF PLACE:
KOREAN AMERICAN ART IN THE LATE
1980s AND 1990s

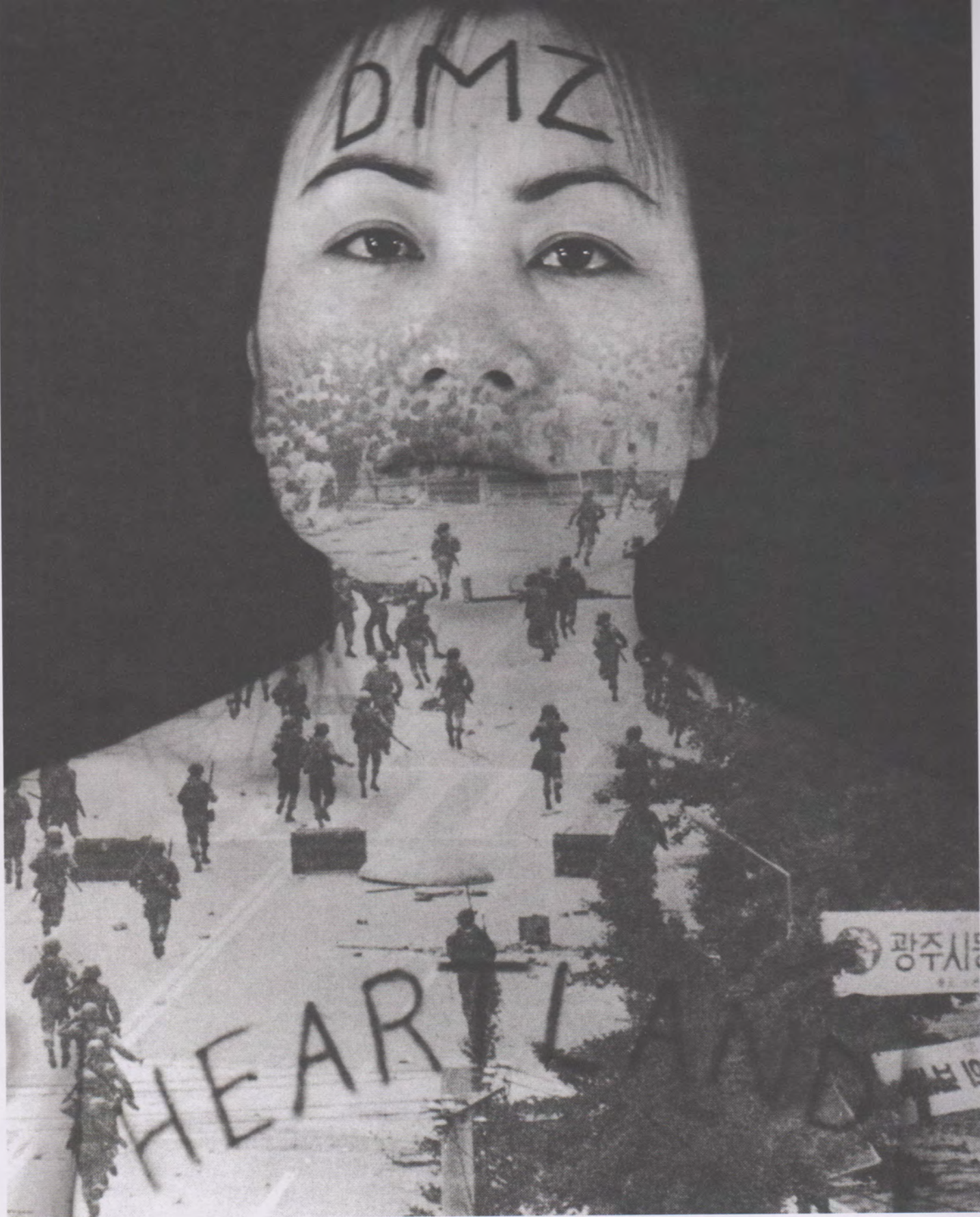
KIMBERLY CHUNG



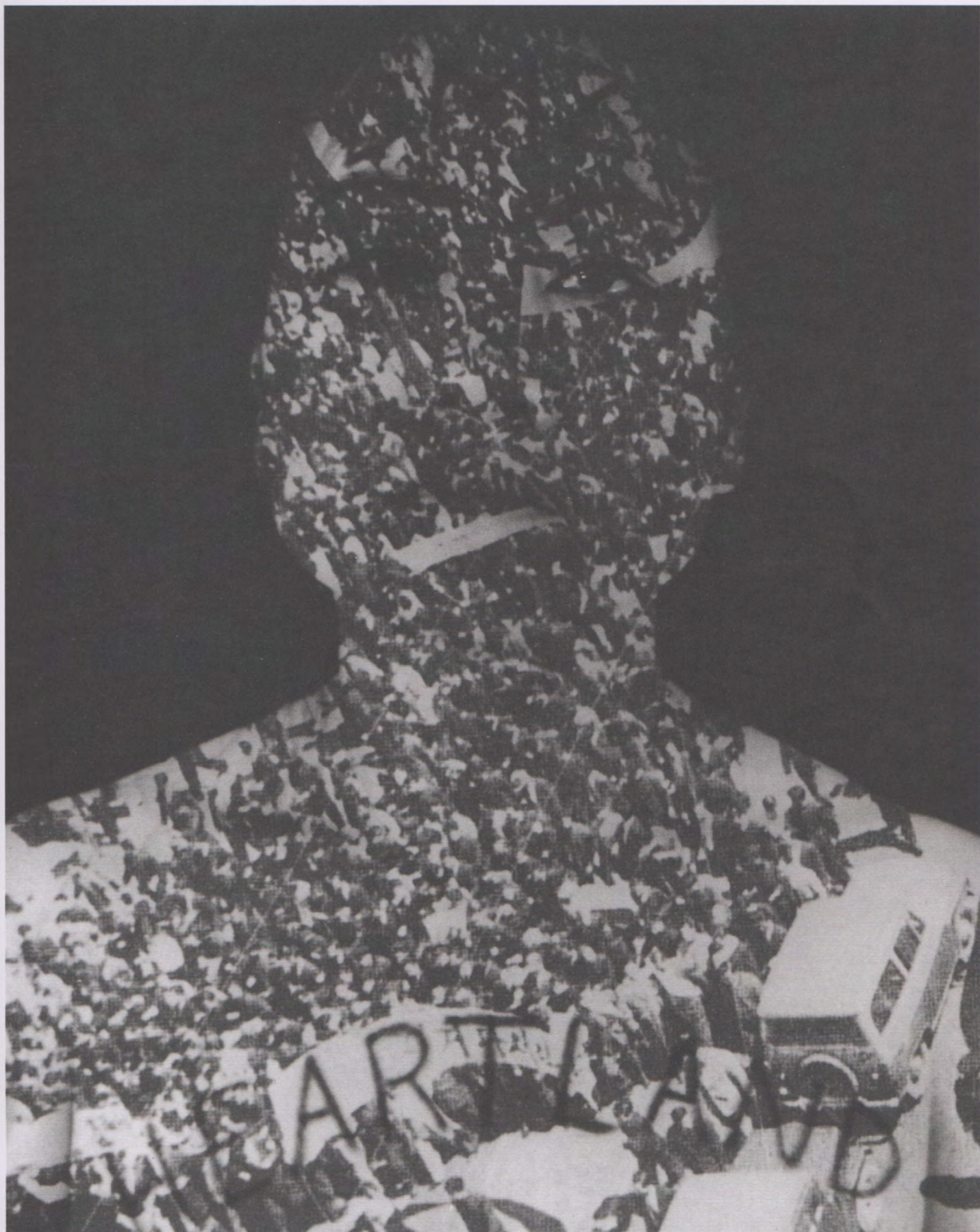
7 Hyung Su Kim
These Americans, 1993
 computer-generated photograph
 40.6 x 50.8 cm

the spatial practices of the people who worked and lived in these areas had been deeply scarred and, in some instances, reduced to rubble'.¹⁶ Revisiting Hyung Su Kim's work, however, reminds us that the disruption of the landscape perhaps was already occurring as established topographies of ethnicity, race and class were changing rapidly during the 1990s. Kim's projection expresses a longing for physical and conceptual presence, to be inscribed permanently into the fabric and sensibility of Koreatown, while simultaneously suggesting in this gesture that it is impossible.

