Art and Activism: Exploring the Shifting Roles of Visual Art through Representations of the “Comfort Women”

This thesis has been submitted on this day of April 16th, 2018 in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements for the NYU Global Liberal Studies Bachelor of Arts degree.
Abstract

The objective of this thesis is to explore the shifting roles of visual art in the context of the highly debated issue of the enforced sexual slavery by the Imperial Japanese army by examining three different representations of the “comfort women”: the survivors’ artworks, the statue of peace in Seoul, and the movie Spirits’ Homecoming. I argue that art is an instrument that responds to people’s needs, with which the public can actively address a political or social problem. This activist aspect of art allows the public to express themselves, whose views might not be reflected in the decisions of the political leaders.

I address the following questions: How did art come to play such a significant role in confronting the issue of the “comfort women”? How does the role of art shift from one representation to the other? What was the reason behind each shift? What effects did the Agreement of 2015 have on the public, and therefore on the role of art? In addition to these questions, I examine whether each representation engages with the question of gender.
Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Luis Ramos, my thesis director and mentor, for his continuous support, guidance, and encouragement throughout the entire process. I would also like to thank Professor Robert Squillace for his position as the second reader, and for his valuable and constructive suggestions and useful critiques of this research work.
Table of Contents

Introduction ...........................................................................................................................................4

Chapter I: Propaganda Art: Beginning of “Comfort Women” Art and Literature ...............11

Chapter II: Social Art: Engaging with the Contested “Comfort Women” Dispute ...........27

Chapter III: Dialogic Art: Space for a Conversation .................................................................48

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................65

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................................68
Introduction

I. “Comfort Women”

In August 1991, Hak Soon Kim testified about her experience as an enforced sexual slave for the Japanese military. She was the first woman in South Korea to break the silence of over 50 years after the end of World War II.\(^1\) When Kim gathered her courage and stepped up to tell the truth, it opened the door for other survivors – not just from South Korea, but from all over the world – to speak up as well.

The women in question were the so-called “comfort women,” who were sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial Army from around 1932 to the end of World War II. Before I delve further into this historical matter, it is important to understand that the term “comfort woman” is a euphemism for sexual enslavement - it is a translation of the Japanese “jugun ianfu”.\(^2\) According to Amnesty International, the term and its use are objectionable, since “the Japanese government has used it in an attempt to minimize the nature of the violations committed against the victims of this system, [and because] the term does not reflect the suffering of the women who had to endure repeated rapes and other sexual violence on a daily basis.\(^3\) However, for consistency, the term “comfort women” will be used in this thesis to refer to survivors of the Japanese military’s system of sexual enslavement.

II. Who were they?

\(^3\) Ibid.
The Japanese “comfort women” system “consisted of the legalised military rape of subject women on a scale – and over a period of time – previously unknown in history.” When the Japanese colonialization and military expanded in China around 1932, the “comfort stations” were set up across China. These military “comfort stations” were supposed to provide on-site sex for the Japanese army, to “comfort” them. The victims were Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, Filipina, Malaysian, Indonesian, Dutch, East Timorese and Japanese.

According to Amnesty International, the Japanese military preyed on women and girls who because of age, poverty, class, family status, education, nationality or ethnicity were most susceptible to being deceived and trapped into the sexual slavery system. Most victims came from poor rural backgrounds. The vast majority of women enslaved were under the age of 20, and some girls were as young as 12 when abducted. They had to face and “serve” 50 soldiers a day, and they were forced to “work” even when they were pregnant or were menstruating. The women and girls were often treated in inhumane ways, who worked under harsh and appalling conditions – not to mention mental and physical violence. All in all, the “comfort system” was an outright violation of human and women’s rights.

III. 70 Years of waiting – Agreement of 2015

For decades, the Japanese government has denied its involvement and attributed responsibility for the “comfort women” system to private agents, although there are evidences that prove the government’s involvement. Therefore, since 1991, when Hak Soon Kim first

---

8 Ibid.
spoke up about her experience, there have been many efforts from human rights leaders, activists, women’s rights leaders, and scholars to raise awareness of the issue and secure justice for the former sex slaves.

In 2015, an official agreement was made between the Japanese and Korean government regarding the “comfort women” issue. It was to finally settle the dispute between the two countries. The Japanese government was to “admit wartime Japan’s involvement in procuring women for its soldiers, and agreed to set up a fund of one billion yen (about $9 million) to benefit the 46 South Korean comfort women alive at the time. A government official said that Mr. Abe expressed ‘sincere apologies and remorse from the bottom of his heart to all those who suffered immeasurable pain and incurable physical and psychological wounds.’”¹⁰

However, there are many things that should be taken into account before regarding this agreement as a success for the survivors. Firstly, the deal was problematic because it did not reflect the survivors’ views. Many former “comfort women” disregarded the deal because it in no way met the survivors’ demands – that the Japanese government admit legal responsibility, and offer formal reparations.¹¹ Secondly, not only were the survivors unsatisfied with the accord, but the Korean society was against it as well. According to the fifth Japan-South Korea joint opinion poll, released July 21 by the Genron NPO, a Japanese nonprofit think tank, and the East Asia Institute, a South Korean think tank, 75% of South Koreans answered that the issue of the “comfort had yet to be resolved despite the agreement of 2015.¹² And lastly, the president that has accepted the deal

---

¹¹ Ibid.
was impeached on corruption charges, therefore making the deal a foggy issue on whether it was a legitimate agreement.

As the agreement caused an uproar in the Korean community, many became more interested in the matter of the political dispute between the two countries, and in the “comfort women” issue itself. More people started to look into the details and ask questions – setting up a climate in which the public started to discuss the issue of the “comfort women” more than ever.

IV. Roles of art

What is interesting about the issue of the “comfort women” is that art has played a significant role in order to make this historical and political event to be known. The “comfort women” literature (visual arts and literature), which has been around since the first victim Hak Soon Kim testified about her experiences, has been growing ever since. Many authors, artists, and directors such as Nora Okja Keller and Young Joo Byun have explored the subject. However, despite the growing number of artworks – books, sculptures, paintings, documentaries, films, etc. – related to the issue of “comfort women,” there is a relatively small number of scholars who deal with this matter in Korea. Up until 2013, there were only two dissertations that dealt with the topic of the enforced slavery by the Imperial Army.¹³

Because there is an increasing number of artworks being produced to raise awareness about the “comfort women,” I believe that art is the chosen method by the artists and public to express their opinions regarding the matter. Therefore, I argue that art is an instrument that responds to the public’s needs with which people can actively address a social or political problem, especially when their opinions are not reflected in the decisions of the political leaders. With that understanding of art, I will explore how the needs of the people affected the roles of

each representation of the “comfort women”. In order to so, I will be addressing several questions: Does the role of art change over time? And if so, how? What were the reasons, or the needs that prompted the changes? In order to answer these questions, I intend to examine three different pieces of art in this thesis: the survivors’ artworks, the statue of peace in Seoul, and the film *Spirits’ Homecoming*.

One scholar I will be engaging with in this thesis is Margaret D. Stetz, a leading women and gender studies professor who has written extensively regarding the “comfort women.” She already has proposed the role that art played in the very beginning when the “comfort women” issue was not well known among the public – the role of a “propaganda art,” a term which I will be explaining in my first chapter. Her insight is very helpful as she offers an explanation as to why art came to be so closely tied with the matter of enforced sexual slavery ever since the first victims stepped up to speak up for the truth. I will be examining if the role art has changed ever since, and if so, how it changed. In addition, she also envisions the “comfort women” literature to take a certain direction towards feminist and gender studies, which I plan on investigating whether it did evolve according to her predictions.

V. “Propaganda art”

In my first chapter, I will be analyzing four different artworks that the survivors drew themselves. When the “comfort women” controversy was yet not very well known among the public, art was the means to raise awareness about the issue. For instance, an artwork was shown during a proceeding at the Tokyo Tribunal of 2000. It is peculiar how visual art, which was a method of healing for the victims, came to play an important role in a legal setting to call attention to a war atrocity. I will be using Stetz’s theory of “propaganda art” (art that attempts to disperse a truth) to explain this phenomenon and how art has acquired a new role in regards to
the dispute over Korean women who were forced to serve as sex slaves for Japan’s Imperial Army.

VI. “Social art”

In the first chapter, I explore the role that art had when the “comfort women” issue was not yet widely diffused. Consequently, in my second chapter, I intend to examine the role of art after the issue of enforced slavery of the Imperial Army was recognized and admitted as part of history. In this chapter, I will be analyzing the statue of peace which was built in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The reason why I picked this statue is because of its remarkable spreading, which is still ongoing. The sculpture now not only stands in most of the major cities in South Korea, but also all over the world. Here, I will be using the term “social art” (art that engages and communicates with the public) that Jun Ki Kim, a Korean scholar and art critic, utilizes in order to explain the success the sculpture had. I will also examine how the role of art has changed in this circumstance, how it responded to the public’s need to express their support and anger. Furthermore, I hope to engage with Stetz’s prospect in this chapter and see whether the statue of peace does touch upon the questions of gender or feminism, and if so, in what ways it does so.

