

Article

Sites and sights of tension: cultural memory
of gender and colonial power in East Asia

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By Gunhild Ravn Borggreen

Introduction

In this article, I will explore issues of gender and colonial power in the East Asian region and how they relate to cultural memory of the historical past of the 1930s and 1940s. I take my point of departure in the sculpture entitled *Statue of Peace* from 2011 by South Korean artists Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung and analyse how the sculpture is involved in issues pertaining to cultural memory of Japan's colonial rule of the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945. The *Statue of Peace* relates to a conflict between the two neighbouring nations Japan and South Korea concerning apologies and reparation after war-related atrocities. However, as I will point out, the symbolic readings of the statue are part of much wider and multifaceted discourses on sexual and racial violence, migration, nationalism and globalisation. With its reproducible properties and physical mobility, the *Statue of Peace* transcends various geographical sites and is entangled in controversies about acts of symbolic violence towards sculptures in public space. The visual appearance and representational status of the *Statue of Peace* engages with issues of verisimilitude, or visual "truth"



Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung, *Statue of Peace*, 2011

as the sculpture both visualises and challenges what sexual violence under colonial rule might “look like”. Drawing upon a strong sentimental power embedded in the visual appearance as well as its size and material, the *Statue of Peace* enacts various emotional reactions spanning from hatred and physical attacks to empathy and solidarity. As visual culture scholar W.J.T. Mitchell (1990) argues, public sculptures may represent images of violence, but, as objects, they may also in themselves perform acts of violence or be the target of violence. In this case, such tensions of violence are related to the particular circumstances of *site* and *sight*: the geographical, political and historical locations of the public monument, as well as the visibility of the sculpture that encompasses various cultural practices, values and ideologies.

In this text, I reluctantly reproduce the words “comfort women”, a translation from the Japanese *jūgun ianfu*, “military comfort women”, or the short version *ianfu*, “comfort women”. Historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki defines military comfort women as “women restrained for a certain period with no rights, under control of the Japanese military, and forced to engage in sexual activity with Japanese military personnel” (Yoshimi, 2000, p. 39). Yoshimi discusses the use of terminology and refers to the “utterly unacceptable” use of the word “comfort” to describe the coerced horror the women involved experienced. Although admitting its inappropriateness, Yoshimi himself uses the term “military comfort women” because a more acceptable term has not yet appeared. Women Studies scholar You-Me Park also stays with the term because of the performative potential in the phrase: “I believe the discomfort of the reader *vis-à-vis* the ironic term can alert us to its inadequacy” (Park, 2000, p. 201, note 3).

Historical background

The *Statue of Peace* was conceived and erected as a memorial of former “comfort women”, a phenomenon closely connected to Japan’s imperial expansionism from the late 19th century to 1945. As Japanese troops were assigned overseas during this period, a system of military “comfort stations” provided Japanese troops recreational sex under the control of military authorities. The military “comfort stations” originated in Shanghai in China in 1932, and the system was expanded from 1937, as the war between Japan and China escalated and became a full-scale war. After Japan became involved in war against the USA in 1941, the military “comfort women” system spread to Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands (Onozawa, 2018, p. 71). The Japanese military created infrastructure across the Empire to traffick women from various places to “comfort stations” close to the front lines, where the women were exploited by soldiers and military officers alike. It is estimated that between 50,000 and 200,000 women were subject to forced recruitment into sexual servitude. Among the women were Japanese, Chinese, Filipino and Dutch women (from the Dutch colony of Indonesia), but it is estimated that 80 % of women forced into sexual servitude were Korean (Kwon, 2019, p. 7). There are many discourses concerning the reasons behind establishing the “comfort stations”. Some discussions focus on the way in which the Japanese military was directly involved in setting up the “comfort stations”, and how the state hereby was complicit in a systematic sexual exploitation of women. According to Yoshimi Yoshiaki, the Japanese military set up “comfort stations” in China as a means to stop Japanese troops from raping local civilian women, an atrocity that infuriated the local Chinese population and created strong anti-Japanese sentiments that would undermine public order and obstruct military activities (Yoshimi, 2000, p. 55). After the Japanese invasion of Nanking in 1937 (also known as the Massacre of Nanking or the Rape of Nanking), over a million Japanese troops were sent to China (Yoshimi, 2000, p. 49). By creating a system where Japanese soldiers could seek sexual recreation in designated places, the Japanese

military leaders believed they could prevent rape of Chinese civilian women and at the same time control sexually transmitted diseases among the troops by providing regular medical examinations.



