



ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN ARTISTS

Performative Strategies Redefined

Stacy **E. Schultz**

So much of the visual representation in popular media, education, and the arts reflect what is basically rooted in Western culture. The rest of us are rendered invisible.

—Betty Lee

To find a place for oneself in this culture is a political act.

—May Sun

RETAINING CULTURAL TIES TO ASIA WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY BECOMING AMERICAN creates tension as Asian American women struggle with identity. The state of being Asian American affirms transience and fluidity. In order to maintain allegiances to tradition while becoming American, lines must be crossed and boundaries overcome.¹ The additional distinction of being nonwhite and non-European further complicates belonging. In overcoming cultural stereotypes, the root of the struggle to gain access to American citizenship, the legacy of immigration continues to linger. As a result, the media through which an artist chooses to engage these difficulties becomes significant. In her essay for the *Global Feminisms* exhibition catalog, Joan Kee identifies the media of performance and photography as offering special opportunities to challenge “systems that attempt to order women according to imposed agendas. Artworks are judged to be especially successful when they are able to reveal how such orderings have been carried out.”² In accordance with Kee’s assertions,

the following discussion seeks to analyze performative works, including performance, photography, film, and video, by women of Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese descent. Though by no means culturally exhaustive or definitive,³ the intent of this examination of specific works that feature examples of the Asian American female body is to investigate processes by which these artists can stake legitimate claims to their bodies as disputed sites in challenging language (both written and spoken), cultural heritage, stereotypes, and politics. Through these media, personal narratives explore cultural traditions in a world that sees heritage as something to be left behind or overcome. The experience of identity formation that is neither fully Asian nor American, a hybrid position, propels this process. This strategic position enables the artists analyzed herein to reveal active processes of negotiation that underscore contested Asian American corporeal presence.

Because of such dramatic differences in culture, Asians often feel displaced, unconnected, and even lost in the United States. This detachment can be especially painful if the individual's new community is one in which the general population is homogenous. There may be few, if any, people with whom to connect or share experiences. Language barriers can also pose problems and increase feelings of isolation. The struggle of living between two cultures can spur varied reactions as the immigrant attempts to adapt. Psychologists have identified four different modes of response: "biculturalism, in which individuals maintain active and effective relationships with both cultures; assimilation, in which members of one culture seek a new identity in a second culture and lose (or do not maintain) their original culture; separation, in which individuals hold on to their original culture and do not seek participation in a second culture; and finally, marginalization, in which individuals fail to maintain active relationships with either culture."⁴ However, for the contemporary artists discussed herein, these strategies cannot prove ultimately effective. By drawing attention to the hybrid nature of their identities, the following works express engagement, extension, and transformation of what constitutes both Asian and American art.

The stresses of entering a new culture can be reconciled by blending

personal concerns with the cultural, historical, and political issues that prompted immigrants to leave their homelands. Because many traditions in Asia are thousands of years old, artists may also decide to include references or allusions to historical events, myths, or literary and artistic creations. These elements would be commonly understood within their own cultural context, and, when cited, draw attention to divergent notions of history in America and Asia.⁵

For Asian women in particular, the burdens of stereotypes have involved negotiating a dual nature perpetuated by the American popular media. On the one hand, they are measured against the mythically seductive Suzie Wong or Dragon Lady, often staged or framed as a prostitute or devious temptress. On the other hand, society expects them to uphold the legend of the docile and subservient China Doll, Geisha Girl, or shy Polynesian Beauty.⁶ These images of Asian women by Westerners were common even into the 1960s. Yoko Ono observed in the 1960s that images alternated between the obedient slave and the Dragon Lady, combining racist colonialist attitudes toward Asians and fear of growing Asian power.⁷ Although traces of these stereotypes linger, Asian American women have been successful in subverting and overcoming them. By using their own images in their work, Asian American artists can combine Western stereotypes with older Asian traditions to create new spaces for identity. The experiences for subsequent generations also affect the relevancy of stereotypes and cultural traditions, including language. For contemporary Japanese American artist Linda Nishio, the tension of not being able to speak Japanese as well as learning to master the theoretical language of the artistic avant-garde in her native language of English sheds light on the generational shifts that occur in the transition from Japanese to Japanese American.

In the work of Nishio, we see a desire to form a whole self through conceptual and performance work. In *Kikoemasu Ka* (*Can You Hear Me?*) of 1980, Nishio appears in a series of six images. The viewer can see only her head, upper torso, and hands. Through these fragments, Nishio mouths the words “Can you hear me?” in Japanese, while her mouth and hands are pressed up against glass. Through these exaggerated movements of

her mouth, she emphasizes her desire to be heard beyond what her face (her primary ethnic marker) presents. Below each photograph (with the exception of the last image), text accompanies the images. The text reads as follows:

My name is Linda Nishio. I am 28 years old. I am a third generation (sansei) Japanese/American. I grew up in L.A. in a household where very little Japanese was spoken, except of course by my grandmother, who spoke very little English during those early years. I picked up some Japanese phrases, a few of which I still remember today. Then I went to Art School on the East coast. I attended classes in an environment where very little art was taught but where iconoclastic rhetoric (intellectualism) replaced “normal” art education. Before long I realized that I, too, was communicating more and more in this fashion. Ho hum. Upon returning to L.A. I found myself misunderstood by family and friends. So this is the story: A young artist of Japanese descent from Los Angeles who doesn’t talk normal.⁸