VII. “Dialogic art”

After examining the artworks and the sculpture, I will look at a different medium of art: a movie. Spirits’ Homecoming, which is the most recent representation among the three that I chose for this thesis, can be considered as a breakthrough movie in the Korean film industry. Before it was filmed, there was essentially no commercial movie that treated the topic about the “comfort women.” Thus, Spirits’ Homecoming offered an artistic narration that was so dire in

---

the present when everyone else was reluctant to do so. The visual art’s new role here was to present an artistic narration that was no longer a documentary that simply dealt with facts. In this chapter, I will be referring to several trauma theory scholars, but mainly to Dory Laub and Daniel Podell and their theory of “dialogic art” (art that creates a space in which a more authentic perspective of a trauma can be gained) to analyze several scenes from the film. I intend to observe how in addition to offering a new artistic narration, the film helped to produce a valuable representation of trauma that would help the survivors to reconnect with the society, and vice versa. And just like the second chapter, I will explore if this representation of the “comfort women” has advanced towards gender or feminist studies in the present, and if there is a linear progression in this direction – as the three art pieces I chose are timewise successive.
Chapter 1

Propaganda Art: Beginning of “Comfort Women” Art and Literature

I. Introduction

On December 2000, a painting by Duk Kyung Kang, a victim of enforced sexual slavery, was projected at the opening ceremony of the Women’s International War Crime Tribunal on Japan’s Military Sexual Slavery. The Tribunal was held in Tokyo in order to to make a judgement on Japanese military sexual slavery before and during the Second World War from the perspective of international law and gender justice. In the end, both the Japanese State and Emperor Hirohito were found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the Tribunal recommended that the Japanese government make a meaningful apology and provide compensation to the surviving victims. Though the Tribunal did not have the authority to enforce this judgement, it was a great achievement for human rights activists and former “comfort women” themselves, since it legally acknowledged that ‘comfort women’ are victims of organized sexual violence, and presented a basis from which they could pursue the legal responsibility of the Japanese State.

What is worth noticing from this Tribunal is the inclusion of the paintings by the victims as part of evidence for the proceedings, along with the photographs of the victims themselves. Not only was a painting shown at the opening ceremony, but other paintings by different

---

16 Ibid. 50
17 Ibid.
survivors were also displayed in front of the audience of about 1000 people as proof of the existence of the “comfort women,” an issue long ignored by the Japanese government.\textsuperscript{18} What was the power of these paintings that allowed for their presentation in a legal court as part of evidence? How did art come to acquire a function within a political setting? These are the questions I attempt to answer in this chapter, in which I also intend to examine how and why art came to play such a crucial role in raising awareness of the “comfort women” issue nationally and internationally by focusing on the artworks done by the victims.

In order to explain the power of these paintings, it is important to take note of the particular roles the artworks played. On one hand, they work as a healing practice that offers an understanding of the victims’ experiences, and on the other, they also work as an official tool to remember a painful past which calls attention to a historical atrocity. The fusion of these two different roles is what made it possible for art to acquire a legal function. Thus, examining the artworks of the survivors of the enforced sexual slavery by the Japanese imperial army would offer a new understanding of the role of art in the realm of politics and human rights.

II. Analysis of the paintings and their importance

First, I will begin by analyzing few of the artworks done by the victims.\textsuperscript{19} I hope to explore how on one hand, they portray the healing process of the victims, and how on the other, the works of visual art were so compelling and served almost as replacements for the survivors’ testimonies. According to the National Archive of Korea, the victims’ paintings can be divided into four different categories:

1) innocence (remembering childhood, home, family)

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} The interpretations will be solely mine, as there are not enough descriptions or interpretations on these artworks.
2) sorrow, bitterness, wound (life haunted by past’s memory even after coming back home after the end of the war)

3) wish (hoping for a proper apology)

4) a different innocence (learning to accept life as it is).²⁰

Though the topics that these categories mention are not the only ones portrayed in the survivors’ paintings, they do, however, offer a helpful way of understanding the healing process that the victims went through – from being lost in their past, to accepting life as it is. Thus, by studying these paintings, the viewers are able to experience the myriad of emotions the victims felt while drawing those artworks. I will examine four different paintings – one from each category – and analyze the ways in which each piece of artwork mirrors the victims’ feelings and experiences and trace back their healing processes.

²⁰ Ibid.
One of the paintings that represents the first category, innocence, is Figure 1, *Hometown*, by Bok Dong Kim. It is a simple black and white drawing that depicts Kim herself walking towards her old traditional house. It is difficult to tell her age, perhaps out of her wish to go back even as she aged. We get a glimpse of a person inside the house; we cannot tell exactly who it is – a parent or a sibling – but someone waiting for her to return. The lack of details on the painting speaks for Kim’s fading memory of her hometown and her old life as it had been so long ago. It is an especially heart-aching artwork as it expresses Kim’s wish to go back, to the time when there was no war. We have a glimpse of how much she missed home, how much she wanted to return to her family and friends.

If the first category expressed the victims’ innocence and their longing for home, the second category expressed victims’ mental state after their return. Figure 2, *Flower Yet to Bloom* (1995), a painting/embroidery by the late victim Soon Duk Kim, is a good example of this category. It represents a young girl wearing traditional Korean clothing. The little girl has a blank expression on her face, simply standing in the middle of the painting. With her arms hanging on the side, she seems tired and weak. An embroidered branch of flowers that have not yet bloomed is placed in front the girl, almost caressing her face. It expresses Kim’s life that is haunted by past’s memory even after coming back home after the end of the war. The flowers that have not yet bloomed in front of the girl symbolize Kim’s life that stopped at the age of 16 when she was abducted.21 The flowers yet to bloom are white, indicating her innocence before she was taken away. The blank expression on the girl’s face suggests the deep resentment and sorrow she’s harbored during her entire life. Thus, Kim reveals through this painting that she still

feels damaged like the broken branch in front of her as she was never able to fully recover from her past.

The first and second categories primarily focused on the victims themselves, where they expressed through art who they were before being taken and what they felt after returning home. The third category, however, is a bit different; it focuses on the aggressors. It pointed fingers at those responsible, and boldly accused them of their crimes. Figure 3, *Punish the Responsible!* by Duk Kyung Kang, is the painting that appeared at the opening ceremony of Tokyo Tribunal in 2000. It is a painting with a strong message. Three guns are pointed at the man tied to the tree in a military uniform – who represents the Japanese soldiers who have sexually and mentally violated the survivors over and over again – which expresses Kang’s wish to see the perpetrators punished for their crimes. The background is of bright red, which expresses the victims’ anger, grief, and frustration. The white doves surrounding the tree seem to represent peace, suggesting that punishment of those responsible is necessary for the victims to find peace. Perhaps the fact that we do not see who is holding the gun is because it could be anyone: a Korean, international courts, or human rights activists. The masking of the holder of the guns is so that the artwork is more accessible and appealing for a global audience since what matters for Kang and other survivors is not “who” punishes those responsible, but rather that the punishment is eventually carried out accordingly.

Artworks in the third category can appear dark and frightening; yet it is understandable that they are aggressive regarding the matters of apology and punishment as the survivors have been waiting for over sixty years. The fourth category, however, is a bit more peaceful as it suggests the victims’ adjustment to their present lives. Figure 4, *Meeting*, by Soon Duk Kim, depicts two older women reuniting who are about to hug each other. The two women are
standing on what appears to be South Korea, which is surrounded by numerous mugungwha (Rose of Sharon), the national flower of South Korea. Both women look aged with silver hair, but they are still wearing the traditional clothing from the time when they were taken away. Perhaps this signifies that Kim, who drew this painting, is ready to meet those who left this world before her because she has done everything she could to seek the apology they deserve. She has no regrets in her life; she has spoken up for herself and others, and there is nothing more she can do.

![Figure 3 Punish the Responsible!](image1)

![Figure 4 Meeting](image2)

Though none of the victims are or were professional artists, that is of no importance. The victims yearned for a way to express themselves, and a set of brushes and paints were exactly what they needed. They might not have been healed completely – as a proper apology from the Japanese government is yet to be received and as you can never fully forget what happened in the past – yet by expressing their feelings through art, the victims were able to free themselves of
their suppressed emotions. And victims themselves might not have recognized in the beginning the power and importance the artworks held, however, they proved to be more than simple paintings. They eventually became a part of history.

III. Recognition of the paintings as historical records

Before the paintings by the victims were considered as a visual tool to remember history, drawing classes were simply a part of their cultural program starting in 1993. However, as the classes continued, they developed into a psychotherapeutic sessions for the survivors as they began to express their suppressed emotions, such as anger and grief, and painted their own experiences as witnesses of history.\(^\text{22}\) Talking about what had happened to them was an extremely difficult task for them; yet it was easier to manage with paintings, as no words were needed. Thus painting eventually evolved into a healing practice, allowing the survivors to express themselves freely.

From the moment the victims started to communicate their own emotions and experiences through art, their artworks developed from simple drawings into records of history. They eventually helped raise awareness of the “comfort women” issue as their works of art not only depicted the atrocities committed by the Japanese soldiers, but they also spoke of the victims’ mental state. As Seon Hyun Kim, an art therapist and author, writes in her book *Paintings that Became History*, the paintings produced from art therapy became photographs which captured the suffering, gloomy, and lonely hearts of the survivors.\(^\text{23}\)

To speak for their legitimacy, the paintings were included in the National Archive of Korea in 2013 as part of records meant to identify the actual conditions of damage from the enforced sexual slavery of Japanese imperial army and to understand the current activities of the


survivors. In addition, they were meant to serve as a pictorial strategy of remembering in case the victims all passed away before the matter was resolved. Along with the paintings, other documents such as documentation regarding the management of the “comfort stations” were also included. This inclusion of the paintings in a national historical archive is significant since it is a form of legitimization of these artworks as part of history, a recognition that they are in fact an instrument used to remember history rather than being mere paintings.

