

Borderline Cases: For Women on the Borderlines

Rebecca Jennison

In this article, Rebecca Jennison discusses an exhibition of works by feminist artists from Korea and Japan, a unique collaboration, presented by F.A.A.B. (Feminist Art Action Brigade) and A.R.T. (Artist Residency Tokyo), held in Tokyo, June 26 - July 17, 2004. The exhibition was accompanied by a symposium 'Co-responses on the Borderline - Women Artists from Korea and Japan' on June 27, at Keio University Mita campus, Tokyo.

An old family photograph is projected on the large wall at the rear of the lower floor of the A.R.T gallery in Ebisuminami Shibuya-ku, Tokyo. The larger-than-life-figures of a father, mother and children sit or stand in stiff, but familiar poses. Dressed and groomed impeccably, a sign of their social status, the figures together construct an image of the male-dominated, patriarchal family from the 1940s that has become the theme of much of filmmaker Idemitsu Mako's work.¹ Idemitsu, the youngest of the daughters in the photo, was still small when the photograph was taken. In another family photograph that comes on the screen, Idemitsu poses with her sister. As we move closer to the image on the wall, we cross an invisible borderline created by a sensor that is part of this video installation work and before we know it, we are watching a different series of images and sounds. A stream of war photographs, footage from documentary films of battlefronts, still images of posters and magazines follow, one after another. They all depict scenes from the Asia-Pacific theatre of World War II: the same time

as the family photos were made. This new installation piece by Idemitsu, *Past Ahead* was the artist's contribution to *Borderline Cases: For Women on the Borderlines*. The ambiguous title is meant to suggest that the piece is both about the past, and the present/future.

The *Borderline Cases* project brought together the work of five visual and two performance artists from South Korea, the Korean diaspora and Japan, and was the culmination of the efforts of a fourteen member organising committee working with very limited sources of funding, but with the support and co-operation of many individuals and a number of organisations.² Both the exhibition and symposium, *Co-responses on the Borderline*, have expanded the space for an already energetic dialogue between feminists in Japan and Korea. This dialogue has been growing for more than a decade and has centred around the issue of violence against women, particularly the history of the Japanese military comfort women system as recorded in the testimonies of Korean women survivors who have spoken out, demanding



Mako Idemitsu *Past Ahead* (2004) video installation plus detail as installed in *Borderline Cases: For Women on the Borderlines*

that the Japanese government take responsibility for what was a system of sexual slavery. Each work in the exhibition touches in some way on personal and family histories, as well as the politics of representing the perspectives of individual women "*on the borderline*". At the same time, by facing directly the differences in position or perspective, and resisting easy or simplistic assumptions about "*joining hands across borders*", each artist's work takes risks and breaks new ground.

The aims of the project are explained by artist and organiser of the project, Shimada Yoshiko:

'Through this exhibition, we explore the meaning of the word "borderline". In relation to our own societies and nations, as well as at the level of individuals who are imagined to be "Others". The word "borderline" can be used to refer to the boundaries between countries, boundaries in general, and the borderline between sanity and insanity.'

Shimada and the other artists participating in the project have, in different ways, been engaging with feminist issues in their work for more than a decade; each has been seeking formal means and representational strategies that might make women's personal histories the material of their art. At the

same time, in light of the long colonial relationship and history of Japanese military expansion in East Asia, the tense and painful intersections of those histories has been an ongoing area of artistic, academic and activist concern.

Kim Sunhee, formerly curator of the Gwangju City Art Museum and presently at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, curated the show. Kim's careful selection and arrangement of works helped bring out both the individual character of each piece and the dialogue or "*co-responses*" reverberating among them.

On the first floor of the gallery, installations by Yun Suknam and Shimada Yoshiko and photographs from Pak Youngsook's *Mad Woman Project/Japan, 2004* series were displayed. Yun Suknam's *Mother, 19 Years Old* (1993-2004) and *Sea* form a five-piece installation that reflects on the life of the artist's mother, and other women of her generation. Yun (b. 1939 in Manchuria) began making paintings and sculpture when she was 40 and has become known for her provocative sculptures; the gestures and expressions of which make them seem to defy gravity. *Mother, 19 Years Old* makes use of photo silkscreen, wall panels with a narrative text that follows the story of her mother's life, and sculpture in wood. Next to this piece, and below the front window of the gallery,



Yoshiko Shimada *Bones in a Tansu: Family Secrets* (2004) mixed media installation. Left: above and below, details of interiors of drawers from the *tansu*
 Courtesy of Artist

the figure of a woman seems to rise up out of the floor. This work, titled *Sea*, evokes the dilemma of women of her mother's generation, who, under the weight of the patriarchal family system, could make few choices about their lives. Yun's installation creates layers in space both vertically and horizontally: figures seem to resist gravity.

