I. Introduction

In 2004, three exhibitions and related events in Kyoto and Tokyo brought together artists, academics and curators committed to exploring meaningful ways of fostering transnational dialogue in the contemporary arts in Japan. In June, 2004, Borderline Cases: For Women on the Borderlines, opened at A.R.T. in Tokyo; in September, Orientity, an exhibition of work by eight young artists of the Korean diaspora was held in Kyoto; and in November, Diaspora and Art, an international symposium and exhibition focusing on the Korean diaspora, was held at Tokyo Keizai University. As a participant in these research and exhibition projects that have emerged, at least in part, out of transnational feminist dialogues in recent years, I have been fortunate to meet and work with artists, curators and scholars who are helping to create alternatives to nationalist and “masulinist” discourses in the arts. While on the one hand, these projects must be considered within the particular context of geopolitical histories in East Asia, including Japan's colonization of Korea and other Asian countries during the Second World War, I would like to begin here by suggesting that within this context, Homi Bhabha's notion of “the borderline artist” might be useful in thinking about transnational dialogues in the arts in contemporary Japan.

In his 1993 essay “Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation,” Bhabha affirms the important role of artists and curators who are trying to represent cultures “at the borderlines.” In his essay, a contribution to a project concerning cultural diversity in the arts of Europe in the 1990’s—a time when the demography of the continent was rapidly changing as a result of growing immigrant populations—Bhabha describes and pays tribute to what he calls “the borderline artist.”

The Borderline artist performs a poetics of the open border between cultures. She displays the “interstices,” the overlappings and interleavings, the hither and thither that is part of the history of those peoples whose identities are crafted from the experience of...
social displacement. Through her works, the (female gendered) borderline artist explores the spaces between cultures, the interconnections and tensions that arise out of the experience of displacement and the “movements” that characterize the personal histories of those who have been forced to migrate as “slaves, indentured labourers, economic minorities, political refugees, sexual or ethnic minorities.” Through exploring, their “personal geographies,” the artists discussed here have each formulated new formal means to express a “poetics” of the borderlines.

During the last several years, the representation of postcolonial histories in Japan has continued to be the subject of intense debate, making support for the work of “borderline artists” even more vitally important. In this essay, I explore the significance of such critical and artistic spaces and discuss only a few of the interesting works by some of the artists I have come to know through these projects. As the innovative visual and literary works of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982) have also served as one “catalyst” for discussion of work by and about artists of the Korean diaspora in Japan, I begin with a brief discussion of two of her works, *Dictee* (1982), (translated into Japanese by Ikeuchi Yasuko) and “Passages Paysages (1979),” a three-channel video work that was exhibited at A.R.T. gallery in Tokyo as part of the *Borderline Cases* exhibition project. After discussing works shown at this exhibition by Idemitsu Mako and Shimada Yoshiko, I will turn to the work of third generation Korean resident artist, Oh/Okamura Haji/Natsue, whose innovative textile and installation pieces display “the ‘interstices, the overlappings and interleavings, the hither and thither that is part of the history” of diasporic Koreans in Japan.

II. “A Message in a Bottle”: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* in Japan

You see farther. Farther and farther. Beyond what you are made to see and made to see only. You pass the mark, even though you say nothing. Everyone who has seen, sees farther. Even farther than allowed.”

Both the written and visual texts of Korean American artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982) have inspired many as they challenge their readers and viewers to look beyond the “expected” or naturalized boundaries of artistic genre, generation and geopolitical territories. In her insightful reading of Cha’s *Dictee* and its significance in the context of debates about cultural diversity in the U.S. context, Lisa Lowe notes that Cha understood the work of art to be a “cultur-
al object” that might serve as a catalyst for engagement and dialogue with the audience. Following the publication of Ikeuchi Yasuko’s Japanese translation of Cha’s *Dictee* (2002), the artist’s works or “cultural objects,” have begun to serve as a catalyst in the context of discourse on postcolonial, feminist and performance art studies in Japan. As Nishi Masahiko wrote in the introduction to a recently published collection of essays about Cha’s work, it is as if Cha’s works have reached us like a “message in a bottle” that has floated across the sea.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s experimental work, *Dictee*, was published in 1982, only one month before her tragic death. Cha had studied Comparative Literature and Fine Art, receiving undergraduate degrees in both from U.C. Berkeley. As an undergraduate, she had been encouraged by ceramics professor Jim Melchert, to explore performance as a medium, and by French and Comparative Literature professors to study French film theory. In the same year that she received an M.A. in Fine Art from the same university, she became a naturalized U.S. citizen and the following year, exhibited her three channel video work, “Passages Paysages” as her M.F.A graduation work. In 1979, she made her first trip back to Korea in eighteen years. At the same time, she was beginning to publish, exhibit and do performances pieces with the support of the growing women’s art and performance networks in and around the San Francisco Bay Area.