IV. Why is art so important in the issue of the “comfort women”? : “Propaganda art”

I stated in the beginning of this chapter how the painting Punish the Responsible! by Duk Kyung Kang was shown at the opening ceremony of the Tokyo Tribunal of 2000. This painting was not chosen by accident; it was selected for a particular reason. The tribunal itself was in fact motivated by this very painting that Kang had drawn before her death in 1997. When the Asian Solidarity Conference on “Comfort Women” Issues was held in Seoul, 1998, the Violence Against Women in War Network, Japan (VAWW-NET Japan) proposed a tribunal after seeing the painting that so strongly expressed Kang’s wish for the correct retribution. Kang and the other survivors were calling for action – through paintings, and also by other means such as testimonies – and VAWW-NET Japan thought that they deserved a response.

Thus, not only were artworks by the victims important pieces of evidence, but they were also what prompted the Tribunal. It was what led to a change. Therefore, it seems that art acquired a legal function as a visual tool of remembering, and has played a significant role in raising awareness of the issue of the “comfort women.” So how and why is art so important for

---

25 Ibid.
this historical issue? Margaret Stetz, a leading scholar in women and gender studies, attempts to answer this question in her article “Representing ‘Comfort Women’: Activism through Law and Art.” She proposes that the reason why art played such a critical role in raising awareness about the “comfort women” issue is because that was the only way to do so. She argues consequently that “comfort women” literature (literature and visual arts combined) was “propaganda art” – where the word “propaganda” is used in a positive way.”\(^{27}\) Stetz explains this concept by comparing the “comfort women” literature to Holocaust literature.

“Comfort women” literature and Holocaust literature are similar as they both strive to memorialize victims of war atrocities, record survivors’ ordeals, and prevent future war crimes. Despite these overlaps, “comfort women” literature differs from Holocaust literature in two respects. First, Nazi war crimes were immediately followed by the Nuremberg Trials. Because all the details of the concentration camp system were published and crimes against victims and testimonies of the witnesses were all documented during the trials, it set up the climate in which many kinds of legal action have been possible.\(^{28}\)

However, this was not the case for the issue of the “comfort women.” At the end of World War II, there was no attention to nor punishment for the “comfort system” at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal.\(^{29}\) This meant that there was no official record keeping or evidence collection regarding the issue of enforced sexual slavery of the Japanese imperial army. And without these documentations and corroborative evidence, it was difficult to bring light to this issue as nothing had been made public.


\(^{28}\) Ibid. 248

\(^{29}\) Ibid.
Therefore, for Holocaust literature, there was no burden of setting the climate for legal actions to take place. “Comfort women” literature, on the other hand, had to serve the interest of advocacy in the present. Art is what documents and indicts in the place of official records and evidence. In addition, the Japanese government was circulating other sorts of representation such as school history books that had erased any mention of the “comfort system,” which meant that there had to be a counter representation to speak for the truth. Thus, “comfort women” literature had two objectives: 1) to raise awareness of the issue to bring about justice for the victims, and 2) to fight against Japanese government’s attempt to ignore this problem.

Stetz argues that by aiming to achieve these two objectives, “comfort women” literature had to become a “propaganda art” – which she is not using pejoratively, but positively. What she means by “propaganda art” is that for this specific historical issue, it was essential for the representations to be spread since there was no other way to make the public aware of what had happened in the “comfort system.” In the beginning, when the first victims stepped up to accuse the Japanese imperial army, very few people knew about the war crime committed to the “comfort women.” Many were not even aware that these women existed. Thus no one was fighting for justice. Therefore, by disseminating facts and details about “comfort women” through art, “comfort women” literature became a “propaganda art” which took an activist role to raise awareness so that legal actions could be taken to help the survivors. And we have seen that it was in fact successful; a visual artwork by a former “comfort woman” prompted the Tokyo Tribunal of 2000. This example shows what art can, and must do in political realm.

V. Global Recognition of Artworks: Soon Duk Kim

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid. 249.
32 Ibid.
The Tokyo Tribunal of 2000 was not the only success the artworks drawn by the former “comfort women” had. “Propaganda art” as a matter of fact accomplished its goal; it helped grant the issue of “comfort women” a worldwide recognition. Because there was an increase of “comfort women” literature, not only in Korea but also in different countries, more people became aware of the existence of the “comfort women.” As a result, more people started to support the cause, allowing global exhibitions to take place. The painting Flower Yet to Bloom (mentioned earlier in this chapter), for example, was displayed in different countries such as Japan, United States, and Canada.\textsuperscript{33}

This specific artwork by the late victim Soon Duk Kim, who passed away in 2004, is noteworthy because it is one of the paintings that played a significant role in raising awareness of the “comfort women” issue internationally. Kim was one of the most outspoken survivors, and she has produced some of the most well-known artworks. Because of Kim’s tremendous efforts to make the “comfort women” issue known, and the special aspect of her painting (embroidery of the flower), Flower Yet to Bloom was the chosen artwork to be given to those visiting South Korea who are leading characters in human rights development or who have the ability to make a difference.

For example, in February 2014, a copy of Flower Yet to Bloom was given to former prime minister of Japan, Tomiichi Murayama, as a reminder that the Japanese government still needed to recompense the victims\textsuperscript{34}. Moreover, in August 2014, another copy of Flower Yet to Bloom was given as a gift to Pope Francis who had visited Korea\textsuperscript{35}. It symbolized the survivors’ appeal to Pope Francis to help resolve the matter of the “comfort women,” which is essentially a

human rights issue. And recently, in July 2017, New York state assemblyman Edward Braunstein, has received a different painting, *Stolen Away*, after his request to meet the survivors. Though different, it was also drawn by Soon Duk Kim. Braunstein, who had previously met other former “comfort women” and had been very vocal about the issue, commented that he “felt great heartache at the pain that the comfort women have suffered, and that he will work harder to restore their honor.”

The offering of the artworks by Kim not only speaks for the value of these paintings – perhaps representing a national identity – but it has also played a critical role in allowing a worldwide diffusion of her paintings. This diffusion furthermore helped to spread the issue globally by appealing to the political and religious leaders to take action upon the war crime that has violated the human rights of 200,000 women.

![Figure 5 Stolen Away](image)

VI. Significance of medium: Paintings vs. Photographs

We have seen that art – whether it be paintings, literature, or film – played a great role in bringing light to the issue of the “comfort women.” In the case of the Tokyo Tribunal of 2000, artworks done by the victims were also presented during the proceeding alongside photographs of the victims and their testimonies. And according to Stetz, art was able to acquire a role within the legal setting because it took the place of official documents and evidence as a tool of remembering and set up the climate for legal actions. As I am focusing on the artworks done by the victims in this chapter – mainly paintings – I wish to compare the success their artworks had in raising awareness to photographs of the victims, which are a more concrete kind of evidence.

Many would argue that when presenting a fact, or evidence, photographs would serve better than artworks, such as paintings. Perhaps to raise awareness of an issue such as what the Japanese imperial army did to the “comfort women,” spreading photographs of the victims might have been a more preferable medium. As André Bazin, a well-known French film critic and theorist, asserted, photography is the only medium where we have the absence of man and his subjectivity. And a picture, in its objective reality, offers a power of credibility that the paintings do not possess. According to Bazin, paintings are always subjective and lack the essence a photograph would have. For example, burning a painting of a person would not be same as burning a picture of the same person because the photograph seems more “real.” I do concur with Bazin that photographs are indeed more objective and do offer a credible reality – so why did paintings have a greater success in spreading and calling attention to the “comfort women” issue? Wouldn’t photographs have been a preferred method to give a voice to the voiceless as it provides a more concrete and truthful image?

For historical atrocities and war crimes, especially one as heinous as wartime rape, it is extremely difficult to look at its direct representations. Photographs can be crude. They do not hide anything; they show the presented material as it is. And most photographs used as evidence for the issue of “comfort women” portray the bodily harms that had been done unto the victims, which are painful to observe. Instead of documenting the stories and mental states of the victims in a more diluted way like the paintings, a camera preserves the actual scars that the survivors have to live with forever onto the photographs. Those scars not only come from forced abortions, but they also come from mutilations done by the Japanese soldiers. The soldiers carved the victims’ Japanese names that they were given on the girls’ bodies with a knife – for fun. They would hurt the girls whenever they tried to disobey or run away. Each time, it left a mark on their bodies. And not only that, the soldiers took the liberty to tattoo the girls with a needle, for fun as well.38

Seeing these photographs is not an easy task. It is heart aching and difficult even for adults. The photographs artlessly portray the aftermath of a war crime. For this very reason, I argue that the photographs were not suitable to be widely circulated among the public as it might have scared them away, or been too haunting for a younger public. Paintings, on the other hand, are more accessible in the way that although they do portray the wartime atrocities and victims’ experiences, they do not realistically depict those atrocities or experiences. As we examine Flower Yet to Bloom, viewers feel the sorrow Kim felt as a 16-year-old who was taken away to be forced into a sex slave. The emotion is palpable and horrifying experiences imaginable, but we do not have before our very own eyes an actual image of young girls who are trapped in a brothel. The distance that the medium of art – especially painting – offers to the viewers was

what made the paintings a better means to raise awareness about a daunting human rights
violation committed during a war.