Thus, in the process of attempting to speak, Nishio reveals multiple levels of incomprehensibility. Not only is she not heard as a Japanese American, though she speaks Japanese in these images, she is also not fluent in the language. It is a common assumption on the part of many Asians, as well as American Caucasians, that Asian appearance equates with inability to speak English. Nishio adds to the visual incomprehension by relating her experiences in art school. By learning a new language, presumably critical theory, Nishio is also misunderstood. In training as an artist, she has developed yet another layer of language that distances her, particularly from her family. In the last image unaccompanied by text, Nishio remains frozen pressed against the glass. Inability on the viewer’s part to adequately see or hear leaves the series open due to the hybrid nature of her identity position. The loss of culture in not being able to speak Japanese also alludes to a type of deafness that the piece acutely conveys. She cannot be heard nor can we hear her. As a result, the transmission of verbal information is short-circuited. In retrospect, Nishio’s desire to be heard and understood can be related to some of the struggles for recognition encountered by Yayoi Kusama and Shigeko Kubota. Their work from the 1960s and 1970s reflects concern with redefining visual communication within the context of the New York art world. Both Kusama and Kubota serve as models for

Nishio in their ability to utilize Japanese traditions subversively. Each uses the geisha, which literally means “one who performs arts,” to redefine the identity of the artist or performance artist.⁹ By acting on the margins of cultural acceptability, since the root *gei* can reference degraded forms of art depending on context, Kusama and Kubota help to create a new space for art defined on their terms.

For Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, escaping the confines of Japanese culture and finding freedom in America to explore avant-garde art proved inspirational. In her performance works during the Vietnam War, which consisted of multiparticipant “Body Festivals,” Kusama applied polka dots to her nude companions while she espoused messages of love and peace. Strikingly different is *Walking Piece*, performed in New York City in 1966. In a series of eighteen color slides that document the performance, Kusama strolls along the streets of New York in a traditional Japanese kimono with a parasol. As a marker of Japanese custom, the kimono also connotes traditional roles for women. The parasol, an umbrella decorated with synthetic flowers, juxtaposes with Kusama’s costume and appears inauthentic. In addition to the application of the flowers, the interior of the black umbrella strikingly contrasts with the exterior, which was painted white. As Kusama walks down largely unoccupied city streets, we see her pass a grocery store and the waterfront in an unknown quest. A shift occurs in images thirteen and fourteen. In these two views, Kusama turns from the camera and begins to cry without reason. She then turns and kneels so that her back faces the camera. In the final images, Kusama walks away and disappears from view. In this work, Kusama utilizes theatrical associations with the dress of the geisha to draw attention to stereotypes that continue to plague Asian women. However, Kusama’s new role as avant-garde artist free from traditional Japanese conventions alters the context of the dress, creating cross-cultural fusion. Frequently known as “the little Japanese girl” in the press, Kusama is able to unhinge the stereotype she seems to occupy to her white American audience by drawing attention to the ridiculousness of cultural categorization in the melting pot that is New York City.

For Shigeko Kubota, also working in New York City in the 1960s, reception of the Japanese body reveals a similarly complex process. As a

young woman eager to extend her artistic skill into the avant-garde art world, Kubota and her contemporaries Yoko Ono and Yayoi Kusama faced different challenges from those of Asian women who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s. Kubota, like her contemporaries, sought to break free from the societal advocacy of the arranged marriage system and her destiny as obedient wife and mother. Artistic freedom in the United States enabled her to explore issues not available to women artists in Japan. Though a male-dominated and prefeminist art world necessitated choices, Kubota was able to have a significant impact as both a performance and video artist. *Vagina Painting* and *Video Poem* are testament to her desire to transcend her roles as both a Japanese woman and an artist.

In 1965 Kubota performed *Vagina Painting* at the Perpetual Fluxfest in New York City. After placing paper on the floor, she proceeded to paint red strokes on the paper with a brush attached to her underpants. In the exhibition catalog, *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, Kristine Stiles describes the work as follows: “[Kubota] dipped the brush in red paint [and moved over the paper] to produce an eloquent gestural image that exaggerated female sexual attributes and bodily functions and redefined Action Painting according to the codes of female anatomy.”¹⁰ Like Kusama, Kubota was able to layer Western and non-Western meaning in this work. The strokes of red paint resemble menstrual blood, an assertion of both her womanhood and ability as a painter to subvert the phallic power of the gestural stroke. By shifting the heroic and ejaculatory gesture of Jackson Pollock,¹¹ Kubota is able to critically draw attention to “the divine painterly trace” of Pollock as privileged.¹² In placing the paintbrush at the site of phallic lack, Kubota unhinges the source of male creativity. The strokes of the paintbrush can also be interpreted as a form of communication, a personal calligraphy. Midori Yoshimoto further connects this piece to a low-class geisha trick in which a geisha draws calligraphy with a brush in her vagina.¹³ Though the ancient art of calligraphy in Eastern cultures stems from a long and honorable tradition, Kubota creates a new hybrid tradition of female empowerment through wielding the brush as a “new” geisha or artist.