Four Korean comfort women after they were liberated by US-China Allied Forces in Yunnan Province, China, 1944.

Source: The Hankyoreh website at <https://tinyurl.com/y4dddxdjn>.

Photo by Charles H. Hatfield, US 164th Signal Photo Company.

Others, such as historian Onozawa Akane (2018), discuss the close relationship between “comfort stations” and a commercial licensing system of brothels and prostitution that the Japanese state had established already in the late 19th century. In the Japanese licensing system, whether in Japan or in colonised areas, unmarried women could seek employment as sex workers, and impoverished peasant families often sold their daughters to brothels for a number of years to avert debts. The conflation between “comfort stations” and the licensing system has given rise to revisionist denial of coercion and slavery because revisionists argue that Korean “comfort women” signed up voluntarily and were paid for their services. However, as Onozawa points out, “comfort stations” were also set up in places where there had not been any licensing systems to begin with, and they were set up by explicit order of the military. More importantly, while a few testimonies indicate that some women were better off in the “comfort stations” than in the licensed quarters, most of the women incarcerated in the “comfort stations” could not leave without military permission, and they were subjected to sexual violence, including serial rape and other forms of sexual brutalisation (Onozawa, 2018, p. 71).

Another discourse is the “virgin narrative” that argues that many Korean “comfort women” were underage and virgins when they were forced into sexual slavery. In South Korea, activists and

politicians alike have promoted the “virgin narrative” for various purposes, for example, as a means to refuse or contradict the notion of paid prostitution (Kwon, 2019, p. 21). According to anthropologist Chunghee Sarah Soh (2001), the “comfort women” system was legitimised through what she terms patriarchal fascism, which combined an underlying ideology of male superiority to the ideological perspectives of the fascist regime of wartime Japan. Korean “comfort women” were entrenched in a concentric power structure of violence on at least four levels: they were subject to gender inequality in the patriarchal Korean society; they were exploited in a capitalist economy; they experienced race discrimination under Imperial Japan, and finally they were part of Korea’s unequal diplomatic relations with Japan and later the United States (Soh, 2001, p. 105-106).

Claims for apologies and compensation

The topic of “comfort women” became widely known in Japan and elsewhere in 1991, when Kim Hak-sun and two other former Korean “comfort women” came forward as the first of several to testify on how they were forced to provide sexual services to Japanese officers and soldiers during the wartime period. The three women filed suit in Tokyo District Court against the Japanese government to seek an apology and reparations in 1992, and this triggered media stories and subsequent involvement from politicians in South Korea as well as in Japan. Several support groups with numerous ordinary citizens in both countries and on an international level were established, including the Non-Governmental Organisation Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (Korean Council for short), in which former “comfort women” and their supporters put forward demands to the Japanese state. The demands include that the Japanese government publicly acknowledge the fact that Korean women were forced by the military to act as “comfort women”; that the Japanese government issue an official apology; that survivors and their families are compensated through legal compensation; and that facts about “comfort women” become part of history education in order to prevent similar violations of human rights from happening again in the future (Yoshimi, 2000, pp. 26-27). On an international level, the former “comfort women’s” trials in Japan occasioned the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to investigate rape and sex-related war crimes as part of human rights issues (United Nations, 1996). Many other nations, such as the USA, Canada, the Netherlands, and the European Union, have adopted resolutions that demand state apologies and compensation for the former “comfort women” (Asia-Pacific Journal Feature, 2015).