The title of Shimada's work – also about family and the invisible borders that affect individuals, families and society – makes use of a bi-lingual play on words. *Bones in a Tansu: Family Secrets* reminds us of the English phrase about skeletons in the closet. Shimada uses a gracefully standing *tansu* or chest of drawers as the central object of the installation. When the drawers of this elegant antique furniture piece are opened, we find that each one contains objects, images and texts that form a collage representing a particular family secret. By placing these secrets in the public space of the gallery, Shimada highlights the tense borderline between public and private; the unadorned, confessional nature of Shimada's comments reminds us that we all have family secrets and negotiate borderlines between private and public worlds. Along with small objects and images seen

through semi-transparent paper, we read texts such as, 'My sister was married to a South Asian and divorced. My parents kept both the marriage and divorce secret from our relatives in the countryside.' Or, in another drawer, layered over the shadowy images of men in uniform we read, 'My grandfather is said to have killed a lot of people.' In another, 'My Father committed suicide.' The prints displayed above the chest show figures looking out through windows from inside a room or the reverse, again highlighting the dilemma, and the dynamic of this borderline. Shimada commented in an interview that she was surprised by some of the things people felt they had to keep secret. Perhaps this is what prompted her to expand the project by inviting visitors to enter a private booth next to the chest and write a family secret on a piece of paper that is then slipped into a locked box. These secrets, gathered in the art gallery as part of Shimada's work-in-progress will become part of a larger installation piece to be exhibited in Tokyo next January.

Four works from Pak Youngsook's *Mad Woman Project/ Japan. 2004* were displayed high on the walls of the upper level of the gallery. Pak's life-sized portrait photographs show women in the private spaces of home, studio or office. Her aim is to explore the experience of Korean and Japanese women who find it difficult to live as they would like. As a photographer she seeks to capture intimate moments of introspection when the minds of her models seem to wander



Pak Young Sook *Mad Women Project / Osaka. 2004* Photos: Park Young Sook

elsewhere, perhaps outside the boundaries that seem to constrict them. Pak has frequently chosen artists and feminist activists as her models. One, a sound artist who has had great difficulty finding venues for her work, is caught in such a moment of self-reflection. Two others, one a feminist activist, the other, an artist and organiser of a network for women artists, also seem lost for a moment in the web of their own thoughts. Pak, herself a survivor of breast cancer, came to her career as an artist in mid-life, and, along with Yun Suknam, is a founding member of FAN, the Feminist Art Network in Korea. After her *Mad Women* series was first exhibited at the 2002 Gwangju Biennale, Japanese feminist artists became interested in her work and invited her to speak in Osaka. That led to the *Mad Women Project/ Japan. 2004*, a project which involves ongoing collaborations with women in Japan.³

The basement floor of the gallery was used on opening night for the live performances of Ito Tari and Takahashi Fumiko. In *People in Rainbow Colors*, a piece created for this exhibition project, Ito boldly explores one of the dilemmas faced by a lesbian writer and a Korean resident in Japan, both of whom must face discrimination when they reveal their names and identities in a society which continues to prefer that they both remain invisible.

Wearing a white wig and dressed as a man, Ito performed in front of a video showing her rocking and swaying on the deck of a ship at sea. Her movements suggest the instability

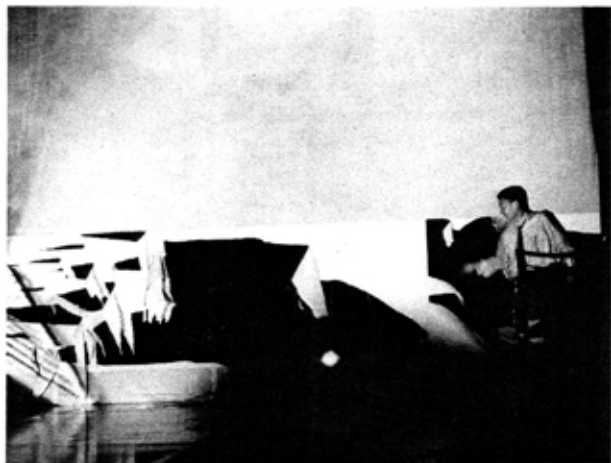


or anxiety of being caught on the borderline. In the background, the voices of Sawabe Hitomi and Park Yung-ja tell stories of their respective struggles with the problem of whether or not to use their real names. Sawabe, who had long used a pen name, describes to her the difficulties she faced when she crossed this invisible borderline.