Cha’s studies in a range of academic and artistic disciplines, coupled with her experience as an “émigré” from Korea, informed her artistic and poetic practice. *Dictee* was in a sense, a culmination of her explorations, a work very difficult to describe in terms of any single genre. Susan Wolf writes:

*Dictee* is uncategorizable, merging different forms of writing, visual forms, and kinds of information. On one level it is about Korean history and it can also be read as an autobiography and biography of several women: Cha’s mother, Joan of Arc, St. Theresa, the Korean revolutionary, Yu Guan Soon, and Hyung Soon Huo, daughter of first-generation Korean exiles in Manchuria. These stories are intricately interwoven as the text shifts from prose to prose poetry, from images to words, from history to fiction, from past to present.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the implications of Cha’s work in the U.S. context, but it is important to note that both *Dictee* and the artist’s innovative “visual” works in a wide range of media shown in the retrospective exhibition, *The Dream of the Audience*, inspired many artists of her own and later generations. The creative legacy of this Korean American artist whose career was tragically, cut short, helps us to see what Bhabha calls the “hither and thither”
that is part of the personal experience and history of the “émigré.” In 1994, Lowe not only saw links between the threads of personal and poetic narrative in the text, but also registered the significance of those connections in the U.S. context at a time when debates about the modern history of Asia, Asian American “identity politics” and globalizing U.S. hegemony were being debated. Lowe writes:

As a text which links Korean immigration to the United States with the record of Japanese colonialism and the American role in the Korean War and partition of Korea, Dictée contributes to this critique by making crucial connections between anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States and imperialist expansion in the Third World.11

Ikeuchi Yasuko’s Japanese translation of Dictée was published in 2002, and in itself, constitutes a remarkable accomplishment of creative and linguistic imagination. The translation has sparked further discussion of Cha’s work in Japan. Responses to this translation and a series of symposia on Dictée by a range of scholars and writers, have helped a new readership to discover new connections between past and present. Ikeuchi’s reading of Dictée in the context of early 21st century debates about the representation of the histories of conscripted laborers and “military comfort women, draws connections between her own experience of growing up on Sakito, a coalmining island near Nagasaki and “the traces, both visible or otherwise, inscribed in Japan people of the Korean diaspora throughout history.”12

At the same time, Ikeuchi reads Dictée as a text that is relevant to the controversies over history and memory, and the position of diaporic Koreans in Japan today.

Walter Benjamin’s admonition that, “Even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins,” has particular resonance in contemporary Japan, where postwar politicians are still not prepared to consistently acknowledge responsibility for the colonial controls and war of aggression.... The dead are insulted again and again, and have their safety compromised by Japan’s nationalist discourses. Nor is it only the dead who are unsafe. “Korean residents living in Japan have once again become the target of ethnic exclusion.”13

As translator, Ikeuchi engaged with Cha’s text, finding the artist’s formal experimentation with narrative, filmic techniques, history and myth to be both poetically inspiring and “politically” relevant.

For me, the history-telling narrated by the multiple voices of the diseuse in Dictée has opened up a circuit filled with a revelation of sorts. Cha’s history-telling evokes the
events of the past as flickering recollections in this present moment of crisis, and in her narrative I feel “the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past,” as Benjamin put it.

This work of mine in translating *Dictée* is one response from someone who has received this spark of hope.