In Japan, the “comfort women” issue became part of a broader discourse of national identity and responsibility during the 1990s, where Japan’s “lost decade”, economic recession, anti-Japanese nationalism in other East Asian countries and challenges of globalisation were part of the many issues of political and social concerns that gave rise to neoliberal and nationalist trends (Machidori, 2015, p. 138). Relevant for this case was the so-called “New Right” revisionism of the mid-1990s, in which conservative academics, media and politicians launched backlash campaigns against new versions of junior high school textbooks that included topics of Japanese colonial expansion and “comfort women” issues. The revisionists called the new textbooks “a horrendous catalog of dark, masochistic, and anti-Japanese historical views”, and organised, among other things, attacks on liberal textbook companies, and intimidated textbook authors (Tawara, 2018, p. 154).

Leading right-wing figures from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) were at the core of the revisionist campaigns, including Japan’s former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, who denied government coercion in the “comfort women” case. During his position as prime minister for a record length of time, Abe attempted to restore national pride by what historian Jeff Kingston calls “whitewashing

Japan's Asia rampage (1931 to 1945) and trying to recast it as a war to liberate Asia from Western imperialism" (Kington, 2018). When Abe was re-elected as prime minister in 2012, he had campaigned to amend or even withdraw apologies made by former state officials (Nishino, 2018, p. 118). Abe was also a key figure in 2015 when the governments of Japan and South Korea made an agreement of a "final and irreversible" solution of the "comfort women" issue, in which Japan would contribute 1 billion yen for a Foundation for Reconciliation and Healing founded by South Korea. The South Korean government in return would do their best to remove the *Statue of Peace* in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul (Son, 2017, p. 2). Whether politically motivated or not, Abe Shinzō himself became a victim of violence when he was shot and killed at a political gathering on 8th July 2022. The incident has triggered a renewed focus on the "comfort women" issues and demonstrates how the "comfort women" were and still are closely related to broader movements of deimperialisation and decolonialisation in the East Asian region.

The artwork

The complexity of the topic is already clear when looking at the *Statue of Peace* as an artwork. The title in Korean is *P'yŏnghwa ūi sonyōsang*, which translates as "peace statue of a girl". Most English-language accounts refer to the work as *Statue of Peace*. The work is a life-size realistic representation cast in bronze of a young woman or teenage girl, seated on a chair next to another empty chair. The figure is dressed in *ach'ima chōgori*, a traditional Korean dress, and features a short hairstyle. A small bird sits on the left shoulder of the figure, and a shadow on the ground behind it, from a mosaic stone in a darker colour, indicates the outline of an elderly woman.

The sculpture was conceptualised by the artist couple Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung together with the Korean Council. The bronze statue was unveiled on 14th December 2011 in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, South Korea. According to a plaque on the ground next to the *Statue of Peace* in Korean, Japanese and English language, the sculpture was to mark the 1000th Wednesday Demonstration. The Wednesday Demonstrations are held in support of the former "comfort women's" demands and have taken place since January 1992 (and still continue to take place) in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul every week. According to the Korean Council, the *Statue of Peace* was erected as a call for apology and remembrance, while also serving as an educational space and as a symbol of hope for preventing sexual violence in armed conflicts around the world (Korean Council, no date). The statue thus had two memorial elements included from the beginning, one element honouring the many "comfort women" who were abducted as young women or girls, and the other element commemorating the survivors' and their supporters' struggle to gain recognition, apology and legal compensation from the Japanese state.

The politics of apology

One of the demands from the former "comfort women" and their families and supporters is the issue of apology. In her case studies of Japan's national apologies for wartime actions, Rhetorical Studies scholar Jane Yamazaki (2006) points out how the political implications of national apologies are important because a national apology and its process may be either constrained by or motivated by maintaining political legitimacy at home as well as abroad.