This style of photographic montage was also utilized in artist Yong Soon Min's (b. 1953) series *Defining Moments* (1992; fig. 8), which features a self-portrait of the artist, her body serving as a canvas for layered images inscribed onto her body. Min's works, which traverse localities that are linked through issues of war, colonization, identity politics and feminism, are often rendered in installation and mixed-media forms. Works like *deCOLONIZATION* (1991; fig. 9) and *Ritual Labor of a Mechanical Bride* (1993; fig. 10) utilize Korean traditional textiles and objects to ask questions about intertwined social and political issues pertinent to Korean American female identity. In *Defining Moments* the six images in the series vary from piece to piece, but all feature different critical, traumatic, violent and symbolic topographies: the Korean War, the Gwangju Uprising, the Los Angeles riots and Baekdu Mountain, an active volcano on the border between China and North Korea. In drawing together certain details from her own life with these historical moments, Min's series brings to light politicizing turning points in her narrative. The interposed representations of a collage of newspaper clippings about the Los Angeles riots are brought into conversation with a photograph



8 Yong Soon Min
Defining Moments, 1992
 gelatin silver print and etched glass
 each: 50.8 x 40.6 cm



of American soldiers crossing an expanse of land labelled the 'DMZ' and a photograph of riot police suppressing protesters during the Gwangju Uprising. 'Landscape' in Min's work, as opposed to Kim's, is a reified concept; in the case of Baekdu Mountain, it is a politically charged topography that, as a symbol, has been manifested in oppositional movements and the quest for unification. In turn, Los Angeles, and representations of the Los Angeles riots, set up a jarring note for the viewer, as these media representations evoke both incongruous and congruous associations with other landscapes of violence set against the artist's female body. The series as a whole is steadied by Min's levelling gaze, replicated in each image, inciting a confluence of conversations around shared histories, representations of cultural identity and the violence of representation.

This enquiry into presence and its impossibilities was also a concurrent theme in the work of Bahc Yiso (or Bahc Mo) who has playfully worn many aliases, like Park Yiso and Bahc Chulho, in a play on the misreading of his name, highlighting the limitations of linguistic systems in prescribing a kind of democratic identity. The use of 'Mo' references the Korean word 'mwŏ', meaning 'nothing', an empty signifier, a questioning after a subject. Together with Sung Ho Choi and Il Lee (b. 1952), Bahc was instrumental in opening a gallery space in 1985 for minority artists called Minor Injury,¹⁷ which organized exhibitions like 'Roots to Reality: Asian American in Transition' (1985) and was one of the first venues in Brooklyn for artists and the local community before the greater influx of artists into the area and subsequent gentrification.¹⁸ Bahc also co-founded the SEORO Korean Cultural Network in the 1990s, a hive and platform for Korean and Korean American artists, which later published a quarterly bulletin called the *SEORO Bulletin* that became a mouthpiece for Korean and Korean American community issues.¹⁹

Bahc Yiso worked with many media: painting, installation, murals and performance. His exploratory work revolved around his diasporic identity as a Korean-born artist and experience of displacement/belonging in other localities, particularly New York City. Interested in the dialectics of self and place, he once said: 'In a world increasingly becoming a place of immigrants, I don't feel

9 Yong Soon Min
deCOLONIZATION, 1991
 Installation view at the Bronx
 Museum of the Arts, New York, 1991





10 Yong Soon Min
Ritual Labor of a Mechanical Bride,
 1993
 (detail)
 Installation view at Queens
 Museum, New York, 1993