Since the opening of *The Dream of the Audience*, a retrospective exhibition of Cha’s works that has traveled to four locations in the U.S., Seoul and three cities in Europe, Ikeuchi Yasuko and I have been seeking a location for the exhibit in Japan. Finally, in 2004, one of Cha’s video installations, “Passages Paysages,” (Ill. 1) was shown as part of the exhibition project, *Borderline Cases: for Women on the Borderlines*. In this work, Cha used a three-channel video, coordinating each image, word and sound meticulously. Words and images in English and French with multiple sounds and meanings suggest migration across borders, movement through place and time, as well as translations of meaning in multiple languages. In an essay about the work, Lawrence Rinder analyzes the visual and sound effects of the French and English words by extracting them from the video work as follows:

- passage: thoroughfare/literary extract/transition
- paysage: scenery
- passé: past
- mot de passé: password
- pays: country/land/home
- sage: wise/virtuous/quiet

Though similar in sound and inflection, diverse meanings are expressed through these words, creating reverberations and movements that underscore the themes of the work. The fragments of Cha’s poetic imagery and visual texts give expression to traces of the diasporic experience that she and her family shared. In many contexts, Cha’s work has served as a catalyst, a generating open dialogue on the borderlines between cultures. Similarly, I would argue, her work has contributed to growing transnational dialogues among artists and their audiences in Japan and Korea. In the following section I will briefly discuss the *Borderline Cases* project where Cha’s work was exhibited, and introduce two of the other works exhibited by visual artists based in Japan.
II. Borderline Cases: For Women on the Borderlines

The difficulty of finding a venue for the retrospective of Cha’s work in Japan led to the idea of having a group exhibition with relevant questions as the theme. In 2004, two Korean and four Japanese women artists came together to work with curator Kim Sunhee to produce the exhibition, *Borderline Cases: for Women on the Borderlines*. Appropriate to the theme and title, Cha’s three-channel video, “Passages Paysages” was one of the featured works. Shimada Yoshiko described the aims of the project as follows:

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.16

Given the recent history of dialogue and debate among Korean and Japanese feminists on the representation of history, Shimada stressed the need to directly face differences in perspective—as Japanese or Korean, in order to, avoid easy or simplistic assumptions about “joining hands across borders.” Each of the participating artists had been engaged with feminist and/or post-colonial issues for many years, seeking formal means and representational strategies for making personal histories the material of their art. Kim Sunhee’s careful selection and arrangement of the works helped bring out both the individual character of each piece and the dialogue or “co-responses” reverberating among them.

Exhibited alongside Cha’s “Passages Paysages,” was film and video artist Idemitsu Mako’s large-scale video installation, *Past Ahead*, a work that gives formal expression to the artist’s reflections on her personal history in relation to the war. We first see a large photograph of the artist as a young girl with her family, projected on the large wall at the rear of the lower floor of the gallery. (Ill. 2) The larger-than-life-figures of her father, mother and sister appear in stiff, but familiar poses. Dressed and groomed impeccably, a sign of their social status, the figures together create an image of the well-to-do family in the 1940s. Idemitsu, the youngest in the photo, was still a girl when the photograph was taken. In another family photograph that comes on the screen, Idemitsu poses with her sister. (Ill. 3) The artist makes effective use of a sensor to create an actual borderline in the work: as the viewer moves closer to the image he or she crosses an invisible borderline triggering the projection of a very different series of images and sounds. A stream of war photographs, footage from documentary films of battlefronts, still images of posters...
Three-channel video installation with sound.
Collection of Berkeley Art Museum. Photo: Shimada Yoshiko

Video installation as shown in *Borderline Cases: For Women on the Borderlines*, A.R.T. Gallery, Tokyo. Courtesy of the artist.


Ill. 4b  Shimada Yoshiko, *Bones in a Tansu: Family Secrets*, (detail.)

Ill. 4c  Shimada Yoshiko, *Bones in a Tansu: Family Secrets*, (detail.)
and magazines follow, one after another. They all depict scenes from the Asia-Pacific theater of World War II, taken at around the same time as the photos of her family were made.

