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Vahri Mckenzie  
*Edith Cowan University*

Jen Webb

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Ursula K Frederick, Ashley Harrison, Tracy Ireland and Justin Magee

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# Re-enactment as Conversation: Yoshiko Shimada's *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman*

Vahri McKenzie and Jen Webb

'Since Plotinus', writes Joseph Tanke (2019, p. 486), 'Western art has been consecrated to beauty, and beautiful art has been understood as the achievement of good form'. But alongside this interest in beauty and form, art has been committed to politics and perspectives, equity and rights. Consequently, and particularly since the start of the modern era, artists frequently initiate or participate in 'difficult conversations'. This might manifest in the form of direct action (Turner, 2005); new ways of constituting community in difference (Smith, 2013); or through the sorts of art works and art practices that incorporate both direct and oblique critiques of political systems, entrenched privilege, and social inequities (Turner & Webb, 2016). For Jacques Rancière, such activities are necessarily both political in nature, and instances of what he terms *political dissensus*. This is very similar to the idea of difficult conversations that animates this volume because *dissensus* is not a conversation among political equals, but 'a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard' (Rancière, 2011, p. 2).

Art is a very productive domain in which to pursue such conversations. Not because it has an authorised voice – it does not, in any real way, since it is largely outside the dominant social and political paradigms (Rancière, 2004) – but because it offers a different perspective on material realities from what is commonly in the social conversation. This allows it to take up 'difficult' issues: the problem of decolonisation, for example; the place of women and social minorities; how history is remembered, and how the future is imagined.

Yoshiko Shimada, a contemporary artist who is wholly immersed in difficult conversations, has been tackling such issues in her public art for several decades. Born in 1959, she has lived, worked and studied in Tokyo, and in the USA, Germany and Denmark. She has included installation, video and performance in her art practice, and exhibited internationally, showing works that engage the silences of history and the present; the legacies of a masculinist culture on women; and the problem of unthinking patriotism or nationalism.

Much of her early work gazed squarely at Japan's participation in World War II and historical war crimes, and at her own imbrication in her culture. This is evident in her series of photo-etchings, *Past Imperfect* (1992–93), which presented confronting images of the so-called 'comfort women', sex slaves of the Japanese military, many of whom were Korean. (In this chapter, we follow the widely used convention of signaling the untruth of the term 'comfort women' with inverted commas, except when directly quoting or naming.) The triptych 'White Aprons' (1993), by contrast, offers three representations of Japanese women, appropriated from wartime photographs. They include a woman learning to shoot, a housewife cooking, and members of the Dai Nippon Kokubō Fujinkai, a women's organisation established to support the war effort. In a direct contrast to the representations of 'comfort women', Shimada also presents images of the 'patriotic mother', the 'sacred mother', dressed in the distinctive *kappōgi* (white apron) adopted as a symbolic

uniform during the war.

She has continued to produce work on, and in collaboration with, survivors of this disaster, while also directing a critical gaze at the Japanese women she saw as being complicit with the war crimes. For example, 'Look at Me, Look at You' (1995) was a hauntingly beautiful installation of two dresses. The first is a white wedding dress, referencing the modern, westernised Japanese woman. The second is a cotton kimono covering a Korean *chima-chigori* (traditional dress), referencing the military abuse of Korean women. Between the garments is a one-way mirror, hung so that the Korean side is obscured, the Japanese image reflected back onto itself.

Shimada's artworks, and her commentary in artist statements and media reportage, directly break the silences of history. She critically addresses discourses that ignore the ugly aspects of history, and/or unproblematically exonerate those in power for their responsibility for the suffering of others. As such, her interventions effectively bring history into the present, crafting a sense of time that Homi Bhabha calls the 'past-present' – where no matter how hard one scours the record of the past, it lingers there, a 'ghost or trace that inflects the present' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 7). The 'past-present' enables a conversation that fills out the interstices between the past and the present. In an artist statement Shimada wrote in 1993, she explains the argument of her work, and why she is still making work about something that happened decades ago: 'Why now the W.W.II? and why women? Because we have avoided thinking about this for too long' (Artasiamerica, 2015). There is a wound on culture that needs to be treated.

Her more recent work, under the title *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman* (2012–), directly addresses that wound through the medium of performance, a mode that can bridge differences even before a common language is found, because because the process of embodiment archives collective memory and expresses an affective position that critiques without words (Sabiescu, 2020). Her performances draw on

and echo the *Statue of Peace* sequence of works, the first of which was proposed by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan, and erected in 2011 in Seoul. This bronze statue was commissioned in honour of the one-thousandth weekly Wednesday Demonstration, a protest in front of the Embassy of Japan in Seoul that has been held every Wednesday at midday since 8 January 1992 (Son, 2018, p. 147). Designed by sculptors Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung, it depicts a girl or very young woman in traditional Korean dress, seated beside an empty chair. Her hands form fists and rest in her lap; her expression is composed; and she looks strong and dignified, with 'a little bit of rage', according to Kim Seo-kyung (from an interview with the artists cited in Son, 2018, p. 150).