In addition to the distance that is offered by the paintings, the artworks done by the
survivors also work as a more efficient medium of conveying the victims’ message because they
are more subjective. Susan Sontag, an American filmmaker, writer, and political activist, writes:
“to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed.”

Photographs can be highly invasive as we have seen above. As they capture the reality, they can also objectify the subject at hand.
Furthermore, there is always a mechanical lens between the person taking the picture and the
person of whom the picture is being taken. There is less human touch and warmth. As Sontag
asserts, “…there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to
violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they
can never have.”

However, in the context of the survivors’ artworks, they are more subjective
and liberating. They are paintings their own messages with their own hands. Moreover, paintings
offer the victims a greater sense of agency and artistic freedom as they get to choose what to
portray and what not to portray. Portraying their deeply scarred past though the medium of
painting is much more manageable than displaying their physically scarred bodies. Having this
“choice” to choose how to portray themselves allows the victims a certain degree of autonomy,
and therefore empowers them.

VII. Conclusion

History is not the past, it is the present; we all carry our history with us, and it is our duty
and responsibility to remember so that the same history is not repeated in the present. As we
have seen throughout this chapter, art has played a significant political and legal role in

---

40 Ibid., 19
preventing the same mistakes to be made again. Not only was art a method of healing for former “comfort women,” but it was also a visual method of remembering the history as well. As “propaganda art,” a term borrowed from Margaret Stetz, the artworks by the victims were able to bring light to the long ignored issue of “comfort women” and helped attain a global recognition. Overall, there is no question that art has acquired a new role in the realm of politics and human rights in regards to the issue of “comfort women”: a role of restoration, activism, and commemoration.

For my next chapters, I will be analyzing the statue of peace in Seoul and the film Spirits’ Homecoming and explore how (of if) the role of art has shifted from being a “propaganda art” to playing a different role in later years. In examining these two different forms of art, I also plan on adding on to Stetz’s theory. Stetz predicted that with the growth of “comfort women” literature, there would be a greater focus on gender studies and feminist perspectives unlike the Holocaust literature which ignored gender issues until much later.41 She also suggested that “comfort literature” would eventually deconstruct the notion that feminism is a “white Western phenomenon,” as the majority of the artists involved are in fact Asian feminists. As I study the more recent artworks related to the issue of “comfort women,” I will attempt to see whether her speculations proved to be accurate or not, and in what ways her presumptions offer a new understanding of the relationship between art and the “comfort women” issue.

Chapter 2

Social Art: Engaging with the Contested “Comfort Women” Dispute

I. Introduction

As I mentioned in my introduction, the Japanese Imperial Army occupied and controlled countries in the Asia Pacific region, including Korea during the WWII. Under colonialism, the Imperial Army abducted, deceived, and forced “200,000 women and girls” into sexual slavery. These “comfort women” were not only used as a “weapon of war,” but were also supposed to provide ‘entertainment’ and ‘fuel’ for soldiers. Despite these horrendous acts of human rights violation, the “survivors of sexual violence are largely denied redress: there is widespread impunity for these crimes where perpetrators go unpunished and victims are denied any form of reparation.” While the issue of the “comfort women” became more publicly known, there has not been many advances in regards to getting justice for the victims. Due to the lack of advancements, many artists decided to take it upon themselves to promote change. The artists Eun Sung Kim and Seo Kyung Kim, who built the statue of peace in Seoul, Korea, were one of the first ones to do so.

In my previous chapter, I have explored the dual functions of the victims’ artworks as a healing practice and an official tool of remembering the past, as well as its role as a “propaganda art.” In this chapter, I intend to examine the first statue of peace built in Korea in memory of the “comfort women” and explore the statue’s different role in remembering a contested past by comparing it to a war monument in Germany, and analyzing the social aspect of the statue. I

---

43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
intend to answer the questions such as: has the role of art changed since the artworks of the victims? If yes, in what ways has it changed? In addition to answering these question, I will examine whether Margaret Stetz’s presumptions proved to be helpful in viewing the artwork in a different context.

II. What is the statue of peace?

The first statue of peace built in Seoul, Korea (also called statue of girl) was erected in remembrance of all the victims of sexual slavery by the Japanese colonial army on December 14th, 2011. It sits in front of the Japanese embassy, and it was made by husband and wife Eun Sung Kim and Seo Kyung Kim, artists who are known to have built numerous memorial stones and statues. Their works are often politically, socially, and historically “conscious”; some examples include memorials for the 100th anniversary of peasant army (1994), sculpture of national poet Chae Kwang-Seok (2000), memorial of Korean independence activist Cho Mun-Ki (2014). However, not all of their artworks are politically/socially/historically driven. They also enjoy making artworks portraying ordinary people’s (folksy) lives. Though not financially well-off, the artists state that they are satisfied with their lives because they are doing what they wish to do. They are now planning on sculpting another statue of peace, the Vietnam Pieta, but this time for the Vietnamese victims who were massacred by the Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War – they are not afraid to confront the issues of historical and social aspects of certain topics unlike other artists who might prefer to stay away from potential problems.

---

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
The statue of peace was their first major work, which was commissioned by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. The council asked the artists to make the statue so that it would remind the public of the past and urge the people to stand up for the cause. According to the artists, this specific piece of art was a very difficult task to accomplish because of the painful past that they had to deal with.\(^5\) Because this statue was mainly dedicated for women who were sexually violated, the majority of the sculpting was done by the wife, Seo Kyung Kim. She did not want the statue, the victimized girl, to be touched by a man – even if it were her husband. After the first erected statue, Mr. and Mrs. Kim have either helped with the designing of the other statues that were erected shortly after the first statue, or gave advice for other artists or cities that asked for help. The fact that the wife – Seo Kyung Kim – has decided not to let her husband touch the statue as much as possible shows that she is very conscious of the nature of the gender-based war crime. Perhaps this is a sign that artists who deal with “comfort women” issues in the present are indeed informed by feminist perspectives, just as Stetz presumed.\(^5\)

The statue, which is made out of bronze, represents a young girl wearing a traditional Korean dress called hanbok, who is sitting next to an empty chair. According to an interview done by CNN, each element of the statue was thought out to have a significance: the hair, which is cut short, stands for all the relationships cut off against their wills. The face shows an angry expression, but one that is not afraid to speak up. The bird, which sits on top of her shoulder, represents peace, freedom, and liberation – it is supposed to connect the victims who are still alive and those who ‘have returned to the sky.’ The clenched fists show that the victims will no longer stay quiet, and

---

that they will tell the truth. The heels, which are not attached to the ground, show the instability of the lives of the victims, who are considered as ‘sluts’ or ‘prostitutes’ by society. The shadow that appears on the ground is of an older woman; it represents the passing of time and all the hardship the victims had to go through. The chair that stand next to the victim remains empty so that the public can sit and think: ‘what if it were me?’ or ‘what if it were my family, my sister?’ Though this raises a question of whether the viewers’ experiences will necessarily correspond what the artists have intended, the description serves to better understand the artwork and the artists’ aim.

In addition to these elements, the location itself of the statue is worth noting. The fact that this public monument is placed right in front of the Japanese embassy – a location chosen by the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan – shows the kind of statement that the people involved wanted to make. It is a provocative public statue, that demands

---

a response. The location is also significant because that is where the weekly Wednesday demonstrations demanding redress of the sexual slavery issue take place. These meetings, which have taken place since 1992, are listed as the world’s oldest rally regarding a single theme. All the elements of the statue, along with its particular location, speaks for the uniqueness of this public monument.

III. Victimhood Narrative

When a war monument represents an innocent victim, it focuses on the brutality of the war and the victimized narrative of war memories. It is unlike the case of war monuments that represent generals, which are clearly meant to celebrate a victory. Perhaps the choosing of a representation of an innocent victim as a public art serves as a means to not only dramatize the issue and attract more attention, but also to solidify the national identity through a narrative of “victimhood.” In

---

this section, I intend to explore the role of the statue of peace as a vehicle that disseminates a “victimhood narrative” while comparing it to an East German monument in Chemnitz.

A big part of today’s Korean national identity has to do with the past of Japanese colonialism. Within Korea, Japan has always been the “aggressor,” and Korea the “victim” that was violated. Through this statue, which deals with victims who were actually violated by the Japanese Imperial Army, the public is reminded of the fact that Korea, as a nation, was also “violated” by Japan’s colonization. Thus the national narrative of a victimized country gets reinstated in the public’s minds, and the public unites through this specific narrative – forming an “imagined community.” The statue becomes a medium through which Korea’s narrative is spread among Koreans, and promotes their own narrative over others. Therefore, the role of this specific representation of the “comfort women” deals with the consolidation of a national identity through remembrance of the past by focusing on the innocent victims of a war.