'But when I was Hirosawa Yumi it was much easier to write, there's more freedom. Particularly about things like sexuality, I became much more careful about wording and was much more hesitant to write. I mean my writing got stuck at one place from time to time. I couldn't write as freely as I used to.'

Later, Park Yung-ja reflects on her experience of crossing another invisible line when she began to use her Korean name instead of her Japanese "passing" name. (90% of Korean residents in Japan still use Japanese "passing" names.) She looks to the history of colonialism for explanations.

'Well, it is all tied back to the fact that the Japanese government hasn't settled what they did during its colonial occupation of Korea and compensated for the war. Such Japanese chauvinism and discrimination against Korea and Korean people existed even after the war ended. And because we had to continue to live in Japan, our parents never taught us Korean language and Korean history. Well, there wasn't any Korean school in my town anyway. They didn't tell me that I had to live as a Japanese, but I felt a message that it would please them if I could just smoothly assimilate myself into Japanese society.'



Tari Ito *People in Rainbow Colors* performance Above Left: Photo by Kazuyo Yasuda, 3 Feb. 2004 at A.R.T. Above: Photo by Ayano Shibata, 16 Aug.2004 , Theater X

Left : work under the window Yun Suknam *Sea* sculpture. Work along the wall Yun Suknam *Mother, 19 Years Old* (1993) sculpture in wood, photo silkscreen and text



Ito's work helps us to imagine two important, but often difficult-to-see perspectives of women on the borderline. Takahashi Fumiko concluded the event with a short, but provocative performance piece depicting women's dilemma in coming to terms with the objectification and fragmentation of their bodies, and the need to embrace a more holistic image of self. Immediately following the performances, the lower level installation of Idemitsu's work and the three-channel video piece by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Passages/Paysages* were switched on and the audience was able to see the complete works.

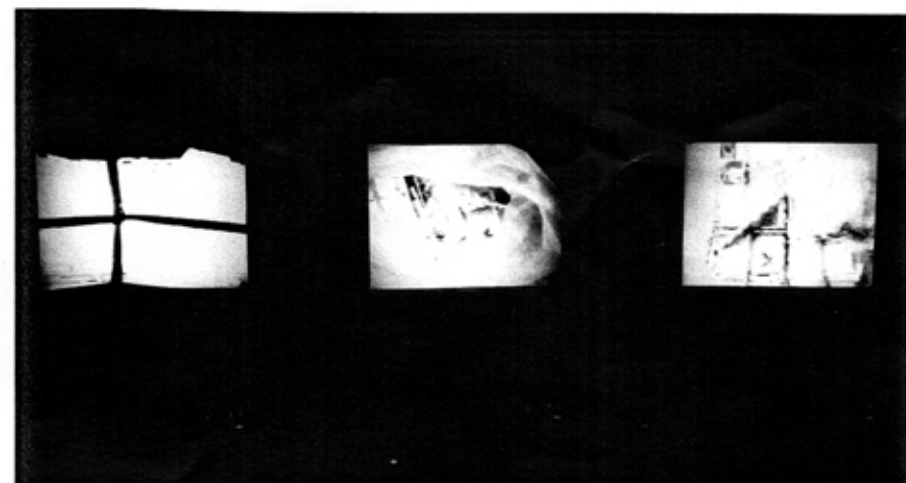
It might well be said that Cha's work was a vitally important catalyst that helped generate interest in, and the motivation to realize the project as a whole. Cha, who emigrated to the US from Korea as a young girl, created a rich array of visual, written and performative works of art during her tragically short career. When some of us saw the retrospective exhibition of her work, *The Dream of the Audience* we began to look for possibilities for bringing the show, or part of it, to Japan. Ikeuchi Yasuko's Japanese

translation of Cha's well-known work, *Dictée*, has increased interest in the work of this artist in Japan. Indeed the themes of *Passages/Paysages*, migration, the condition of being caught between languages, translation, identity, and the ways in which all of these things unfold in family as well as geo-political historical narratives, helped set the tone and direction for the show as a whole. The subtly shifting black and white frames of Cha's work, and the soft voice of the artist's narration raise questions about crossing borders, identity, language, time, translation and history. The work makes use of subtle film techniques to express the complex and multi-layered nature of experience of existing on the borderlines.