Shimada has performed her version of this work a number of times, in significant and often contested locations. In these performances, she sits silently next to an empty chair, or, depending on the site, next to the titular statue of a 'comfort woman'. The work's impact depends upon co-location with such statues – or with a viewer's knowledge of these statues – which are now proliferating across South Korea, and across the world, in communities with Korean populations, e.g., the USA, Canada, Germany, and Australia. The dissensus generated by their installation means that the statues are themselves participating in this 'difficult conversation'.

There are important distinctions between the statue Shimada is 'becoming' and the *Statue of Peace* that is her model. First, the Statue is itself, present, while Shimada's performance is of one who is becoming, and becoming *specifically* a statue of a Japanese 'comfort woman'. Jessica Nakamura's study of Shimada's *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman* is attentive to the potency of the work's title, noting that the use of the present progressive verb signals its 'representational and transgenerational entanglements' (Nakamura, 2020, p. 81). The silences and silencing of the facts surrounding 'comfort women' mean that the artist cannot be a Japanese 'comfort woman': as Nakamura observes she has no living model to replicate.

Moreover, because of the narrative of Japanese women's wartime complicity – a narrative presented in much of Shimada's earlier work – her performances are necessarily ambiguous and tentative: not yet become but always becoming.

A further distinction, one that draws attention to the complicity of some Japanese women during the war (Yamamoto, 2021, p. 80), is signalled in her choice of performative elements such as costuming. This echoes her earlier works on the different experiences of Korean and Japanese women during the war, as in 'White Aprons' (1993) or 'Look at Me, Look at You' (1995). In these performances their shared status of being women is reflected in Shimada's skin and clothing being painted bronze, like the bronze statue; but their differences are reflected in the costuming: the girl in the *Statue of Peace* wears a Korean *hanbok*, while Shimada wears a Japanese kimono (Yamamoto, 2021, p. 83). Further, writing about the *Statue of Peace* (though not about Shimada's re-enactment), Elizabeth Son shows how the empty chair next to the girl develops meaning in an active way, inviting viewers to physically enter the work: 'The empty bronze chair holds memories of the "comfort women" who are no longer with us and anticipates the next person who will take a seat by the bronze girl in solidarity' (Son, 2018, p. 158). Focusing on peaceful actions, Son describes the many 'performances of care' the *Statue of Peace* elicits, such as dressing the bronze girl against cold weather and leaving her gifts (2018, pp. 147–175). Son suggests the position of the chair next to the bronze girl and facing the Embassy of Japan invokes those who gather to protest and 'invites us to become part of a chain of co-presence' (2018, p. 158).

Shimada's performances take up this invitation, attending to both the awareness-raising work that performances of solidarity can achieve, and the critical nuance required to address difficult matters. But in Nakamura's view, the empty chair in Shimada's *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman* is more complex than the chair used in the *Statue of*

*Peace*. While that statue clearly signals solidarity with Korean 'comfort women', Shimada's performance, writes Nakamura, 'does not provoke empathy' (2020, p. 83), and her empty chair 'can cast the viewer as "comfort woman" or soldier or others complicit with the system' (Nakamura, 2020, p. 83). This seems to align with Shimada's own logic of life and of practice which she describes as 'a tool of self-examination and communication. In order to know who I am (an Asian, a Japanese, a woman), examining the recent past history of Japan and the role of women and what we have done to the people of Asia' (Artasiamerica, 2015). This suggests that her 'difficult conversations' are held with herself, as well as with the perpetrators and the enablers of violence and injustice.

The first performance of *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman* took place on the footpath outside the Japanese Embassy in London in 2012 (Figure 1). The location of the performance and Shimada's pose explicitly recall Seoul's *Statue of Peace*, and, as with that work, Shimada sits beside an empty chair. Following the London performance, Shimada performed *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman* in front of Japan's National Diet and the Yasukuni Shrine. For these events, photographs were taken before the authorities interrupted the performances (Nakamura, 2020, p. 86). In the Tokyo performances, Shimada wears a *kimono* and her mouth is taped shut, but the empty chair is missing. It could be that the riskiness of the performance sites made it too difficult to set up an additional chair. Yet its absence from these performances suggests Nakamura's interpretation of the chair's role in recognising Japanese complicity may be overdetermined: here we see the chair enabling diverse engagement, which accommodates expressions of condemnation as well as solidarity.

In 2018 and 2019, Shimada collaborated with Tomorrow Girls Troop, a feminist social art collective based in East Asia and on the internet (Tomorrow Girls Troop, n.d., 'English home'; see Figure 2). On the Los Angeles' site



Figure 1. Yoshiko Shimada, *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman*. Image: Y.Shimada (2012).