The representations of innocent victims in memorials – especially war related ones – are quite common. Perhaps it is because representations of innocent victims portray to the fullest the horrors of wars and atrocious events, thus making it easier to exploit in order to form a new national identity or narrative. The untitled monument to bombing of Chemnitz built in 1960 erected in the municipal cemetery in Chemnitz, Germany, is also an example of a representation of innocent victims in a war memorial. The monument, which was built in memory of 3715 lives lost by the bombing of Chemnitz by the Allies on March 5th, 1945, was designed by a local sculptor, Hans Dietrich. The monument consists of a “wall in the form of a triptych with two picture engraved


on either side.”⁵⁷ The statue that stands in the middle portrays a woman holding a dead child. On the left panel, a “reconstruction of what a bombing attack may have resembled is accompanied by an inscription that reads, ‘once again, the awful wounds the barbarian has inflicted on humanity will heal.’”⁵⁸ On the right panel, an image is presented of a possible reconstruction of Chemnitz after Nazism. In it an East German flag flies high, and those who survive look forward to a hopeful ‘Soviet’ future.⁵⁹

![Figure 3 Monument to bombing victims in the Chemnitz cemetery](image)

Through this monument, another “victimhood narrative” is shown, just like the statue of peace in Korea. Instead of seeing the bombing as a campaign to stop the Nazis, it was seen as an “act of terrorism against the city’s inhabitants.”⁶⁰ The woman represents the innocent lives lost because of the bombing. The inscription, which says, “humanity,” emphasizes the “suffering of

---

⁵⁷ Hans Dietrich, Untitled monument to bombing victims of Chemnitz, 1960, Chemnitz municipal cemetery, [from Margalit, Figure 21, page 168]
⁵⁸ Ibid.
⁵⁹ Genovese, 9.
⁶⁰ Genovese, 9
the Germans” as a whole. Here, something that is different from the statue of peace is happening. If the statue of peace sought to highlight a certain past, the Eastern Germans used the monument to overshadow Germans’ role in World War II. The use of an innocent female figure with a child, alongside the “insistence on the collective German victimhood,” distorts the fact that Germany was the first to use aerial bombings against civilians during World War II. Since Chemnitz was part of Soviet-controlled East Germany when the statue was built, it inevitably influenced its rhetoric. However, just as the statue of peace transferred a specific national narrative and identity, so did this monument of Chemnitz. The leaders of East Germany wanted to create a new, separate identity from the one associated with the war. By overshadowing their identity as an aggressor, they hoped to “transcend their own guilt by displacing it onto other parties.” By placing the right panel, which looks forward to a glorious “Soviet” (East) Germany, the East Germans wanted to be seen as the “victimized peoples,” where the national blame would be simply attributed to the Western Germany and their American occupiers. Although this monument primarily portrays a feminine figure, it is understood as representing the overall “innocent Germans,” who were different from the Nazi Germans, the “others.” Then, the feminine figure ends up encompassing everyone – women and men alike. Because the women were not directly associated with the Nazi soldiers (like other non-Nazi German generals), the image of the woman is appropriated to build a new national identity, not related to the Nazis. Therefore, a new and desired national identity and narrative is articulated through the monument.

IV. Social Art

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
It is true that there are many similarities to the two commemorative monuments in the sense that they both deal with innocent victims and portray a certain victimhood narrative through a feminine figure, yet there are two differences between the statue of peace and the monument to the bombing of Chemnitz. First, the use of a feminine figure in two cases is very much different. For the case of the monument at Chemnitz, the feminine figure was purposely chosen and appropriated in order to create a new national victimhood identity. The image of a woman was appropriated to fit the cause of the monument. Yet, in the case of the statue of peace, the feminine figure is a part of history – all “comfort women” were actually women. The image of a girl for the statue of peace, then, was not appropriated for the cause, though it did lead to the same result: a victimhood narrative forming a national identity.

However, the critical difference between the statue of peace and the monument to the bombing of Chemnitz is that the monument commemorating the bombing of Chemnitz is a rather static monument. It dealt with the victimhood narrative, yet once it was erected, that was the end. As a commemorative monument should, the monument commemorated a certain event that should be remembered, but it did not give way to social or political movements that fought to safeguard the narrative that arose from it, or the monument itself. The statue of peace, on the other hand, is an active monument. It is what would be called a “social art” – not a static monument meant to simply be looked at, but one that is able to communicate with the public. In this part of the chapter, I will explore the meaning of “social art,” and how the “social” role of art has promoted changes in the society to fight for justice on behalf of the “comfort women.”

Some scholars in Korea have discussed the statue of the girl’s role, whether it be social, public, or political. Jun-Ki Kim, an art critic and also the director of the Institute of Arts and Sciences of Korea, offers a particularly insightful analysis. Kim argues that the statue of the girl is
a successful social and public art.\textsuperscript{66} He first praises the statue for successfully bringing to light a problem of the past that has not yet been resolved. He argues that the artists were able to make an artwork through which people of the present generation can relate to a past event that has happened a long time ago. In that sense, the statue plays a significant role as a “social art.” “Social art,” as Kim calls it, promotes communication between the public and the artwork, that not only focuses on the end result (artwork produced) but also on the process through which it is made.\textsuperscript{67} Kim asserts that as a social art, the statue can be interpreted through four different frames: art of criticism, public art, community art, and activism art.

According to Kim, the statue is a criticism art because it is a statue that criticizes a certain past event and an aggressor. The way the artists put meanings in each element of the statue – position, hair, face expression, etc. – shows an example of a critical realism, which calls for attention on the criticized event. The second frame is public art. Kim claims that the statue is a public art because it works with a public subject, a problem of the past, created with a public donation, and placed in a public location. He points out its location and explains the critical importance of the location for artistic communication, because without its significant location, the statue which looks a like an ordinary girl would never have received this much spotlight. He also claims that the statue was a successful public art thanks to its low position and open demeanor. Compared to other commemorative monuments, which tend to be grand and exert a certain authority, the statue measures a mere 130cm. Therefore, it has a low threshold which makes it more accessible to the public by extending horizontally. It is a statue with which the public can identify themselves easily, and thus, a successful public art. Kim also argues that the statue can be interpreted as a community art because the artists work tightly together with the community (like

\textsuperscript{66} Kim, Seo Kyung et al. Promise Carved on Empty Chair. Mal, 2016., 169.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. 170
the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan), and always stress on the collaborative aspect of their work – whether it be between themselves, or with the community. Lastly, Kim interprets the statue as an example of activist art. He asserts that the most important virtue of activism art is change. The statue is an activist artwork because it fights for an issue that is still being questioned to this day and demands reactions. The artists focus on the possible social change that the art might bring, and leave themselves out of the artwork to promote the social change themselves by promoting the spread of the statues and being flexible regarding copyright issues. All in all, Jun-Ki Kim perceives this statue as a “social art” and symbol that fights for remembrance of the past.

Compared to the monument to the bombing of Chemnitz, the statue of the girl is a monument and a social art that is not static, but one that is always in conversation with the public. In addition, the statue is also more politicized. Of course, there has to be a difference between the ways the two monuments function since for Germany, an actual, sincere, and accepted apology was issued by the government regarding the WWII. Korea, on the other hand, never received an official apology – at least until 2015 – which makes the issue of the “comfort women” still relevant today. As I disclosed in my introduction, an agreement between the Japanese government and the Korean government regarding the issue did take place in 2015. Yet it was deemed insufficient by the majority of the Korean society as the Korean government did not consider to thoroughly consult the victims themselves regarding the agreement.68 As Hiroka Shoji, East Asia Researcher at Amnesty International stated after the “comfort women” deal was made: “The women were missing from the negotiation table, and they must not be sold short in a deal that is more about

political expediency than justice." Though the agreement still stands, the president that agreed to the deal (Geun-Hye Park) was impeached earlier this year, so there might be changes concerning the agreement.

This difference between Germany and Korea has brought a contrasting reaction among the public in Korea. Even before the agreement in 2015, the Japanese government had lashed out at the statue of peace, which led to the public to react against in order to protect it. People started making clothes and accessories for the statue such as scarves, socks, jackets, and hats (Figure 3). They brought flowers that they placed around the statue or on her lap. College students started a campaign called “Butterflies of Peace” to help support the surviving victims and to raise awareness of the issue. It had an effect on the public to the extent that even the artists were surprised and touched by the public’s reaction. Seo-Kyung Kim even stated: “[people] are supposed to look at the unattached heels, but they keep putting socks on. And they have to see the chopped hair, yet they keep putting hats on. They are supposed to sit on the empty chair and cry with the girl, and embrace the grandmothers’ (victims) resentment and sorrow to stare at the Japanese embassy together, but they keep putting flowers. I was so thankful by the sight that I started to cry.”

---

70 Kim, Seo-Kyung et al. *Promise Carved on Empty Chair*. Mal, 2016, 133.
After the agreement of 2015, many were afraid that the statue was to be torn down, since the issue of the “comfort women” was supposedly settled.\textsuperscript{71} The night the deal was passed, citizens and students from all over Korea – not just Seoul – came to stay overnight in order to protest and protect the statue.\textsuperscript{72} Even famous singers rushed to distribute goods for those staying overnight, and anonymous citizens stopped by with food and various goods.\textsuperscript{73} Artists sang and recited poetry at the protest. It was an incredibly moving sight that surprised the artists themselves and everyone in Korea. Would there ever be a statue that is this much loved in any part of the world? This proves what Jun-Ki Kim claimed; it is truly a social art. The statue, as stated above, remains in conversation with the public even after years of its erection. The public and community aspects of the statue are highlighted here, as the public worked together to take care of and defend the statue in times of need. It is a successful social art that was able to touch and engage everyone in Korea.