In *Video Poem* of 1976, Kubota’s body appears again in video form. Her self-portrait appears on a small monitor that peeks through the opening of a purple nylon bag. To keep the video equipment cool, a fan was placed

within the bag, creating pulsating movements. The opening of the bag, with its seemingly organic motion, appears like a vulva, opening to reveal Kubota's image. The origin of the bag is especially significant because it belonged to Kubota's first boyfriend, Kosugi. Kubota recounted the following about the bag:

I used to support him. I worked three jobs. And I said to him, "Why don't you work?" And he said "Because I am a composer." So I said, "So where are your compositions?" "I give you one," he said, and he gave me this piece, this bag which I inflate with the air from a fan, with wind, like breath, you know.¹⁴

Like *Vagina Painting*, *Video Poem* also challenges male artistic authority. By using the tools of her male predecessors and counterparts (the brush and bag), Kubota is able to assert her presence. The text on the invitation card of *Video Poem* further supports her stance as a woman artist using the format of the poem as communication device:

Video is Vengeance of Vagina.
Video is Victory of Vagina.
Video is Venereal Disease of Intellectuals.
Video is Vacant Apartment.
Video is Vacation of Art.
Viva Video . . .¹⁵

Through these works, Kusama and Kubota create spaces for the critical reception of Japanese women artists that do not deny their position as women. Asian women artists are beginning to find their voices, ones that may not always be understood. The following works by Korean and Vietnamese American artists utilize language as a crucial tool. Just as stereotypes of obedience and submission were shattered by artists in the 1960s, the written and spoken word (whether English, French, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese), in contrast to visual images, forms an important departure point from which to examine the liminal space where Eastern and Western cultures converge. Language, whether through speech or the written word, mediates the path between East and West and forms a significant part of this examination.

For the late Korean artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, competing linguistic truths are at issue. Cha's family immigrated to the United States in 1963

as exiles. Cha's family ultimately settled in San Francisco in 1964, after a brief stay in Hawaii. For Cha, who was twelve years old when she immigrated, being a member of the 1.5 generation of Korean Americans who were born in Korea but raised and educated in the United States defined her experience. Cha attended the University of California, Berkeley, from 1969 to 1978, a tumultuous period both for the nation and the university. Her experience as an art student during a time of protest is relevant to her development as both a writer and a performance artist. Cha first came into contact with performance in an introduction to a sculpture class with James Melchert. In addition to training in art, Cha received a bachelor of arts in comparative literature in 1973. The additional opportunity of studying film theory in Paris at the Centre d'Etudes Américain du Cinéma in 1976 fostered her interests in poetry and performance. There Cha was exposed to the new wave of French filmmakers. Particularly influential was Jean Luc Goddard's *Alphaville*, in which the lead female character must relearn language in order to reclaim her identity.¹⁶ Cha's own fluency in Korean, English, and French directly parallels the experience of the female protagonist. Through her poetry and performance work, we will see language form the key to understanding Cha's oeuvre. By layering her works in one or many languages, a complex, multifaceted arrangement emerges in which a forum is created to examine her ethnic identity through word play. Though Cha's poetry is dense and compelling, the intent here is to focus solely on her video and performance works.

The video *Mouth to Mouth* of 1975 reveals the importance of the Korean language for Cha. The ability for Koreans to speak their native language is highly charged, due to the lengthy period of Japanese colonialism (1909–1945). During this period, the Korean people were forbidden to speak their language, retain their customs, or keep their names. Also of note is the history of Hangul. King Sejong, a noted linguist, developed the Korean alphabet in 1443. As a phonetic language (unlike Chinese and Japanese, which are character based), the shape of the letters is of particular importance because they are modeled on the shapes of the mouth and tongue when pronouncing them. Thus, it is the process of pronunciation and of giving voice to the Korean language upon which Cha focuses.

Mouth to Mouth begins with a slow pan across the eight Korean vowel graphemes. The viewer then sees Cha's mouth forming these sounds in

another slow pan, which gradually dissolves into white static. Because the viewer cannot hear Cha's voice during the pans, several important elements arise. Due to the close-up shots of Cha's mouth, the viewer is unable to determine not only kinesthetic meaning but also her racial or ethnic identity. As a result, one cannot make culturally biased assumptions based on appearance. The shapes of Cha's mouth and their connection to the Korean language alone speak for her and her heritage. Because one is unable to see the rest of Cha's face, communication is limited. In addition, the extreme close-up point of view further disorients the position of the viewer. Much like Linda Nishio, Cha cannot be heard either. The vowel sounds she mouths are rendered abstract, because they are stripped of context in relation to language. As a result, the language she references is incomplete or incomprehensible in relation to conversation. Both artists speak to cultural deafness with their reference to foreign languages not heard or understood. Their works also contextualize the power of speech to identify a person's identity. By providing examples of incomprehensible speech, they allude to the inappropriate or even ridiculous nature of language as cultural marker.

In comparing *Mouth to Mouth* to Bruce Nauman's *Lip Sync* of 1967, we see a decidedly different perspective on the significance of language. In *Lip Sync*, the viewer is confronted with an upside-down image of the lower part of Nauman's face and a portion of his neck. This disorienting perspective is exaggerated further by the unsynchronized sound and image. Despite the disjunctive presentation, Nauman's image is decidedly male. Though the sights and sounds we hear are skewed, they are not foreign or completely unfamiliar. Thus, because Cha presents her mouth making unfamiliar sounds to a Western viewer, her piece draws in a wider cultural consideration of how language functions.