Apologies for wartime wrongdoing became particularly poignant for Japan after the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989 and the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in 1995. During this period, different Japanese prime ministers have issued various degrees of apologies as a means to restore the national image in a dilemma between maintaining the illusion of a great and glorious

past and taking responsibility for “correcting” the historical past. In the case of the “comfort women” issue, the demand for apology occurred because of court cases and the discovery of incriminating historical documents in the early 1990s. This was supported by the human-interest dimension of the media coverage when elderly former “comfort women” came forward to tell their stories. Yamazaki calls this type of apology a “transcendent” apology, or an apology with a moral motive, and she argues that the “comfort women’s” case was compelling and different from other types of apologies because of its attention to morality. Yamazaki points out how Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Kōno Yōhei’s statement from 1993 is a historical piece of rhetoric because this is the first time an issue relating to violence against women was included as part of wartime crime. The “comfort women’s” case is an example of how the changing standards of morality also changed the motivation of a national apology because women’s groups and human rights activists around the world demanded acquiescence to moral principles.

The topic of national apology is closely related to the histories of imperialism and colonialism. A national apology is often understood to be part of a reconciliation in decolonisation processes. In his book *Anti-Japan* (2019), Cultural Studies scholar Leo Ching analyses Japan’s role in the East Asian region and describes the various forms of resistance toward the Japanese pre-war political imperialism and new types of post-war imperialism. According to Ching, anti-Japan sentiments in China, Taiwan and Korea are a result of Japan’s failure to decolonise, and can be seen as a “symptom of unsettled historical trauma of the Japanese empire and its legacy” (Ching, 2019, p. 3). Ching argues that unlike the French and British empires, where decolonisation was often accompanied by violent struggles for independence, the Japanese empire ended because of war defeat in 1945, after which Japan itself was colonised by the USA. The war defeat and the demilitarisation and democratisation of Japan using the US model resulted in a lack of deimperialisation of Japan and a similar lack of decolonisation of Japan’s former colonies, including Korea. Collective anti-Japanism throughout Asia is often enacted as public demonstrations with posters and slogans, as in the case of the Wednesday Demonstrations in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The demonstrations have social impact because the demonstrations “elicit certain visual representations that can be disseminated, circulated, and reproduced” (Ching, 2019, p. 12). In this case, the emergence of the *Statue of Peace* at the Wednesday demonstrations in 2011 in effect enhanced the visual representation because the *Statue of Peace* and its role in the Wednesday demonstrations are disseminated as images on social media and other platforms.

Site and memory

The *Statue of Peace* was placed in 2011 on the public pavement in the area of Jongno in central Seoul, a place with office buildings, cafés, restaurants, tourist sites, as well as foreign embassies and South Korean official government offices. The sculpture faces towards the street and the building across the street: the Japanese embassy in South Korea. In this way, the *Statue of Peace* was visible from the Japanese embassy building and for those entering and exiting the building. However, since 2015, the offices of the Japanese embassy have moved to rented office accommodation close by and the original six-storey brick building from 1976 was torn down to give way for a new building, planned to be finished by 2020, but never completed. In 2019, the Jongno district of Seoul withdrew the building permit. So, the *Statue of Peace* in fact faces an empty building site surrounded by scaffolding and temporary fences, its own presence in the space perhaps being one of the reasons why the Japanese government has not rebuilt their embassy in Seoul (Park, 2020, p. 25).