V. Spread of the Statues

The statue of peace was a huge success as a public art; it was well-received by the majority of the Korean public and eventually led to a heightened sense of consciousness regarding the issue of the “comfort women” among the Korean society – especially after Japan lashed out at the iteration of another statue of peace in Busan, Korea, in 2017 – which, according to Japan, the was an “action [that] breached [the] 2015 agreement.”\textsuperscript{74}

Realistically, there was not much the public could do in a legal or political setting in order to help the victims; however, donating their money to build more statues was something they could partake in while demonstrating their support. Therefore, after seeing Japan’s reactions to the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Kim} Kim, Seo-Kyung et al. Promise Carved on Empty Chair. Mal, 2016., 122.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid.
\bibitem{Griffiths} Griffiths, James et al. “Why this Statue of a Young Girl Caused a Diplomatic Incident." CNN Wire 2017. Print.
\end{thebibliography}
statues of peace, Koreans started to build statues in other cities with public funds as a means to express themselves. It was to show their anger and consolidation. The other statues often looked similar to the first statue – if not the same – and were erected in different locations, which were often public. The artists of the first statue, Kim Eun-Sung and Kim Seo-Kyung, were often asked to build the same statue, and if not, other artists were asked to build the statues. The other statues also received the same love and care that the first statue received; flowers were offered by the public, and they were clothed with gifted hats and coats. The first statue really prompted a new phenomenon of statues of peace.

As the statue of peace became a famous symbol in Korea, it started to spread everywhere. The statues themselves and the issue of the “comfort women” eventually received attention from different countries, too. This phenomenon of the spread of the statues within Korea and also in different countries further supports Jun-Ki Kim’s argument of a “social” role of art. So far, there are 73 statues in Korea (as of March 2017), and they can also be found in China, Australia, Germany, and the United States as seen in Figures 4 through 8. That is not all; the spread is still an ongoing movement that is now more global. Therefore, the statue was, and is a successful social public art where it achieved communication with the public, and communication within the public as Jun-Ki Kim stated.

---

76 Ibid.
77 KBS 데이터저널리즘팀
Figure 5 Map of the 73 statues of peace in Korea (updated in March, 2017)
Figure 6 Map of statues (yellow butterfly) and other commemorative monuments (white butterfly) in the US and Canada

Figure 7 Map of statue of peace in Germany
Figure 8 Map of statue of peace in Australia

Figure 9 Map of statue of peace in China and other monuments in Japan
VI. The statues’ present role

Although the statue of peace was well-received by the public, not everyone felt the same way. The statues erected in different countries were mostly the products of communicative efforts of the members of Korean communities and associations in each country. Thus, reactions of certain Japanese groups (especially the far-rightists) were violent even when the erections were granted permission, and other non-Japanese far-rightists also rejected the building of the statue. There were protests regarding the building, and even after the building, there were incidents where the statue was vandalized. In 2013, in Glendale, Los Angeles, a picture of the statue built in Glendale holding two Japanese flags with a paper bag over her head was posted on a blog (Figure 9). It was the work of a far-rightist American supporting the Japanese far-rightist movement, who wanted to mock the victims of sexual slavery. The culprit even posted a video saying: “I heard all ‘comfort women’ were ugly.”78 This kind of incident shows the kinds of difficulties the statues face in different places. Yet despite the tough conditions, the statues keep spreading, thanks to those who keep supporting the victims and the international human rights.

The statue of peace was also rejected from various art exhibitions. There is an international art exhibit that takes place every two years in Japan called JAALA that presents people’s art. The Korean Association of People’s Art, which the artists of the statue also take part in, participates continuously. Yet in 2013, two artworks were rejected and sent back to Korea.79 One was a painting of the “comfort women” by Yong-Bin Park, and the other was a miniature sculpture of the statue of peace. The artists were outraged that JAALA refused to give them the freedom of

---

expression and to value Koreans’ people’s art simply because they represented a contested past of Korea and Japan.

Figure 10 Statue of peace in Glendale, vandalized

In addition, Yu-Ha Park, the Korean historian and author who criticized the choice of the artists for representing a little girl, also said that the statue is a product of a “nationalistic thinking” which contains “violent and dichotomous thinking.” He argued that the statue reproduced the idea that there is an “aggressor” and a “victim,” which does not leave room for progress. Perhaps he is arguing that by reproducing the “victimhood narrative,” Korea will never be able to escape the role of the “victim” identity, and that reconciliation between Japan and Korea would be impossible. Yet this perspective of the statue is rather distorted since Korea has been able to

___________________________

80 Ibid, 151.
develop significantly after the end of its colonialization, and is still growing to become a powerful country. It does not mean that Koreans still see themselves as victims just because the statue of peace generates a narrative of victimhood. The narrative of victimhood is a part of Koreans’ past that they do not want to forget.

Furthermore, the statue is not just a simple artwork that represents and reproduces nationalistic identity. It has now become a symbol in Korea that remembers the past, while demonstrating the people’s support in the present. The artists did not intend the statue to be only an aggressive statue that punishes and accuses the aggressor. It is meant to confront not only the Japanese government, but also the Korean government to self-reflect and reconcile to strive for a more peaceful world.\textsuperscript{81} It is also a statue that strives to promote international human rights since sexual slavery is a global issue regarding other nations such as Netherlands and other East Asian countries.

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of art in the case of the statue of peace seems to have shifted from simply being a “propaganda art” that only seeks to spread the truth about the “comfort women” issue, but to having two different roles: 1) one that generates a certain national identity and 2) a “social” role that allows the public to engage with the political issue through the artwork.

The statue of peace is a representation of the “comfort women” that narrates and remembers a national identity through a “victimhood narrative,” yet which does not simply confine the limits of the artwork to nationalistic ends. It is a statue that calls for a true, sincere reconciliation about an issue that is not just between Korea and Japan. Not only that, it is a remarkable example of a “social art,” that was able to connect the public with the artwork itself and also among

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid, 138.
themselves. It also helped the public to express themselves by spreading the statues. This phenomenon of the spread of the statues of peace throughout Korea and the world is also what influenced other artists to start embracing the subject of the “comfort women” in their own artworks, which resulted in creations of poems, movies, books, comics, and songs about the “comfort women.” And it is only after the statue was built that the awareness of the issue of the “comfort women” was raised considerably not only in Korea but also worldwide. Overall, the statue of peace played a pivotal role in promoting art as a means to remember and fight for the past, as the issue at hand is continuously contested. As Mun Ki Cho, professor at Induk University, asserted, it is a “device through which we remember the pain of history.”

In this chapter, the artworks of the victims played slightly different roles than the ones illustrated in my first chapter. Although the main purpose of commemorating the past remains, the goal of the statue of peace was also to serve as a facilitator to help the public to express their anger and support, and allowing them to engage with this highly politicized issue. It seems as though the role of art has shifted – especially after 2015 – because the society needed a way to engage with the “comfort women” issue since they could not change the agreement themselves. In addition, we see a relative increase in interest of gender studies as the artist herself is very conscious of the gender based nature of the war crime. This new perspective could bring about a new gender studies in relations to the statue of peace and its representation.

In the next chapter, I intend to examine the role of art of a movie called Spirits’ Homecoming by Jung-Rae Cho which also addresses the “comfort women” issue. I intend to apply trauma theories in order to understand its value. Moreover, I will explore whether the role of art shifts once again, and if it is once again contingent on the public’s need or wish.

---

82 Ibid, 181.
Chapter 3

Dialogic Art: Space for a Conversation

I. How Spirits’ Homecoming Came to be Made

When the agreement of 2015 was passed between the Japanese and Korean governments, the public was outraged, as I mentioned in my introduction. By then, the issue of the “comfort women” was much better known among the public because of the statue of peace which I examined in the previous chapter. Many of the Korean citizens were angered that their own government would accept such an agreement, which did not include a proper apology to the victims and one that simply tried to pay off the victims. What the victims wished was not money; they wanted legal reparations and a sincere apology for what they had to go through in the past. The victims were repeatedly sexually violated, some forced to “serve” 50 soldiers a night – even during menstruation or pregnancy; this hateful crime could simply not be settled with money.

With the spread of the statue of peace and the settlement of 2015, which was widely debated among the Korea society, the public hoped to see more of what could remind them of the past that they wished to forget, but should not be forgotten. And thus the movie, Spirits’ Homecoming, came to be made with the efforts of many Koreans.

The movie came to be made when Chung Rae Cho, a movie director, came across the painting of “Burning Young Girls” by Il Chul Kang at the House of Sharing – where the victims of sexual slavery currently reside together. When he first laid eyes on the painting, he was shocked. Il Chul who was a sex slave herself, was taken when she was 16. She drew the artwork

---

during a psychotherapeutic session as a healing practice, just like the ones that I explored in my first chapter.\textsuperscript{85} The painting portrays groups of girls being burned to death in a pit as soldiers watch them die. The fire, which is expressed with a bright red color, stands out in the painting. The soldiers are simply standing, watching the horrific scene without any emotion. Il Chul

\begin{center}
\textit{Figure 1: “Burning Young Girls” created by Kang Il-chul, who was a sex slave herself}
\end{center}

explained that a typhoid epidemic was going around and that the soldiers were worried it might get to the soldiers as well. So they decided to burn the girls alive. Il Chul was able to escape with the help of a soldier of the Korean independence army. When the director heard her story, he was so shaken that he suffered from body aches, and had dreams about the souls of the victims returning to their homes. And that is where he got the inspiration to make a movie, \textit{Spirits’ Homecoming}, to make this story known.\textsuperscript{86} This anecdote speaks of the power and role of the artworks that I explored in the first chapter. Although it started out as a healing practice, it eventually touched different people’s hearts, and encouraged further artistic exploration.