Cha continues to emphasize the power of language in *Aveugle Voix*, or *Blind Voice*, of 1975. Performed in San Francisco, this piece relies solely on the printed word to communicate to the viewer. With block script stenciled in French and English, Cha is able to utilize text both physically and metaphorically to convey a disabled voice. Dressed in a white shirt and pants, Cha first produces two white blindfolds. On one blindfold, "Voix" is printed. On the other, the word "Aveugle" is revealed. Cha then proceeds to cover her eyes with the blindfold imprinted with "Voice"

and her mouth with “Blind.” Finally, Cha unfurls a white banner. As the banner is unrolled, the following words emerge: “aveugle / voix / sans / sans / me / fail / words.” With the use of both French and English text, the seemingly mismatched blindfolds, and the accompanying banner, Cha presents a multilayered message to her audience. As a Korean American woman fluent in three languages, she utilizes her two nonnative tongues to express her inability to see or speak. As a foreign-born person, whose identity has developed into one of marginalized hybridity, Cha conveys the physical sensation of being in a double bind due to her cultural complexity. The incorrect grammatical combination of “Aveugle Voix,” which should read “Voix Aveugle” in French, further adds to the confusion.¹⁷ In creating sensory and perceptual disjunction through both the concept of a blind voice, mixing the visual and verbal, and the reversal of noun/adjective word order, Cha is able to convey a sense of her own cultural bewilderment to the viewer. With words in her new Western languages, Cha is able to poignantly draw attention to the power of words in enabling a person to interact through sight and speech.

Like her contemporary Cha, Korean-born artist Yong Soon Min was also part of the 1.5 generation. Being born in Korea but raised and educated in the United States shaped her experience. In Min’s installation and photographic work, she draws from Korean tradition and history to locate her identity:

The importance of history in formulating 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.¹⁸

Because of the disparity between the diversity of the American population and the limited sense of American history a young person is presented with in school, Min sees the process of cultural reeducation as vital to understanding her place as a Korean American. By excavating her ethnic past, she is able to reclaim and reframe her ethnic and cultural heritage to reflect the fusion that is Asian American.

The role of family is equally important in the development of one's ethnic identity:

[The family] is a really nice strong base, but on the other hand, it was hard for me to reconcile all that I was experiencing outside the home. . . . I've sort of maintained a separation mentally and emotionally and that's one of the reasons I have a hard time explaining to my parents what I'm doing.¹⁹

Psychologists have found that the sentiments expressed by Min are not unusual. In researching the identity formation of young Asian professionals, Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim have found that the formation of racial and ethnic identities greatly influenced the research subjects' academic interests and career choices. Many subjects who initially felt pressured by their parents to study medicine or law turned instead to the social sciences, humanities, and the arts while struggling to define their ethnic identities.²⁰ Yet the struggle to find an authentic self in the midst of an existence between two worlds remains a primary challenge:

[H]ow much of me is Korean, how much has changed, or how much is Americanized and feeling sort of half of both realities, a foot in here, a foot in there . . . ; a superficial aspect of getting back to one's culture can really be akin to being a tourist in your own culture.²¹

This becomes especially apparent in viewing *Defining Moments* of 1992, a series of six photographs in which images of personal or historical significance overlay the silhouette of the artist's head and torso. Within this series, Min's body is revealed as a contested site where nationhood and politics collide. The end of the Korean War, student uprisings in Korea in the 1960s, the Kwang Ju Massacre in the 1980s, and the Los Angeles civil unrest of the early 1990s constitute "defining moments" for the artist. She describes these moments as follows:

1953—End of the Korean War, year of my birth; 4/19/60—witnessed this popular uprising which toppled the Syngman Rhee government and emigrated later that year to the U.S.; 5/18/80—the Kioanju uprising and massacre indelibly politicized me; 4/29/92—Watched LA burn on my birthday; _____—we stand together on Mt. Paektu overlooking our Lake of Heaven.²²

By utilizing images from these dates as framing devices, along with text inscribed onto her body, Min is able to shed light on the nature of her body and identity as problematic sites. The complete series appears in *Writing the Self / Writing Nation: Four Essays about Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's DICTEE*.²³ As a former classmate of Cha at the University of California, Berkeley, Min's artistic contribution to this book is personal and cultural. Because both artists are of Korean heritage, Min's designs for the book have relevance on multiple levels.

Opposite the title page, we see a negative of Min's abdomen and forearms. "Occupied" is written on one arm, and "Territory" on the other. Dates of significance emanate in a spiral pattern from the artist's navel: 1953 (the year of Min's birth as well as the end of the Korean War); April 19, 1960 (the Korean student uprising that toppled the Syngman Rhee government, which Min witnessed as a child); May 18, 1980 (the Kwang Ju Massacre, which awakened Min's political consciousness); and April 29, 1992 (Min's birthday, which coincided with the Los Angeles riots).

In one image from this series, *Defining Moments, #4: Kwang Ju Massacre*, we see Min face the camera frontally. Images of the uprising, in which military officials aim weapons at students, are projected onto her chest. Across her forehead is inscribed "DMZ," or Demilitarized Zone, representing the area dividing North Korea and South Korea. By labeling herself with this designation, Min also sees her body/identity as a demilitarized zone, a "no-man's-land" in which borders are fluid and undefined. Across her chest, "Heartland" appears. The word "heart" crosses the area of her chest, under which her heart beats. The images come from her homeland of Korea, but how Heartland is meant to be defined remains ambiguous. To which land does her heart belong, Korea or America?