Idemitsu’s use of the sensor and invisible “borderline” ensures the viewer’s engagement with the work. Recognition of the very different perspective that results from crossing it borderline is triggered the instant the viewer moves toward the projection on the wall. On the one hand, the photos of the artist and her family make the work a personal exploration into memories of wartime from the vantage point of the artist’s, upper class family; on the other, the title of the work reverses our sense of time warning us of the “past ahead.” In an interview about the work, the artist 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 over this invisible line, and, for example, we find that the Self-Defense Forces 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.17

In her installation piece, *Bones in a Tansu: Family Secrets*, (Ill. 4a) Shimada Yoshiko also explores personal histories and the borderline between private and public space. The phrase “bones in a tansu” reminds us of the English phrase, “skeletons in the closet.” A graceful *tansu*, or chest of drawers stands against the wall and is the central object in the installation. Each drawer of this elegant antique furniture piece contains objects, images and texts that form collages representing a secret about a particular family that was contributed by a participant in this interactive project. One catalyst for the work was Shimada’s earlier project with a group of Korean resident women in Osaka, in which family photographs were used to explore personal memories and histories that have been excluded from “Japanese national history.” Out of the project came an installation that was exhibited in *There*, an exhibition of Korean diaspora art curated by U.S. based artist, Yong Soon Min.18 Work on this project prompted Shimada to reflect further on her position as a Japanese and to ask questions about her past relations own family’s with Koreans in Japan.

In one drawer, layered over the shadowy images of men in uniform we read the words, ‘My grandfather is said to have killed a lot of people.’19 (Ill.4b, 4c) In another, along with small objects and images seen through semi-transparent paper, we read the words, ‘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.” In yet another drawer, the words ‘My Father committed suicide’ seem to float to the surface of the paper. Participants in the project, share their secrets in the public space of the gallery, making that space a charged, but “open border” between the public and private realms. As seen here, these secrets might touch on indirect memories or accounts of war, personal tragedy or the effects of global migration in the present day.

The curtained booth placed next to the *tansu*, generates ongoing participation in the project which has since been shown in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, University of the Philippines in Manila, Chiang Mai and Indonesia. As the work moves to other sites in Asia, participants at each location introduce new personal narratives and memories that touch on colonialism, war, domestic violence, AIDS, and migration, linking past and present and continuing to bring fragments of personal history and memory into public spaces where they might be shared.

In addition to ongoing work on her own projects as an artist, Shimada has been vocal about the obstacles that face “minority” artists in Japan and has lent support to projects that help provide venues to such artists. Concerning the situation of artists of the Korean diaspora in Japan, she writes:

> There is preexisting inequality in the power relations between the minority and majority audience, therefore minority artists’ intentions and messages are not always met with respect and acceptance. Sometimes the audiences ignore them completely, other times, they intentionally misread them. Only about 10-20 percent of the more than 600,000 Korean residents in Japan use their real names; the rest use “passing” names. Among them, even fewer ‘Zainichi’ visual artists who use their real names (compared to the number of Zainichi novelists and musicians). They are often excluded from participating in international events, and when their work is exhibited, it is often dismissed as having to do with “minority issues.”

In spite of these obstacles, the projects discussed here show that new, albeit alternative, spaces for the work of “borderline artists” are slowly being created. In the same year that *Borderline Cases* was held in Tokyo, two other exhibitions, held in Kyoto and Tokyo respectively, provided unique venues for young artists of the Korean diaspora, including a few working in Japan. *Orientity* brought together works of eight young artists of the Korean diaspora working in Europe, the U.S., Korea and Japan. Inspired by the networking project of Korean adoptee, Mihee-Natalie Lemoine, these artists, with very little funding and in collaboration with two young cura-
tors at the Kyoto Arts Center organized the exhibition in September, 2004. Relying heavily on the voluntary commitment of the participating artists, the exhibition and related events successfully drew a diverse and interested audience. In her introduction to the exhibition, Ikeuchi Yasuko writes:

The unfamiliar title of this exhibit, *Orientity*, has been coined from the words “oriental” and “identity.” Here we can see the artists’ very clever aim to unsettle these two terms which are laden with potentially essentialist notions.21

Indeed, it would be impossible to discover “essential” Korean characteristics in the works produced in diverse media and presenting a range of perspectives of artists who are living in at least six different countries. But as Ikeuchi writes, the artists share the experience of being silenced or coerced as ‘minorities’:

This project is an attempt to provide the artists themselves, who have been named and categorized by the majority, a place to resist these representations and to (de-) construct their own identities through their artistic expression.22

In the final section of this paper, I will discuss several recent works by one of these young artists, Oh/Okamura Haji/Natsue. I will suggest that the formal and poetic innovations of her recent textile and mixed-media installation works constitute an example of Bhabha’s notion of borderline art and that these works are helping to open up spaces in contemporary Japan that enable viewers to envision new and diverse narratives of cultural and political history.