Another important aspect of site is the mobility of the *Statue of Peace*. As art historian Vicki Sung-yeon Kwon (2019) argues, a change in the reception of the *Statue of Peace* occurred in 2015 with the so-called “final and irreversible” agreement between Japan and South Korea referred to earlier. Because the agreement was done without consulting the survivors, many Korean citizens became upset, and young people began to camp next to the sculpture around the clock to protect it from removal by the Korean police force. As Kwon notes, it was ironic that the attempt to remove the sculpture instead resulted in many more versions of the sculpture: the artists began reproducing replicas of the bronze statue as well as small 3-D printed versions that could easily be placed at various locations in South Korea and abroad (Kwon, 2019, p. 11). According to the artists, by 2022, there were 99 replicas of the *Statue of Peace* in different locations around the world, 82 of them in South Korea and 17 in other countries. Local people raise funds to cover the production of the statue, and local people help handling the space of the *Statue of Peace* (email correspondence with Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung, 1 October 2022). Due to the many replicas, the *Statue of Peace* has become a mobile memorial. The memories that the *Statue of Peace* is intended to honour are not attached to a fixed geographical site, but are multilocal, just like the atrocities against “comfort women” carried out in the 1930s and 1940s were dispersed throughout most of South and Southeast Asia (WAM, 2022).

Three examples of the *Statue of Peace* at different locations can reveal how each place generates its own local context and history. One replica of the *Statue of Peace* was erected in Ashfield, a suburb of Sydney, Australia (Lattouf, 2016). Here the *Statue of Peace* is a memorial of Korean “comfort women”, but added to this is the memory of many Dutch women who also suffered under sexual slavery by Japanese military in Indonesia during World War II (Kozaki et al., 2016).

Another replica of the *Statue of Peace* was installed in Berlin in 2020 in a collaboration between the Korean Council and Korea Verband (Korea Association). According to Japan Studies scholar Dorothea Mladenova (2022), the sculpture in Berlin acquired multiple meanings, including a remembrance of the continued sexualised violence perpetrated against women all over the world, both in armed conflicts and in peacetime. Here we see that a transnational feminist movement of memory activists contextualise the “comfort women” issues as a universal example of human rights violence.

A third *Statue of Peace* was erected in Glendale, California, in 2013, where it commemorates a House Resolution from the United States Congress calling for the Japanese government to apologise and provide compensation to former “comfort women”. In Glendale, many council members and other governmental officials are of Armenian descent, and in their statement of support for the *Statue of Peace* they claim that “the denial and revisionism of history by the Japanese government is reminiscent of how the Turkish government frequently and vehemently denies accountability for the Armenian genocide” (Peace Monument of Glendale, 2019). Here is a case where the *Statue of Peace* is connected to wider global issues of migration and diaspora communities and provides reference to other historical atrocities.

It should be made clear that anti-Japanese statements and sentiments are confined to some particular circles and groups, and should not be seen as a general or global trend of Japan-bashing (BBC, 2017). Scholars and activists propose new perspectives on how to handle issues of reconciliation and redress in ways that bypass national frameworks and instead include critical anti-racist and post-colonial re-contextualisation of artworks and artistic practices (Abraham, 2021). Ching suggests the concept of “intimacy” as a kind of interpersonal and intergenerational reconciliation between former colonisers and colonised without state intervention (Ching, 2019,

p. 119). Scholar in Asian and International Studies Vera Mackie and historian Sharon Crozier-De Rosa (2019) point out that the many versions of the *Statue of Peace* outside South Korea are less clearly addressing the Japanese government and instead take on local meaning in terms of redressing injustices and war time atrocities on a wider scale. In a global context, the *Statue of Peace* becomes part of what historian Daniel Schumacher calls “inter-ethnic atrocity alliances” (Schumacher, 2021, p. 6). The *Statue of Peace* is a literal artefact of what historian Carol Gluck calls a “travelling trope”, where “comfort women” now stand globally for sexual violence against women in similar ways that “the Holocaust signified genocide the world around” (Gluck, 2019, p. 4). It seems that many contemporary discussions of “comfort women” as well as the various activist and artistic productions related to the issue are moving away from a national context and are more focused on transnational topics of solidarity based on gender, ethnicity, colonialism and class.