To us . . . a birthplace is no longer our home. The place we were brought up is not either.²⁴

The final image in *Writing the Self* appears on the front side of the book's last page. In it we see Mt. Paektu, the fabled mountain in North Korea, superimposed on Min's body. This mountain has cultural significance on several levels. As the mythical birthplace of the Korean people, it is a symbol of origin. The mountain is also thought to be the birthplace of the late North Korean leader Kim Il Sung. As a further symbol to both the

opposition and South Korea, Mt. Paektu is considered an image of hope for reunification.²⁵ It is the problem of reunification, whether applied to self or nation, that Min continuously explores. Fractured selves predominate.

Yong Soon Min's *Make Me* of 1989 presents images of the artist's face in stark black and white. These four head shots feature a bisected face and involve shifting of the halves that make up Min's face. With the movement of half of the photographs up, down, inward, or outward, the viewer is confronted with a constructed presentation of identity that is further enhanced by the overlay of text. Superimposed statements such as "Model Minority," "Assimilated Alien," "Objectified Other," and "Exotic Emigrant" reveal the cultural construction of the self as a multiple, shifting, and unfinished process that rejects a sense of stable selfhood unaffected by exterior definition. Min's hands, which appear in three of the four images, add additional meaning. In "Model Minority," the two halves on Min's face fold in on one another. She smiles as her hands rest upon the sides of her faces in a sweet, endearing position. Her hands appear as if clasped in a prayerlike position; however, in conjunction with the three other photographs, there is nothing comforting about her overall message. Adjacent to this image located in the top left hand corner appears "Assimilated Alien." Here half of Min's face features one hand covering her right eye. The other hand covers her mouth. In referencing both speak no evil and see no evil, she reflects that through assimilation, one learns not to raise one's voice in opposition. Directly below the pair of images, "Objectified Other" and "Exotic Emigrant" are positioned. Notably all of the text features alphabetic doubling or alliteration. This serves to enhance the image bisection and allude to a doubling of the self that occurs through the Asian American experience.

With "Objectified Other," Min's left index finger pulls at the corner of her left eye. This elongates the shape of her eye, causing it to appear exaggeratedly Asian. Her right eye is closed, denying the process of objectification. In the final image, Min's face stares blankly at the viewer. The photograph appears to fold in on itself, much like a book being either opened or closed. Her face appears slightly compressed, as if the label compromises proper viewing. Her mouth is closed. The text speaks for her. Whether the image expands or contracts is no matter. Her image has been externally defined.

The title *Make Me* also invites a dual reading. The viewer is invited to create or make of Min what he or she wishes. *Make Me* can also be seen as a challenge, a dare so to speak, which forces the viewer to confront Min. The disjointed or asymmetrical presentation of each photograph also beckons the viewer to render or “make” images that conform to appropriate visual expectations. The images are obviously fabrications, highlighting the disjunctive nature of labeling a person with misrecognition. Both the text and the misshapen photographs speak to this point. Stereotypes and cultural expectations about what constitutes Americanness drive the creation of this piece.

The political parallels Min draws between her existence as both a physical and political body marked by two very different sets of cultural expectations are also referenced in a later work of 1991, *Demilitarized Desire*. By designating her body as evidence of occupation, Min makes a clear reference to Korea, a former “occupied territory” of Japan. In creating a physical commentary on the legacy of colonialism and communism, Min is able to relate her country’s experience to others in Asia, particularly Vietnam.

For Vietnamese immigrants who sought refuge in the United States due to political conflict, the process of assimilation for the 1.5 or second generation has proven difficult. Psychologists have found that more recent immigrants often view themselves as occupying a position of marginality. This occurs when neither the world they came from nor the new American reality they face offers viable alternatives in forging a new identity in America. Immigration from Vietnam has generally taken place in six waves. The first wave arrived after April 30, 1975, when South Vietnam lost the war. From 1978 to 1979, mostly ethnic Chinese immigrated. Immigrants who came to the United States from 1978 to 1982 escaped by boat or over land. Members of the later waves, who arrived in the United States during the 1980s and later, either sought asylum or were refugees from camps in Thailand or the Philippines. Those who came to America in the 1970s tended to be more affluent, coming from primarily urban areas of Vietnam.²⁶ For all of these groups, certain cultural inheritances from Vietnam would continue to influence them in the United States, namely Confucian notions of family collectivism and gender hierarchy.

For women immigrants, strict gender hierarchy played the most dominant role in the process of assessing identity in the United States.