III. “Cultural re-iteration” and “Postmemory” Oh/Okamura Haji’s Recent Works

Returning once more to Bhabha’s delineation of the “borderline artist,” he notes a number of “double acts,” including collaborations between artist and curator, and creative acts that link past and present in new ways. Of what is new and original in the work of the borderline artist, Bhabha writes:

The borderline work of art... (conveys) the borderline sense of the new that is an insurgent act of cultural re-iteration. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ is part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living.23
Third generation Korean resident artist, Oh/Okamura Haji/Natsue has been working in the medium of textiles since her graduation from the Kyoto City Arts College in 2001. In recent installation pieces, she has reached beyond the genre of textiles, introducing photographs and other materials to create works that are powerful both formally and conceptually. Since she submitted her graduation (M.F.A.) work, “Where Did She Come From and Where is She Going?” (2002), Oh has been committed to the discovery of formal and aesthetic means that can give expression to the complexities of her “borderline” identity through art.

For Oh, one starting point was identifying herself as a Korean resident by using her Korean name as the signature for her work. Her stance as an artist is grounded in her “double” identity.

I have two names, Oh Haji and Okamura Natsue. In Japan, I am often asked which name I use. My Japanese family name was forced on us by history, and my Korean family name, Oh, is in our family tree. But both names are mine, so I use them both. I began to use them in public, with pride, six years ago. I am both of these names.24

Oh began by exploring the material and formal means to give expression to her identity, engaging with the materials and techniques she had been trained to use—thread, dye, weaving tools, looms—to create unique garments or “cultural objects.” She took pieces from a roll of cloth used to make Japanese kimono, and after taking them apart, rearranged and re-stitched them to create an original garment reminiscent of the hankok or chima chogori (Korean ethnic dress). This medium allowed her to give material expression to her “in-between” identity as well as to the layers time, memory and thought that, for Oh, accompany the painstaking processes of producing textiles.

In 2001, Oh’s grandmother passed away, an event that was to deeply affect her. Oh records a brief conversation with her mother on that day, marking a moment that would lead several years later to the creation of the works shown in the Orientsity exhibit, “Three Times,” “Three Flowers,” and “Three Generations.”

June, 2001. Two weeks before my first one-person show, my grandmother passed away. I heard the news as I was embroidering one of the works for the exhibit. She had been fighting a serious illness for some time, and we knew death was near. I felt sad and wept as I worked. It was then that the news came.

Several hours earlier, my mother and I had heard she was worse and were preparing to go to the hospital. But then they called saying she was better, so we decided to stay home. I will never forget.
After that call, my mother and I talked.

Before then, I had not talked much to my mother about being a Korean in Japan, but then, I spoke.

Me: I wonder how Grandma’s felt about her life.

Mother: Yes,....(Silent pause)... When I was in Junior High school, I was shocked by something my teacher said. I’ll never forget it. He said, “You Koreans, you’re like wild grass just floating on water with no place to put down roots..

(Silence)

Me: Is that so?

(Tears, silence)

Oh vividly recalls, the impossibility of finding words to express the incommensurable sense of loss at the moment of her grandmother’s death. She soon left for Seoul to study Korean language and stitching techniques, and recalls many moments of feeling frustrated and confused during her two years there. Reflecting on that experience, she writes:

It wasn’t just the frustration of someone who lives in an unfamiliar place. It had something to do with my being a “Korean Japanese.” Memories of being unable to speak Korean in Japan and uncomfortable moments with my grandmother started coming back to me. Memories of my grandmother trying to speak to me in Japanese, and me, unable to understand her Korean. There was nothing I could do with these memories.