\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
In this chapter, I intend to examine *Spirits’ Homecoming* in terms of trauma theories, how in this artistic form, the movie allows the spectators to approach trauma that they cannot approach directly. I will be borrowing a special term which Dori Laub and Daniel Podell call: “dialogic art.” Along with their theory, I will bring in several trauma theories and experts to examine the different values of the movie.

II. About the Movie

*Spirits’ Homecoming* (*Gui-Hyang*), directed by Chung Rae Cho, was released on February 24th, 2016 in Korea, and on March 25th in United States. The movie, which had a huge success in Korea, is about two young Korean girls being kidnapped by the Japanese imperial army and forced to become sexual slaves, the “comfort women”. Only one of the girls survives, and decades later, the survivor tries to reunite with the spirit of her lost friend. It is a movie that remembers a painful history – just like the statue of peace – yet it is a more accessible art. In order to fully experience and grasp the meaning of the statue of peace, at least the original, one has to be there in person physically in front of the statue. Though this is easier now with all the statues being in most of the big cities in Korea, it is still not easy to access the statues from abroad. One has to rely on pictures, videos, news, or visit the cities that do possess the statues. However, a movie can be seen anywhere, whether a person is in Korea or elsewhere; it can also be watched through different mediums, such as on computers screens or theater screens. In addition, with theaters showing movies from different parts of the world, *Spirits’ Homecoming* has a chance to attract global attention – which it has, as an article about it was posted on the New York Times.

---

88 Ibid.
Though the movie was a success when it was released, it did not have an easy start. It actually took 14 years in the making because it did not have enough financial support. The director was able to begin filming in April 2015 relying on the online crowdfunding with the help of the *Hankyoreh 21 magazine*, yet ran out of money within four days. If it were not for the investment of the production team and ordinary people, they would never have been able to continue shooting. The producer, Seong-Cheol Lim, even mortgaged his house to loan money in order to help the team. Ordinary people, such as a fitness trainer, owner of a laundromat, owner of a local garage, and even students donated so that the film could be made. In the end, some

---


91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.
75,000 individuals donated, who were each listed in the credits at the end of the movie.\(^{94}\)

However, financial support was not the only problem that the production team encountered: there were not enough screens to show it on.\(^{95}\) Yet this problem was resolved when the public showed interest by buying tickets in advance and by signing online petitions to increase the number of available screens.\(^{96}\) It was a movie that could not have been made if not for the support of the team and the public.

It is crucial to point out the difficulty the movie faced to finish its production; I have mentioned in the introduction that there was still a great lack of commercial films regarding the “comfort women” issue. *Spirits’ Homecoming* is still not exactly a commercial movie since it was funded by donations, but it still seen as a breakthrough. The hardships the production of *Spirits’ Homecoming* had to go through shows that the Korean film industry’s attitude towards treatment of trauma on screen is still negative. However, now that the society has shown its interest in these subjects, perhaps seeing an actual commercial film might be possible in the future.

When the director decided to turn the story of Il Chul Kang into a movie, actors and Koreans who are residing in Japan offered their talents without pay and flew over to Korea.\(^{97}\) The Koreans residing in Japan actually took great risks by deciding to take part in making this movie, since there was a possibility that they would be harmed by extreme right wing Japanese.\(^{98}\) Hana Kang, who played one of the lead characters, received numerous hateful comments and

---

96 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
threats after her interview done in Korea was leaked to Japan. Hana, who is a 4th generation Korean Japanese and was only a middle schooler at the time of the filming, had commented that she was grateful to have had the opportunity to work for such a movie and that she was horrified by what she learned the victims had to experience. When the extreme right wing Japanese learned about what she had said, they leaked her private information online, including her address and the high school that she attended. She even had to get police protection when she was just a middle schooler. However, Hana asserted that she never regretted participating in the project, and that she was glad that she was able to do something so that the issue of the “comfort women” would be resolved someday. Also, Hana was not the only one who risked her life; other actors were excused from interviews and media in order to protect their identities. Making this movie was no easy task; it required great efforts from not only the production team, but also from the public and the actors. They were only able to make it happen because they wanted to let the victims know that they do not stand alone, and that they are still remembered.

III. Analyzing Spirits’ Homecoming

I chose to analyze Spirits’ Homecoming in my thesis because it is a breakthrough movie in Korean film industry. Never before a movie that treated the subject of “comfort women” that is not a documentary has had any success before Spirits’ Homecoming came out. Moreover, it is a movie that successfully represents a traumatic experience. Representing a traumatic experience, especially one that deals with sexual violence, can be extremely difficult. Director of

100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
Spirits' Homecoming Chung Rae Cho especially had to take into consideration the fact that the victims whom he was going to represent in his movie were still alive. Making this movie could re-traumatize the victims by forcing them to relive their painful memories and transforming the private memories into public ones. Scholar Patricia Yaeger also cautions against the co-optation of the suffering of others and the commodification of their stories of pain, trauma, violence, and injustice.¹⁰³ How can one represent a trauma, then, in a way that does not serve to re-traumatize and what purposes would that representation have?

One of the biggest questions raised in representing trauma related to sexual violence according to Wendy Hesford is: How are we to understand women's agency in the context of sexual violence?¹⁰⁴ The victims are already labeled as the “raped victims.” For this reason, they had been marginalized from the society and their own families.¹⁰⁵ As victims, they do not possess much power in their narrative of their past. Director Cho helps the victims of sexual slavery regain their agency by empowering the women in his movie. By doing so, watching the movie can be restorative for the victims, as well as changing the society’s preconception of the labels of the victims. When the past of Jung Min, one of the protagonists, is first introduced in Spirits’ Homecoming, we can observe that she has a good relationship with her parents; however, her ties with her mother are stronger. The mother is the authoritative figure in her family instead of the father, and Jung Min is more respectful towards her mother. Hence, from the very beginning, Director Cho deconstructs the binary conception that male = power / female =

---

powerlessness, and thus empowers the female figures in his movie who may have lost their agencies by their aggressors in their past.

In addition, the victims in *Spirits’ Homecoming* are not helpless as the aggressors or rapists – the imperial Japanese soldiers – want them to be. Some, including Jung Min and Young Hee, try to escape the brothels which are prisons for them, and they have the courage to go back when one of the escapees gets caught so that they can protect one of their own. The girls who are imprisoned also find a way – such as singing and speaking in Korean among themselves – to survive and resist. These are all different ways through which director Cho empowers the victims. Then later in the movie, we learn that Young Hee has friends and a family – an adopted son. By placing her in a more recent society with different societal roles, a friend and a mother, director Cho is offering a new label to the victims. They are no longer merely the victimized. They have a new identity. Though the trauma may still be there, the new label could allow the victims to break out of the restricting label of “raped victims.” And here, we can evidently see the director’s efforts to make this a pro-women’s rights movie.106

Besides empowering the victims by providing them a new label through his movie, director Cho writes a new narrative of traumatic experience in order to reconnect the victims to other victims, society, and spectators. Because the trauma of the “comfort women” is one that is not easily accessible for those who have not experienced it (unlike 9/11, which has affected a whole nation), it can seem as another story of other people in which the public has no place. Dori Laub and Daniel Podell cite in their scholarly article a poet-survivor Anne-Marie Levine, who commented: ‘Everyone has a story and every story is interesting. But not everyone has a

---

viewpoint about and within that story." In order for everyone to have a viewpoint about a "story," Laub and Podell argue that a "dialogic" art is necessary. What they mean by "dialogic" is that the art in question has to contain a viewpoint that would result in a "space outside of [a] limited conventional perspective" which would allow "for the negotiation of another, more individualized and authentic perspective from which to become more aware of, or ‘know’ the trauma." Spirits’ Homecoming creates this space by inviting the audience to be in conversation with the movie and the victims to take a part in the story of the victims.

Young Hee, the other protagonist who actually survives, hears about the Korean Council for Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan accepting declarations from the victims for the first time and visits a government office in order to file her declaration form. One of the social workers asks the reason why she visited the office, and she is very hesitant as it is difficult for her to say it out loud. The social worker gets frustrated while waiting for her to answer, and starts a conversation with his coworkers about the declaration forms for the sexual slavery victims. At one point, he comments: "I’m not surprised that there was no declaration in our jurisdiction. I mean, think about it, who would want to come forward? I would be ashamed of such a past. One would have to be a lunatic to want to expose a shameful past like that". When Young Hee hears this, she explodes. The spectators see a shot of Young Hee’s face, what the social worker would be seeing; and we hear her yelling right in front of our faces: “I’m… I’m that crazy person!” She leaves the office without saying anything else, and her entire body is shaking – perhaps because of anger, or shame.