Idemitsu Mako's *Past Ahead*, though using different techniques and materials, reverberates with Cha's *Passage/Paysages*. Family history and geo-political history overlap and intersect. Idemitsu's work causes us to notice the borderline between the safe well-to-do Japanese family and a borderline that might make it impossible to see the devastation being caused by the imperial war that lies beyond it. In the 15-minute video segment that plays repeatedly until the viewer walks away, Idemitsu has made a collage of quickly moving images, that together creates the sensation of rushing into this other world of war. When interviewed about the work, Idemitsu commented:

'When we cross the invisible borderline, we see the whole situation of the war. I think it is true today as well. While on one side of the line, our daily lives seem unaffected. But without even being aware of it, we cross

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha
Passages/Paysages (1978)
three-channel video installation
with sound
Collection of Berkeley Art Museum
Photo : Pak Youngsook



over this invisible line, and, for example, we find that the Self-Defence Forces [of Japan] are being deployed to Iraq, becoming a real military force. I think it is that feeling of things happening "before you know it" that is disturbing. We slip across the line and there is another reality happening there.'

In the video, images of the Emperor, footage of battle scenes, are followed by a short sequence from a more recently filmed interview with a former military comfort women who explains that the women dared not even attempt to run away because they would have been killed on the spot. Idemitsu has taken risks in creating this powerful work which is now scheduled to be shown (along with Shimada's piece and several others) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo in January. At a time when we continue to move toward the *Past Ahead*, the work is certain to attract a great deal of attention.

When last April, I too joined F.A.A.B. and became a member of the Borderline Cases Organising Committee, I was struggling to find ways to respond to the Bush Administration's illegal, "pre-emptive" war on Iraq. I knew that the Borderline Cases project would help create an invaluable forum for discussion at a critical time. The artists who contributed to this project help us to expand the space in which we may "imagine" the multiple positions of women on the borderlines. Their works also help us to see beyond the present moment and gain a deeper understanding of how personal and geo-political histories overlap and intersect. As Shimada writes in the F.A.A.B. manifesto, **'While we thought old ideologies were dead, imperialism, colonialism and militarism have all made a great comeback. The bad old patriarchal system is alive and well as ever, and have even become unapologetically ruthless.'** At this critical

moment, the Borderline Cases exhibition had a particularly powerful and poignant impact. Plans are now underway to take the exhibition to Seoul. I believe it would also make a timely and powerful impression on audiences in North America or Europe. I look forward to following F.A.A.B and the *Borderline Cases* project in the future.

Rebecca Jennison teaches Gender Studies and Cultural Studies at Kyoto Seika University. She has coordinated exhibitions of work by Shimada Yoshiko, Laurie Toby Edison and Tomiyama Taeko. Her most recent essay is 'Between Media, Art and War: Contemporary Art in America and the Shaping of Public Memory' *Kyoto Seika University Kiyo (Bulletin)* No. 27, September, 2004. Online version at www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/johokan/kiyo/page/kiyo-27e.html.

Notes

1. See Idemitsu Mako: makoidemitsu.com
2. Presented by F.A.A.B. (Feminist Art Action Brigade and A.R.T. (Artist Residency Tokyo), with cooperation from Feminist Art Network (FAN) of Korea, the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, and the Gender and Representation Project Team of the Art Research Center, Ritsumeikan University.
3. In her timely review of the exhibit, Tochigi Prefectural Museum Curator, Kokatsu Reiko outlines the series of events and exhibitions that led up to the Borderline Cases project. See, "'Intolerance' nojidai ni, takai ni outou suru 'Borderline Cases: kyoukaisen jo no onnatachi he' wo chushin ni," in *AIDA* #104, August, 2004, pp 2-14 (Tokyo).