Two years later, Oh was able to use the material of ethnic dress, re-figured—or in Bhabha’s terms, “re-iterated”—in a way that allowed her to address the complex intersection of her own memories, and the unknowable memories and experiences of her mother and grandmother. Through creating the linked installation pieces, “Three Times,” “Three Generations,” and “Three Flowers,” Oh was able to engage in what she calls “the process of remembering (or actively not forgetting) the history of Korean residents in Japan and passing on that history.”

This work was exhibited in one of the two galleries of the Orientity exhibit. In “Three Generations,” (Ill.5) a wooden frame made for five photos was displayed on the far wall of the gallery. In the three center frames, we see images of Oh Haji herself, wearing three different hank-bok or chima chogori, traditional ethnic dress worn by women in Korea. While each garment is made of different fabric, in different colors, Oh herself poses in an identical way, standing on a road against the same landscape, a low hill in the countryside on Cheju Island, the ancestral home of her mother’s family.
Oh explains that this work, shows both the differences in the three generations, and the passage through time that connects them. In the photo on the right, she wears the *chima chogori* she herself made while studying Korean textiles in Seoul. In the center, she wears her mother's *chima chogori*, and in the photo on the right, she wears the white, machine embroidered, polyester *chima chogori* that her grandmother and other women of her generation commonly wore.

Though the landscape in the photo does not represent a specific place, the road on which the artist stands leaves the viewer wondering whether she is moving away from or toward her destination, whether the road itself is a border, etc. In her artist's statement, Oh writes that she cannot know what other generations experienced, but the two empty frames on either side and the sense of continuity through time and space created by the images convey through formal means the artist's attempt to touch on those memories and experiences as if they might be—even if only in part—linked to her own.

In “Three Times,” a long piece of brown, hemp cloth is used; on it, similar photo images of the artist wearing three different *hanbok* or *chima chogori* have been printed using a photo-silkscreen technique. (Ill. 6a, b) In her statement, the artist explains that the cloth, *senba*, is traditionally used in Korea to make the garment worn by the person whose role in a funeral is to send off the deceased. This piece of cloth is the one Oh's grandmother had prepared for use in her own funeral. Again by imprinting an image of herself on the cloth, Oh attempts to touch “the times her mother and grandmother lived through,” something now only possible through an act of imaginative creation.

In front of both works on the wall, hangs the third work in the installation, “Three Flowers.” (Ill. 7a, b) The artist explains as follows:

> This work is the re-construction of a *chima chogori* worn by my grandmother, made into a new garment. The “three flowers” are the white flower pattern embroidered into the original fabric, the flowers painted on the inside of the skirt and the third flower, which is stitched in colored yarn around the outer edge of the white embroidered flower, linking the three.27

Again, the artist delves into her memories of her mother and grandmother, and finds material means to give expression to both their differences and the things that link them. The three pieces in the installation are also very different, but at the same time, reverberate with one another in interesting ways.

In 2006, after producing other mixed-media installations using hand-woven and dyed textiles
Ill. 5  Oh/Okamura Haji, “Three Generations.”
「三つの世代」(2004)
Three chima chogori, c-print. Courtesy of the artist.

Ill. 6 a, b, c  Oh/Okamura Haji, “Three Times.”
「3つの時間」(2004)
Sanbe cloth, thermal transfer print paper 45 × 500cm. Photo on fabric Courtesy of the artist.
Ill. 7 a, b. Oh/Okamura Haji, “Three Flowers.” (2004)
Polyester chima chogori, fabric dye, colored yarn. Courtesy of the artist.

Ill. 8a. Oh/Okamura Haji, Memory (2006)
Polyester organdy, polyester fiber, spool, stand, mirror, lightbulb, photograph.
As shown at VOICE gallery, Kyoto. Courtesy of the artist.
along with photographs and other mixed-media, Oh again created a work using the materials and images of her grandmother’s *chima chogori* in the installation piece, “Memory,” shown at the VOICE gallery in Kyoto. (Ill. 8a) In this work, a white, polyester organdy garment reminiscent of her grandmother’s *chima chogori*, was displayed, suspended from one of the white walls of the gallery; the train of the dress spreads onto the floor of the gallery, nearly filling the space with soft, semi-transparent fabric. Near the center of the room, a spool wound with braided white fiber rested on a small table, topped with a mirror (Ill. 8b); soft rays of light from a small standing lamp wash across the semi-transparent cloth, creating ripples of light. Windows on one side of the space opened out onto the tree-lined street, and on the walls closest to the entrance, two small photographs, brown in tone—as if faded with age—of the artist’s grandmother’s *chima chogori* were displayed. (Ill. 8c) Each element of the installation contributed to the sense of “still presence” in the space.