Violence of public art

In recent years, especially in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movements from 2020, the world has witnessed various actions against public monuments. As semioticians Federico Bellentani and Mario Panico (2016) argue, monuments and memorials often have a commemorative function that serves selective historical narratives of the political and cultural elite. People who encounter monuments and memorials in public space draw upon their own opinions, beliefs, feelings or emotions to interpret the monument, and they can turn monuments into spaces of resistant political practices. The recent toppling, beheading or disfiguring of monuments to Christopher Columbus, Cecil Rhodes, King Leopold II and other figures of imperial and colonial conquest is a result of indefinite multiplicity of meanings that can be attributed to the sculptures. Many Black Lives Matter protesters target these historical monuments because they represent to them people associated with colonialism, slavery and imperialism, and because activists resent the ideological and political implications of the historical narrative embedded in the monuments.

Many such historical monuments have been toppled or defaced as a means to confront the established narrative of white supremacy because the statues represent *perpetrators* of colonialist violence. In the case of the *Statue of Peace*, the monument signifies the complete opposite: here is a representation of a *victim* of colonialist violence. The *Statue of Peace* symbolically represents acts of violence committed in the past, and thus is attacked by those who deny this historical past. As mentioned above, beginning in 2015, the South Korean police forces attempted several times to remove the original statue in Seoul, and each time, citizens and activists have repelled the attacks by circling around the sculpture to protect it from harm with their own bodies. Students guard the sculpture all year round by camping next to it in makeshift tents (Shim, 2021). In 2017, the Korean authorities attempted to stop the erection of a replica in Busan, which prompted people to stand guard and protect the statue from demolition (Feller, 2017).

Outside South Korea, groups of Japanese historical denialists pressure local governments to refuse its erection or to remove it. In Glendale, a lawsuit has been made claiming the erection of the statue to be an unconstitutional interference in foreign affairs, and the statue itself has been vandalised with paint or other substances (Peace Monument of Glendale, 2019). In early August 2019, two different versions of the *Statue of Peace* were included in a curated exhibition entitled *After Freedom of Expression* at the international art festival Aichi Triennale in Nagoya, Japan. The artworks in the exhibition were meant to provoke discussions on topics that are regarded as taboo in Japanese public discourse, such as the “comfort women” issue. However, the organisers decided to close the exhibition after only three days due to large amounts of emails, telephone calls and fax messages

from right-wing nationalists containing protests and threats of violence. The mayor of Nagoya, Kawamura Takashi, a conservative politician and a member of the ultra-right lobby group Nippon Kaigi, objected to the *Statue of Peace* sculpture by claiming that the work “tramples on the feelings of the Japanese people” and that it should not receive taxpayers’ money for support (McNeill, 2019, p. 1). Even though the actual number of opponents to the *After Freedom of Expression* exhibition was relatively small, their means of drawing attention to their case was loud and aggressive with threats of violence towards audiences, organisers and artworks.

As mentioned at the beginning, W.J.T. Mitchell discusses aspects of violence related to public art. Mitchell identifies three basic forms of violence in the images of public art:

(1) the image as an *act* or *object* of violence, itself doing violence to beholders, or “suffering” violence as the target of vandalism, disfigurement, or demolition; (2) the image as a *weapon* of violence, a device for attack, coercion, incitement, or more subtle “dislocations” of public spaces; (3) the images as a *representation* of violence, whether a realistic imitation of a violent act, or a monument, trophy, memorial, or other trace of past violence. (Mitchell, 1990, p. 888-889, italic in original)

These three forms of violence often interact with each other, and they all apply to the *Statue of Peace*. Monuments of colonial conquerors are often larger-than-life representations of a white male, placed in an unreachable and heroic posture on top of a pedestal. In contrast, the *Statue of Peace* represents almost all possible opposites: a life-size representation of a non-white female seated on a chair on ground level in a posture that invites interaction (to sit in the chair next to the figure). The figure comes across as vulnerable yet heroic. As such, the *Statue of Peace* is a *representation of violence*, in Mitchell’s words, a “memorial, or other trace of past violence”. At the same time, the way in which the statue itself is located in contested public space, for example, in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, indicates its function as a *weapon of violence*, what Mitchell calls “a device for attack, coercion, incitement, or more subtle ‘dislocations’ of public spaces”. This is because the sheer existence of the *Statue of Peace* in this spot is a visual attack on the state of Japan, the stoic stare of the figure fixing its gaze on the site where the embassy building used to be. Finally, the *Statue of Peace* becomes an *object of violence* in the instances where Japanese historical denialists or others, who oppose its presence, attack the sculpture, take action in hindering its erection, or try to demolish it afterwards.