For Vietnamese American artist Hanh Thi Pham, the legacy of politics also plays a role. Born in Vietnam in 1956, Pham did not settle in the United States until 1975, at the age of twenty-one. In experiencing the aftermath of French colonialism as well as the rise of communism and the Vietnam War, Pham struggles to define herself in America. Pham's lesbian identity, as well as her coming-out process in America, further complicated the formation of her multifaceted self. Pham did not come out until fourteen years after her arrival in the United States.²⁷

"I was a very 'good' and dutiful female before," she has said. "I remember my marriage to a man and living as a housewife [for twelve-and-a-half years], while trying to be a role model daughter. . . . I tried always to blend in with the expectations of family and femaleness." Stimulated by her divorce to start "taking charge of [her] life," she experienced a "new birth: bringing out the man within the woman."²⁸

Pham strives to forge a space for herself that is not a simple reflection of Western stereotypes. She draws upon Vietnamese history, familial legacy, autobiography, and references to her sexuality in her work to come to terms with the forces of influence that have played dominant roles in her life, namely French, American, and Communist: "[T]he real thing that a Vietnamese person is about: not erotic, or anything for you [that is, Westerners], but about hatred for those years that were so damaging."²⁹

In a series of collaborative works with Richard Turner entitled *Along the Street of Knives* of 1985, Pham and Turner explored multicultural voyeurism in Vietnam from the perspectives of both the Vietnamese and foreigners living in Vietnam, a reference to both Pham's and Turner's personal experiences. The installation is composed of a series of eight large multiexposure color photographs. Each photograph is the result of the combination of between two and thirteen exposures to produce a single negative or transparency. In fabricating a series of loosely autobiographical tableaux, Pham and Turner sought to explore the dual natures of cultural incomprehension and ignorance. American tourists are featured in several of the works. By staging Vietnam from a foreign/outsider point of view as a temporary playground, Turner and Pham highlight the problematic situation of Vietnam for Americans.

In *Evening Stroll / Night Patrol*, an American couple peers into the window of a Vietnamese home, hoping to catch a glimpse of something exotic. Pham holds a Mickey Mouse doll, a reminder of the vast influence of the United States. The doll also ruptures the viewers' expectations, as she appears as inauthentically Asian. In *Reconnaissance*, the roles are reversed. Pham appears as a child grasping for a toy rifle as she spies on a foreign couple. The mixed-race couple (black and white) surprises Pham, as does their villa, which is adorned with the skin of a tiger. Not only is the couple exotic, but their display also affirms their colonial supremacy. The title *Reconnaissance* also reflects a mixed meaning. As Pham's character reaches for a toy gun, both the rifle and the title allude to the Vietnam War. The link between the gun and "reconnaissance" as a military maneuver or term heightens this connection. Using a French word that translates as "recognition," both Turner and Pham play their roles in "recognizing" one another's dissimilarity. Turner and Pham reveal their racial and cultural differences within this world of exoticism, war, and European colonialism with dramatic poignancy. Pham draws attention to the problem of Vietnam for Americans. "They don't want to talk about the Vietnam War but I want to do something to wake them up."³⁰ This desire to awaken the viewer recurs in her work.

In *Expatriate Consciousness No. 9* of 1991–1992, Pham utilizes her nude body to subvert presumptions about Vietnamese femininity. By appearing before us without shame or modesty, Pham rejects the traditional role of the Asian woman as subservient and deferent. With a bare chest, unshaven armpits, and an arm gesture of profanity, Pham defiantly faces an image of an inverted William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, a symbol of American nineteenth-century westward expansion. The Vietnamese text surrounding her translates as "not the person who lives here." In Vietnam, "a person who lives here" is equated with servitude. Buffalo Bill, who symbolizes not only conquest and expansion but also patriarchal influence, is countered with the rebellious position of Pham. The text as framing device highlights the position of servitude that strips an individual of identity. This point is reinforced by Pham's unclothed body. For Pham, this textual and visual arrangement constitutes refusing to be subservient. Thus, in stating that she is not the person who lives here, Pham refuses to be labeled as a servant

to Western cultural needs or expectations.³¹ This is a reference both to American society in general and to the menial jobs her grandmother had to take with French foreigners in colonial Indochina (later Vietnam) to support her family. “I became my grandmother in this life, in this generation . . . whereas she never revolted I will fight back, so watch out.”³² By specifically referencing matriarchal lineage, she also counters patriarchal dominance with an image that speaks to the power of women to define themselves on their own terms. “[In] the picture, I no longer want to be a servant of the system, and I can be my own self. I’m a lesbian. I’m very proud of myself as a woman. I’m very proud of my body, the muscles of my body, and my intentions as a person. [This is] my empowerment, given to me by myself.”³³

For those who emigrated after the war, memory continues to dictate their lives. The stress of acculturation combined with a myriad of post-traumatic stress syndrome symptoms can hinder the creation of a new life in America. As is the case with other ethnic groups of Southeast Asia, mental health problems among Vietnamese refugees include anxiety, depression, intergenerational conflict, psychosomatic illness, and adjustment problems.³⁴ The multifaceted legacy of the Vietnam War remains alive for both Americans and the Vietnamese. Especially for uprooted Vietnamese like Pham, “a process of mutual humiliation [occurs],” for “no one . . . has been able to follow his or her ideals without being destructive, from Ho Chi Minh down to the rank-and-file American G.I.”³⁵

As the Vietnam War and its effects continue to resonate for Vietnamese immigrants, how to view the past remains as a continual concern. Coupled with a general attitude of conscious amnesia on the part of the American public, the Vietnam War occupies a problematic space. Trinh T. Minh-ha’s film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* of 1989 reveals a moving response from a Vietnamese woman director. Through a montage of images, Trinh is able to acknowledge what it means to be Vietnamese from a variety of viewpoints. The title comes from recent socialist tradition. When a man meets a woman and begins to flirt with her, he asks, “Young woman, are you married yet?” If she is not, the woman replies, “Yes, his surname is Viet and his given name is Nam.”³⁶ Thus, as a woman must always belong to someone, the nation or state is cited:

(Kim, voice-over:) *I keep on thinking despite our emigrating to the U.S., if our surname is Viet, our given name ought to be Nam—Vietnam. For the Vietnamese woman, the family closest to her is her husband's; as for our native country, we all love it, young and old. We will always keep our last name Viet and first name Nam. Even when the women marry foreigners here, they are still Vietnamese, so I think your film title is very suggestive . . . very meaningful.*³⁷

The inspiration for this film came from Mai Thu Van's *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix*, published in Paris in 1983. Translated as *Vietnam: One People, Many Voices*, the book comprises a series of interviews the author conducted in Vietnam. The interviews were recorded in Vietnamese and then translated into French for publication. Also relevant to Trinh's attraction to this book were the personal circumstances of the author, Mai Thu Van. Van was born in New Caledonia. Her mother was sent there by force as an exile to work in nickel mines, because her village was one of several that rose in rebellion to the French colonial regime. Van traveled to Paris at the age of twenty-three and later returned to Vietnam, her true homeland, in 1978 to research Vietnamese women.³⁸ As both Trinh and Van share the experience of viewing Vietnam from the outside, a melding of visions and experiences occurred in the development of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*.

In *Surname Viet*, the interview transcripts were translated from French into English and combined with other documentary elements. By transporting the voices of the interviewed women yet again, this time from French to English, Trinh is able to draw on not only French colonialism but the American legacy of the Vietnam War as well. This process of translation across languages and cultures also connects this film with Cha's works that conflate French, English, and the artist's Korean heritage. In addition, Trinh included a series of her own interviews with Vietnamese women. The final interviewees chosen would play dual roles in the film. They would reenact Van's interviews and include their own experiences. The final result is a blending of past and present, authentic and restaged, Vietnamese and English. Textual overlay and narration also play roles. With the blending of true and reenacted documentary styles, Trinh is able to emphasize that a homogenized Vietnam does not exist. By focusing on the experiences of women, she shatters stereotypes and expectations.

Trinh contrasts Confucian principles of ideal womanhood as reflected in the four virtues of Cong Dung Ngon Hanh with both the poetic response of resistance as well as lived experience. This produces a reflection of multiplicity and continued struggle to define Vietnamese femininity. To reflect variety in experience, the viewer encounters women speaking from five places, two voices reading in English, and a third voice reciting sayings, proverbs, and poetry in Vietnamese. Interviews are conducted in both Vietnamese and English. Subtitles in English are included when Vietnamese is spoken or text appears.

The following excerpts from the script reveal the permeation of Confucian principles across time and place, Vietnam and America:

(In Vietnamese, from the Miss Vietnam 1988 Pageant:) *“Candidate H____ P____, please tell us what characteristics of Vietnamese culture we should preserve in American society?” “I think that, as far as women are concerned, we should preserve our Vietnamese heritage and the four virtues Cong Dung Ngon Hanh.”*³⁹

Cong Dung Ngon Hanh. Why are these four virtues persistently required of women? First, *Cong*: you’ll have to be able, competent, and skillful—in cooking, sewing, managing the household budget, caring for the husband, educating the children—all this to save the husband’s face. Second, *Dung*: you’ll have to maintain a gracious, compliant, and cheerful appearance—first of all for the husband. Third, *Ngon*: you’ll have to speak properly and softly and never raise your voice—particularly in front of the husband or his relatives. Then fourth, *Hanh*: you’ll have to know where your place is; respect those older than you and yield to those younger or weaker than you—moreover, be faithful and sacrifice for the husband.⁴⁰

Theo luan ly tam cuong ngu thuong
 dan ba khi nao cung phai tuy thuoc dan ong
 khi con nho thi phai theo cha
 khi lay chong thi phai theo chong
 khi chong chet thi phai theo con
 suot doi la ke vi thanh nhan
 phai dua vao mot nguoi dan ong lam chu chot
 chu khong bao gio duoc doc lap

(According to the moral of the three deferments and five human virtues,
 women must always depend on men
 Child, she must follow her father
 Married, she must follow her husband
 Widowed, she must follow her son
 all her life she remains a minor
 depending on a man as on a central axle
 and can never be self-governing)⁴¹

(Kim, voice-over:) *Generally, every girl or woman in Vietnam must practice the four virtues. She must know how to sew, cook, speak and behave. Obviously, she is subject to the three submissions vis-à-vis her parents, her husband, although not always vis-à-vis her son.*⁴²

Through narration and interviews in both Vietnamese and English, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* speaks directly to women's experiences. By staging the performances of Vietnamese women to better represent their lived experiences, Trinh T. Minh-ha offers the viewer a rendering of female Vietnamese identity that defies stereotypes and critiques traditional views of Asian women. By enabling Vietnamese culture and history to reframe the Western view of Vietnam, we see a clearer performance of identity.

Through performance, photography, film, and video, Asian American women artists of Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese descent speak to the hybrid locations of Asian American identities. Asian bodies as physical sites between contemporary Western culture and Eastern traditions are powerful reminders of politicized multifaceted experience. Yet through the examples shown, there exists a variety of active negotiation processes of what it means to become American. By transcending stereotypes long held by Americans and rejecting traditional Asian Confucian ideology of the respectful and submissive woman, a distinctly feminist position, these women (and the characters they create) are able to draw attention to the challenging process of finding an identity that can potentially function in a society with limited knowledge and familiarity with such cross-cultural fluidity. By utilizing their own bodies in this process, we see images of strength that dare to defy easy categorization to create new voices for Asian American women today.