Strands of thread form a braid that unwinds into the space; at close range, the flower pattern imprinted on the cloth becomes visible. The artist’s statement, part of which is inscribed on the wall of the gallery, is itself like a poem:

As I look at the *chima chogori* that my grandmother left, I feel as if she is here.

Many things were wrapped in her skirt.

I print the design on the cloth, again and again,

Each print, another fragment of memory.

The soft, white train of the skirt

Spreads on the wooden floor, endlessly.

Here are her memories, that I cannot know.

Have they vanished, along with her body that exists no more?

No memory is certain,

But I imagine something was there,

For my grandmother and the women of her generation.

Memory

The fragments spill down

A memory etched on each fragment
Nowhere to go,
Floating, sinking, again and again,
I scoop up the fragments with cupped hands
And again, they spill,
Again, they float and sink,
Over and over again.28

In this work, the artist’s memories of her grandmother—and her attempt to imagine her grandmother’s memories—led her to experiment with her own complex and charged relationship to the Korean and Japanese languages as a visual element in the work. (Ill. 8d) The Japanese characters are inverted, but can be read with difficulty; hangul characters appear to sink into the wall. This use of letters and fragments of language, the absence of color except for the soft brown tones of the photographs in this installation, contribute to the conceptual and formal tension of the work. In the fragments of materials or language we sense the artist’s desire to recover things that have been lost, as clues to experience in the present. In a recent email exchange, Oh elaborated upon the use of Korean and Japanese in the work.

These inscriptions on the wall were not to be spoken, but to appear as if they were floating up to the surface, or as if perhaps rubbed into the wall. I was recalling the feeling of frustration I had when I couldn’t understand what my grandmother was saying to me.... I was also thinking about my grandmother’s experience, coming to Japan, forced use Japanese everyday, even though her native language was Korean.29

Oh also explained in greater detail about the process she used to produce the photographs of her grandmother’s chima chogori that inspired the work and so powerfully convey a presence:

In the past I have made works by unraveling my grandmother’s chima chogori and making new garments. But I was ready to try something else, and just kept this chogori hanging in my room... I began to feel as if she were really there, as if she were physically present. That was the inspiration for this work... Technically speaking, I took photographs, both with an ordinary reflex camera and with a camera that I could manually adjust so that it was slightly out of focus. I tried both and decided to use the latter because it conveyed the sense of her physical presence.30

Through this work, Oh engaged with materials in new ways and found formal means to probe the
Ill. 8d Oh/Okamura Haji, *Memory* (2006), detail.
Ill. 9a  Oh/Okamura Haji, Kahan (2007). Polyester organdy, wire, fiber, needles, pin cushion. As shown at the Kyoto City Museum.

Ill. 9b  Oh/Okamura Haji, Kahan (2007), detail.
mechanisms of personal and shared memory in more complex ways. Here, the relationship between the photographs on the wall and the other elements of the installation is critical:

I wanted the photos to be a mechanism linking memories of my grandmother and the memories of others, including myself. I was trying to find some way to give expression to of the fragments of my memories of her. Of course, that does not mean representing concretely what these were; rather, to ask a question about what might have been there. And though this has to do with my personal/individual memories of my grandmother, I didn't want the viewer to completely, separate her or himself from this, because I think that while we have memories that are our own, these are in some way linked to the memories of others.\textsuperscript{31}