Visual verisimilitude and kitsch

These different kinds of violence or threats of violence related to the *Statue of Peace* are closely connected to the visual appearance of the sculpture and the performative properties of the size, scale and material. Returning to Leo Ching’s analyses of the “comfort women” issue and the general anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea since the 1990s, Ching comments on the *Statue of Peace* with special attention to the visibility of the sculpture. Ching notes: “What renders the statue empathetic and also alarming to the supporters and naysayers, respectively, is her verisimilitude, that she is neither a statue nor a real person, but both at the same time. Thus, the statue also mediates between ‘real’ life and ‘fantasy’.” (Ching, 2019, p. 78) It is this verisimilitude, this life-likeness, which prompts people to dress the figure (and its many replicas) with clothes and scarfs, or to offer presents in the form of flowers or stuffed toys. Many people sit down in the empty chair next to the figure and thereby become part of the memorial themselves. The sculpture performs an invitation to solidarity and unity. The act of sitting down is naturalised due to the human size of

the figure and the everyday use of a chair. The sculpture itself becomes anthropomorphised when people attribute human-like properties to the object, for example by performing acts of caretaking and protection towards the sculpture, as if the figure was a real living person. As Ching points out, while the naysayers might find the verisimilitude of the figure in the *Statue of Peace* disturbing, the supporters gain benefit from the empathic part of the statue's verisimilitude as a means to create an urge to protect the sculpture against violence.



The Statue of Peace in Seoul, 2016
Photo credit: Kim Seo-Kyung

We see a similar interaction with the sculpture's verisimilitude in various social media images related to the protest against the closing of the *After Freedom of Expression* exhibition in Nagoya in 2019. Many people around the world submitted staged photos as part of the protest. The Facebook group Being a Statue of Non-Freedom of Expression features 155 photos in which artists and activists have set up two chairs and placed their own body on one of them in a pose similar to the figure in the *Statue of Peace*. Some activists are holding an image of the head of the *Statue of Peace* figure in front of them. The artwork by Japanese artists Shimada Yoshiko printed in this volume offers another set of associations. Here the artist uses her own bronze paint-sprayed body clad in Japanese traditional kimono as a representation of the many Japanese women who also performed sexual labour during the wartime but who have since been forgotten. These and many other ways of interacting with the *Statue of Peace*, one of the replicas, or a representation of the image, all have an element of performance: the interaction as a “doing” or as a repetitive act that involves a corporeal

experience by engaging with the body of the sculpture and/or investing one's own body. Theatre and Performance Studies scholar Elizabeth W. Son refers to such performances as “redressive acts”, which she defines as “embodied practices that involve multiple audiences in actively reengaging with traumatic pasts to work toward social, political, cultural, and epistemological change” (Son, 2017, p. 3). Son notes how supporters refer to the *Statue of Peace* as *her* (rather than *it*) as a verbal means of anthropomorphism. She points out how the representation of youth (in the sculpture) and old age (in the shadow) in combination induces the sense of vulnerability and thus heightens the repulsiveness of the crimes of sexual slavery. The desexualised representation of the young girl and the old woman makes the figures legible as “sexually and morally pure” (Son, 2017, p. 155).