Notes

- 1 Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "Bold Omissions and Minute Depictions," in *Feminism and "Race,"* ed. Kum-kum Bhavnani (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 164.
- 2 Joan Kee, "What Is Feminist About Contemporary Asian Women's Art?" in *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, ed. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, exh. cat. (New York: Merrell Publishers, 2007), 111.
- 3 For further research on modern and contemporary Asian American art, see Gordon H. Chang, Mark Johnson, and Paul Karlstrom, eds., *Asian American Art: A History, 1850–1970* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008); and Margo Machida's *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 4 Kyoung Ja Hyun, "Is an Independent Self a Requisite for Asian Immigrants' Psychological Well-Being in the U.S.? The Case of Korean Americans," in *Psychological Aspects of the Asian-American Experience: Diversity within Diversity*, ed. Namkee G. Choi (New York: Haworth Press, 2001), 184.
- 5 Margo Machida, "Out of Asia: Negotiating Asian Identities in America," in *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, exh. cat. (New York: Asia Society Galleries, 1994), 85.
- 6 Valerie Soe, "Turning the Tables: Three Asian American Artists," in *New American Feminist Photographies*, ed. Diane Neumaier (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 262. See also Renée Tajima, "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women," in *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women*, ed. Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 309.
- 7 Yoko Ono in *Yoko Ono: Then and Now*, dir. Barbara Graustark, Polygram Records, videocassette, 1984.
- 8 Lucy M. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 18.
- 9 Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 182.
- 10 Kristine Stiles, "Between Water and Stone, Fluxus Performance: A Metaphysics of Acts," in *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 82.
- 11 The evolution of Jackson Pollock's gestural painting, labeled action painting by Harold Rosenberg, can be traced to French surrealist automatism. The historical chain of influence from surrealist automatic writing to Pollock's marks to Kubota's reframing of mark-making is significant to acknowledge here.
- 12 Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 97.
- 13 Yoshimoto, *Into Performance*, 182.
- 14 Ingrid Wiegand, "Video Poem," *Soho Weekly News*, June 12, 1975, n.p.
- 15 Shigeo Kubota, text on invitation card to the exhibition, "Video Poem," at the Kitchen, New York, June 7, 1975.

- 16 Constance M. Lewallen, *The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982)*, exh. cat. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 6.
- 17 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "White Spring," in Lewallen, *Dream of the Audience*, 46.
- 18 Yong Soon Min, "Home Is Not a Birthplace . . ." *Korean American Community* (July 13, 1991).
- 19 Interview with Betty Kano and Sharon Mizota, Brooklyn, New York, February 23, 1992.
- 20 Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, "Formation of Racial and Ethnic Identities: Narratives by Asian American Professionals," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, ed. Pyong Gap Min (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2002), 171.
- 21 Betty Kano, "Four Northern California Artists: Hisako Hibi, Norine Nishimura, Yong Soon Min, and Miran Ahn," *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 632.
- 22 Text designed by Yong Soon Min on the back side of the last page of *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on DICTEE by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha* (Berkeley, Calif.: Third Woman Press, 1994).
- 23 It is significant to note here that Min is honoring Cha's literary, not artistic, contributions with her involvement in this project. *Dictée*, Cha's best-known work, centers on the experience of female characters, patriots, saints, and family members, who are connected in their struggles to speak despite their existences across time and varying cultures.
- 24 Ko Won, "Home," *Amerasia Journal* 16, no. 2 (1990): 132.
- 25 Elaine H. Kim, "'Bad Women': Asian American Visual Artists Hanh Thi Pham, Hung Liu, and Yong Soon Min," *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 597.
- 26 Hung Cam Thai, "Formation of Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Vietnamese Americans," in Min, *Second Generation*, 55.
- 27 For a more detailed analysis of lesbian identity in Pham's work, see Dena Gilby, "Wild Western Lesbian Feminist Asian American Art: Hanh Thi Pham's *Expatriate Consciousness* and the Unpacking of Identity," *Aurora* 8 (2007): 85–100.
- 28 Erica L. H. Lee, "[Re]Present Asian / A Representation: Politics of Being an Asian American Woman Artist" (Paper, Scripps College, 1994), 37.
- 29 Machida, "Out of Asia," 96.
- 30 Machida, "Out of Asia," 106.
- 31 Interview with Elaine Kim, Los Angeles, January 1994.
- 32 Machida, "Out of Asia," 98.
- 33 Lee, "[Re]Present Asian," 43.
- 34 Dung Ngo, Thanh V. Tran, Judith L. Gibbons, and Joan M. Oliver, "Acculturation, Premigration Traumatic Experiences, and Depression among Vietnamese Americans," in Choi, *Psychological Aspects of the Asian-American Experience*, 229.
- 35 Artist's statement, *Along the Street of Knives*, 1985.
- 36 Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "From a Hybrid Place with Judith Mayne," in *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 142.

- 37 Trinh T. Minh-Ha, script from *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, in *Framer Framed*, 86.
- 38 Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "From a Hybrid Place," 144.
- 39 Trinh, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 83.
- 40 Trinh, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 90.
- 41 Trinh, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 83–85.
- 42 Trinh, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 85.