**Figure 2.** Tomorrow Girls Troop, *Against Forgetting*, and Yoshiko Shimada, *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman*. Image: Sit Weng San (2018).



of the *Peace Monument of Glendale* (an exact replica of Seoul's *Statue of Peace*), Shimada performed *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman* while sitting in the bronze girl's empty chair. At the same event (18 February 2018), Tomorrow Girls Troop debuted *Against Forgetting*, which connects 'the plight of comfort women and our current reckoning with sexual harassment', with actions including reciting a statement for solidarity, handing sunflowers to the bronze girl, and hugging Shimada (Tomorrow Girls Troop, n.d., 'Against Forgetting LA'). The collaboration was repeated in Seoul at the 1385th Wednesday Demonstration (1 May 2019; Tomorrow Girls Troop, n.d., 'Against Forgetting Seoul'; see Figure 3). For this performance Shimada sat amongst a sea of seated protesters, facing the Embassy of Japan like the bronze girl, but not in her empty chair.

Tomorrow Girls Troop credit Shimada's role in their collaboration for a nuanced articulation of difficult issues. They highlight differences between the treatment of Japanese and Korean victims resulting from 'the intersection of colonialism, war time mobilisation and gender', and note Shimada's insistence that 'equating the experience of Korean "comfort" women and Japanese "comfort" women isn't right' (Tomorrow Girls Troop, n.d., 'Against Forgetting Seoul'). Further, they link this to Shimada's choice to sit 'a respectful distance

from the original statue' (Tomorrow Girls Troop, n.d., 'Against Forgetting Seoul'). Such careful deliberations in performance choices and in the accompanying messages disseminated using internet platforms enhance both the critical impact and the expressions of solidarity in *Against Forgetting*. Any sense that Tomorrow Girls Troop's work is merely amelioratory has to reckon with the unsettling aspects of their work, such as performing in strange pink rabbit masks (Tomorrow Girls Troop, n.d., 'TGT pink mask').

Beyond the collective gatherings that accompany many of the transglobal manifestations of *Statues of Peace*, Shimada's *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman* has 'transplanted a contested space surrounding the issue of "comfort women" to other places, forging multiple platforms for facilitating meaningful discussions' (Yamamoto, 2021, p. 83), and activated a new generation of socially engaged performance artists. In the months following Shimada's Seoul performance, artists around the world posted online images of themselves seated next to an empty chair, or in the empty chair provided by a *Statue of Peace*. All adopt the carefully placed hands and composed face of the bronze girl; but it is more accurate to say they adopt the stillness and solemnity of Shimada's work. Shimada produced a digital arrangement of 21 of these images, published



**Figure 3.** Yoshiko Shimada, *Becoming a Statue of a Japanese Comfort Woman*.  
Image: Kwon Homan, Kim Sunghye

in *The Korea Times* (Bahk, 2019).

Nakamura points out that, for most audiences, Shimada's short, sometimes spontaneous performances are mediated by, and experienced through, visual documentation. Given Japanese silencing of the 'comfort women' issue, Shimada's photographic and video documents 'challenge the current archive and amend it for future generations' (Nakamura, 2020, p. 86). For scholars of performance arts, the relationship between performing bodies and their archival documentation has long been a vexed one. Philip Auslander's *Liveness* (2008), for example, problematised the status of live performance in a culture dominated by mediated culture. More recent scholarship has emphasised the mutual and reciprocal relationship between performing bodies and their related documents. Rebecca Schneider's study of re-enactment art argues that, in contrast with art-historical analyses of performance in which documents follow (and replace) ephemeral performances, performing bodies are, in fact, '*already* a matter of record' (Schneider, 2011, p. 92). Live performances contain echoes of the past that are archived in collective memory and embodiment: 'striking a pose partakes of reenactment, and reenactment defers its site in multiple directions' (Schneider, 2011, p. 161). At the same time, Schneider argues that archives are not static, but active mechanisms that perform the act of saving; archives are '*another kind of performance*' (Schneider, 2011, p. 108). Rather than letting Japanese 'comfort women' be doomed to 'cultural habituation to the logic of the archive' (Schneider, 2011, p. 98), a logic that assumes authenticity and fixed authority, Shimada amends the archive with a performance that is documented in photographs, which are re-re-enacted, photographed, and passed on again.

Shimada's re-enactments of the simple gesture – sitting silently alone or next to another woman – powerfully communicate resistance to the erasure of difficult truths. All the performances we discuss are linked in 'a chain of co-presence' (Son, 2018, p. 158)

and, we argue, those connections are significant to their cumulative impact.

The seated figure next to an empty chair, provided by the Kims' original sculpture and maintained as a variable in Shimada's re-enactments, enables one re-enactment to link to the next. The power of a re-enactment performance is seen in the way repetitions of the work transfer embodied meanings from one performance to another, critiquing without words. Documentation of these performances extend the work's reach, and invite others to participate, adopting the pose themselves and sharing that through images.

The internet culture of shared images that makes this kind of broad participation possible is powerful, and collective actions resist the losses of memory and justice for 'comfort women', sustaining the difficult conversations that are so much a part of this issue. Democratisation of this sort does not necessarily mean the actions are less politically pointed or authentic. The immersion of internet culture in our lives illustrates the fluidity between performing bodies and their related documents. It is through an image that most of us will experience the work, but these are images in dialogue with a gesture which can be readily experienced and reanimated. In viewing these images, we may spontaneously imagine how each was made by staging the simple gesture of sitting in a chair. Even as we sit here right now, we may become, for a moment, a statue of a 'comfort woman' ourselves.

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