Posted by Min Molly Chem, 8 August 2019 on the Facebook group Being a Statue of Non Freedom of Expression.
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2392043547508585&set=a.10157370903348164>
Accessed 10 July 2022

Sites and sights of tension



Posted by Rosaria Iazzetta,
13 August 2019 on the Facebook
group Being a Statue of Non
Freedom of Expression.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10156574652511762&set=a.10157370903348164>
Accessed 10 July 2022

Posted by Lim Jang,
31 August 2019 on the Facebook
group Being a Statue of Non
Freedom of Expression.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2376876815925912&set=a.10157370903348164>
Accessed 10 July 2022

The visual aesthetic and formal qualities of Kim Seo-kyung and Kim Eun-sung's *Statue of Peace* borders on what philosopher Robert C. Solomon has called "sweet kitsch", defined as art "that appeals unsubtly and unapologetically to the softer, 'sweeter' sentiments" (Solomon, 1991, p. 1). The figure of the young woman of the *Statue of Peace* comes forward as cute and innocent. The "sweet kitsch" elements of the *Statue of Peace* are the presence of emotional content such as cuteness and innocence that stimulates feelings of empathy, care and protection. The anthropomorphic properties of the sculpture further strengthen this because it gives way to the performative act of displaying care in dressing the figure and in protecting the figure against attacks. The protective emotions come about because the figure, in addition to the "comfort woman" victimhood, is a visual representation of a young human being (almost a child) as well as a female, both of which conventionally evoke perceptions of innocence and vulnerability through infantilisation.

Furthermore, the intended symbolic meaning of the *Statue of Peace* is easy for most people to understand, and the sculpture does not manifest itself as complex art that requires some kind of elite "taste" or sophisticated connoisseurship. The sculpture thus opens a wide ground of common identification, which is amplified through the manipulation of emotions in the sentimentality of the work. It is "easy" to feel empathy for the figure that the sculpture represents and animates. It might also feel soothing to be emotionally charged by the "sweet kitsch" sentimentality and to share the emotion with hundreds or thousands of other people. In this way, the visual appearance

of the sculpture along with its aesthetic sentiment is closely related to the moral dimensions and emotional investment of decolonial practices that the *Statue of Peace* signifies.

Conclusion: Site and sight enacted

As an artwork, the *Statue of Peace* is a straightforward representation of a young woman dressed in traditional Korean dress. As my analysis has demonstrated, however, the cultural, political and historical context of the sculpture spans a much wider, multifaceted and diverse repertoire of visual and spatial performances, in which tensions of site and sight activate issues of gender and colonial power. The replicas and physical mobility of the *Statue of Peace* echo the dispersed geographical locations of the sexual violence and atrocities committed against “comfort women” throughout South-East Asia during the period of Japanese imperialism, while the visual representation and verisimilitude enacts various affective responses towards the sculpture, from acts of violence to acts of caretaking and protection. The violence enacted upon the *Statue of Peace* becomes symbolic of the violence enacted upon women and in a wider sense upon all subjects under colonial rule, which makes the sculpture and its numerous replicas function as a placeholder for cultural and political memories at various topographic locations. Some may argue that notions of political injustice and decolonial critique have been coerced by the emotional manipulation of the sentimental. On the other hand, perhaps it is because of the verisimilitude and the empathic sentimentality that the *Statue of Peace* has made multiple inter-ethnic atrocity alliances of solidarity possible around the world.

Note:

Japanese and Korean names are written with family name first followed by given names, unless otherwise noted in bibliographical references.

Gunhild Ravn Borggreen is an Associate Professor in Art History and Visual Culture in the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen. With a background in Japanese Area Studies, Gunhild Ravn Borggreen focuses her research on contemporary Japanese visual art with attention to issues of gender, nationhood and cultural identity. In her recent research, Gunhild Ravn Borggreen looks at transcultural interchange between Danish and Japanese art practices in order to contribute to dismantling Eurocentric and essentialist frameworks within art history and culture studies. Among her publications are *Dead or Alive! Tracing the Animation of Matter in Art and Visual Culture* (co-edited with Maria Fabricius Hansen and Rosanna Tindbæk, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 2020) and *Performing Archives / Archives of Performance*, (co-edited with Rune Gade, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press 2013), as well as numerous peer-reviewed journal publications and anthology contributions.

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