Oh's reflection on this work and use of material and formal elements to explore questions concerning memory and history for Korean residents in Japan brings to mind the work of other diasporic artists who have probed similar themes in their work. In speaking of thematic and formal elements in her work, Korean-born Canadian artist Jin-me Yoon refers to the notion of “postmemory,” a form of “cross-generational” memory that has been used to understand and explain some uses of photography and art by the descendants of holocaust survivors. Yoon's recent video installation, \textit{Unbidden}, was sparked by discussions in the Canadian Korean community about how to commemorate “memories” of the Korean war; the notion of postmemory helped the artist to articulate ways in which her mother's memories and experiences of the war were communicated to her viscerally.\textsuperscript{32} Marianne Hirsch explains the notion of postmemory as follows:

In my reading “postmemory” is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection... Postmemory characterized the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.\textsuperscript{33}

This notion may also be useful in explaining Oh Haji's works of installation art. As seen in the works discussed here, the artist repeatedly seeks formal and conceptual means to give expression to her own memories as well as to the irrecoverable memories and experiences of her grandmother, transmitted to her indirectly through things said and not said, through the tangible fragments of those memories somehow embodied in objects such as the \textit{chima chogori} she wore.

In February of 2007, Oh exhibited a new work titled, \textit{Kahan}, at the Kyoto City Art Museum. The compound of Chinese characters used in the title – 花 (flower) and 痕 (mark or bruise)—is
the original invention of the artist. Perhaps because of the space restrictions imposed by a large group show, Oh had to find ways to work with the themes of her earlier installations in a more condensed and abstract way. She again chose to use the polyester organdy with imprinted flower patterns of the chima chogori seen in “Memory,” which forms the base of the abstract form of the work. (Ill. 9a, 9b) Strands of white fiber at first appear to rise out of the abstracted form of the fabric; upon a closer look, the strands or fibers are threaded through needles that pierce the rounded surface of a pin cushion placed on a transparent round plate that seems to hover in the air above the base of the work. Reference to the formal elements of the chima chogori have been abstracted, needles pierce the soft skin-like surface of the cloth, and threads, suspended precariously, topple down into the folds of white cloth, lending the work a poetic intensity, entirely through formal and material means. The artist’s statement about the work again points to the underlying theme of memory.

**Kahan**

Warmth moves up from the base, floats upward,
Fades along with time that passes.
*Kahan* is the trace of memories that never fade
The mark of memories unheard, unwritten.

* * *

I began this essay by suggesting that cultural critic Homi Bhabha’s notion of the “borderline artist” might be useful in readings of works seen in exhibition projects like *Borderline Cases* and *Orientity*. Though of different generations and working in very different media, the artists whose works are discussed here are opening up new spaces “on the borderlines” as they continue to explore personal geographies in public spaces. At the time of this writing, we may on the one hand note disturbing signs of what philosopher and cultural critic Judith Butler describes as “racial hysteria in which fear is directed anywhere and nowhere.” If this is so, then the spaces for reflection and dialogue made possible by “borderline artists” and their work becomes even more vitally important. It is with the hope that the works discussed here might reach a wider audience and become catalysts for further dialogue, that I end this brief essay here.
Endnotes

1 It was thanks to support from the “Gender and Performance Studies” project, Ritsumeikan University, U.C. Berkeley Art Museum and many others, that these projects were possible.


3 ibid. p.23.

4 ibid. p.23.

5 A recent example of this is the controversy caused by Abe Shinzo’s comment on the “military comfort women,” in early March, 2007. See Morris-Suzuki, Tessa, “It’s time for Truth,” Japan Focus, Spring 2007.


7 Lowe, 1994, p.63.


10 ibid. p.157


13 ibid.

14 ibid.

15 Lawrence Rinder, “The Dream of the Audience,” p.36.

16 Shimada Yoshiko, Borderline Cases, exhibition statement. The participating artists were, Shimada Yoshiko, Yun Suknam, Park Young sook, Idenitsu Mako, Ito Tari and Takahashi Fumiko.

17 Interview, TV broadcast, June, 2004 (translated by the author).


21 Ikeuchi Yasuko, exhibition pamphlet statement, translated by the author.

22 Ibid.


24 Unbound, Special Issue on Gender, Kyoto Journal, Fall, 2006, p.22

25 Oh/Okamura Haji, “As and Artist and Korean Resident,” AIDA.

26 ibid.
Statement by the artist.

ibid.

Email exchange with the artist, March 2007.

ibid.

ibid.

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