108 Ibid.996
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
111 Spirits’ Homecoming.
This heart aching scene, though difficult to watch, is an example of a “dialogic” scene among many in *Spirits’ Homecoming*. This scene represents the reality of the present: the way people viewed the victims in the beginning, and the way certain people continue to perceive the victims. As mentioned in my previous chapter, the victims were rejected by the society for their “shameful” past, and were even disowned by their families. While representing the hardships of the victims who are living in the present when they are still stuck in the past, the director might be criticizing the public and the society, by projecting Young Hee’s cry of desperation onto the viewers. As we see her face on the huge screen, she is directly looking at us, the public. Here, her gaze and her face immediately present before the audience deconstructs the spectators’ observing gaze of bystanders. She draws the spectators in her story, the story of all victims. Those who watch the movie become a part of the story and they become engaged. Thus the audience is in a dialogue with Young Hee, and all the other victims. By doing so, director Cho is helping the victims reconnect with the society, as he offers a viewpoint from which the public can share the painful memory of the victims who could not do so themselves.
According to Laub and Podell, an art being “dialogic” is a prerequisite of the “art of trauma” – which is the “only medium possible for effective representations of trauma.”\textsuperscript{112} Aside from being “dialogic,” the work of art must also represent the traumatic experience in indirect ways in order to be an “art of trauma.”\textsuperscript{113} *Spirits’ Homecoming* possesses this indirect nature in the way it narrates the story of Jung Min and Young Hee. It is not a documentary on the lives of the victims of sexual slavery. If it were a documentary, it would have been a direct representation of the traumatic experience, which would only superficially represent the trauma (the actual event) itself, not the traumatic experience. Instead, *Spirits’ Homecoming* explores the traumatic experience that victims suffered after the aggression on their bodies and minds.

All leading scholars of trauma theory such as Cathy Caruth and Dory Laub stress the importance of *belatedness* of a traumatic experience.\textsuperscript{114} Trauma, as Cathy Caruth defines it, “describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”\textsuperscript{115} The trauma always re-emerges later, after some time of the actual traumatic event.\textsuperscript{116} Therefore, this temporality becomes a great factor in representing the traumatic experience. In a direct representation, there is no possibility of illustrating this temporality. Yet it is achievable through an indirect representation.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. 995.
Spirits’ Homecoming does a wonderful job with the issue of the temporality from the very beginning of the movie: it starts with the interview of one the first victims to come out to talk about what the Japanese soldiers did to her after almost 60 years of silence. As the interview is being shown on TV, Young Hee stares at the screen. While she listens to the interview, the screen shifts to show Jung Min’s past – the friend to whom she owes her life – when she was only 14 and was living an ordinary life. However, it does not stop at this peaceful memory. It also shows the moment she is taken by the Japanese soldiers, and how she has had to say goodbye to her family in the most abrupt way. This shift from the present to past is caused by the stressor of watching another victim coming forth with her testimony. Even after all the years, the trauma is there; in its belated form, it continues to haunt the victims.

In addition, throughout the film, the scenes constantly change from present to past, and vice versa; the line between the present and past is blurred. This constant shifting of scenes and time frame, which can seem confusing for the viewers, offers a glimpse of the traumatic experience of the victims themselves. The going back and forth of the past and present is what the victims go through for their rest of their lives; at one slightest sound or image, they can be taken back to where they were when they were teenagers, suffering in the brothels that they called the “living hell”. Therefore, the belatedness of the traumatic experience is represented indirectly, without words, through the shifting of the time where different scenes take place – past and present – and through its confusion, the spectators are able to at least imagine what the lives of victims must have been like, especially when no one else knew about this painful past except themselves. This indirect representation offers an inner experience of the traumatic experience of the victims, and thus presents an effective representation as an “art of trauma.”

117 Spirits’ Homecoming
However, we have to take into consideration that there are limits to representations; as Antoon Van den Braembussche’s states: “it should be recognized that there are no neutral or unproblematic forms of representation, that all perception and thus representation is not merely passive, but active, conceptually and ideologically affected.”\(^{118}\) We – the society or the spectators – may not truly understand the “real” traumatic experience through the mere act of watching a movie. However, through *Spirits’ Homecoming*, which encompasses the characteristics of the “art of trauma” – we may be able to at least glimpse at the traumatic experience embedded in the victims’ lives.

IV. A Disparity in Public’s Reception and Critic’s Reception

Though the movie had a huge success and was well received by the public, the film critics were harsh. On Naver, which is a site that can be considered as the Google of Korea, the film critics of *Cine21*, one of the leading Korean weekly magazine dedicated to movies created in 1995, rated it as 5.80 out of 10, while the viewers rated it as 9.17 and 9.33 out of 10.

![Figure 4 Screenshot of Naver's rating of Spirits' Homecoming](image)

The critics claim that it was a good use of the medium of a film to remember a painful past that everyone should be aware of. They also admit that it was a necessary movie; yet it could have been made less dramatic without unnecessary plot. Though it was a good attempt, this movie does not guarantee a positive feedback from everyone.\(^{119}\) In addition, Dong Jin Lee, one of the


most famous film critics in Korea, agreed; he gave 2 stars out of 5 and commented: “So much anger towards history, so much disappointment towards the movie”. It is true that there is a fairly good amount of violence in the film with overly dramatic settings. Yet, is a “good” movie necessarily one that is artistically well made? Why can’t a movie be considered as well-made based on not only its artistic elements but on its intent, the effect it has had on the public, and the efforts that went into its production?

One of the major characteristics that highlights the importance of Spirits’ Homecoming is that the movie was continuously in conversation with the public, not simply after it came out, but through the whole process of filming. Additionally, watching this movie and buying the tickets was a form of social participation for many Koreans – like filling out a ballot in an election – to prove to the victims that they were not forgotten, and to stand against the settlement of 2015. After its release, many families and organizations reserved to go see the movie as groups. According to Wu Seong Lee, director of a private institute who arranged to rent a local theater for about 160 students and parents, ‘it was an opportunity for the whole family to rethink recent historical issues, including the negotiations between South Korea and Japan over the comfort women and the government’s monopolization of history textbook authorship’. Another student surnamed Kim, who was planning on watching the movie with her parents, commented: ‘I’m going to ease the horrible pain suffered by those women. I’m going to share their pain, and I won’t forget about them.’

---

122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
In the history of Korean film industry, there has not been a historical movie that discusses such a sensitive topic that has been as well-received as Spirits’ Homecoming. In 2017, a similar yet different movie, The Battleship Island (Kun Ham Doh), came out, which treated the also delicate topic of forced labor of Koreans by the Japanese on Hashima island during Japanese colonization. Though this movie was produced with a much larger fund and was played by some of the most well-known actors in Korea such as Ji Sup So and Joog Gi Song, it failed to receive praise from the public. It was classified as a Hollywood-like blockbuster that did not attempt to recreate the reality of history; what the public wished to see was a genuine attempt that would offer them a true glimpse of history and the suffering of the victims.¹²⁵

Furthermore, it is interesting to see the contrast in the number of screens that played Spirits’ Homecoming and The Battleship Island and the public’s reaction. In the case of Spirits’ Homecoming, the spectators had to buy the tickets in advance to show their interest for theaters to open up their screens. Even then, only the major theaters showed the movie. On the other hand, The Battleship Island was played on 2168 screens – simply due to the fact that it was a big scale movie shot with a large amount of funds and famous actors.¹²⁶ Even with the huge disparity in number of screens, the amount of advertisement, and the funds spent to produce both films, Spirits’ Homecoming was able to receive more positive reviews from the public. So why was Spirits’ Homecoming so successful compared to The Battleship Island, which treated a similar topic, and was produced better in terms of artistic elements (sound, special effects, actors, etc.)?

¹²⁶ Ibid.
Perhaps the reason why the movie was so successful and attracted the public is specifically because the movie was rather crude and unpolished. What Korean people wanted to see projected on the screen was not a movie from which its lighting or special effects could be discussed; they hoped to see an artistic representation of the issue of the “comfort women” in a popular medium as it had never been done before.¹²⁷ The artistic portrayal of the issue of sexual slavery by the Japanese imperial army has been a taboo subject in the Korean film industry until it began to attract more attention starting with the statue of peace. And as the public grew more conscious of the pressing issue, it wanted to see more artistic reproductions that would attempt to reproduce the truth. Spirits’ Homecoming fulfilled this need. And as the movie was fundamentally made with the support of the Korean public, it meant more than just a simple film to the viewers, it held a special meaning for them. It did not matter for the public whether the movie was a great film. What mattered was that they were able to partake in the production of an artistic reproduction of the matter of the “comfort women” that they felt strongly about, and one

that needed more artistic representations to make it more known. The government of 2015 could not, or would not do much to help the victims; taking part in the making of the movie and watching this movie was one of the only ways the society could do in order to show their support and anger.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, Spirits’ Homecoming is a notable movie because of its attempt to narrate a historical event that is still so sensitive, yet desperately needs a kind of artistic narration. The Korean film industry still lacks representations of the “comfort women,” and this movie might just have opened up new paths for further artistic exploration on this subject. In this chapter, I have attempted to explore the “dialogic” role of art – a term borrowed from Laub and Podell – through the analysis of Spirits’ Homecoming. The movie, by offering an inner experience of a trauma, facilitates the public’s understanding of the traumatic event while restoring a certain amount of agency to the survivors themselves. Though Spirits’ Homecoming may not play the same role as the artworks of the victims or the statue of peace did, it has found a new role to play in the society. Therefore, we can see just from the three artworks that I engaged with in my thesis that the role of art has constantly shifted throughout the years – from being a “propaganda art” to a “social” art, to a “dialogic” art.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to explore the different roles of art in the political realm, specifically in relation to the issue of the “comfort women.” Art has been, up to the present, a particular tool for the survivors themselves, those who support the survivors, as well as for those who fight for their justice. It is one that allows people to actively address a social or political problem that has not been solved yet. However, there is a gaping hole in the study of various representations of the “comfort women”. This thesis was an attempt to fill that gap.

As I was exploring the different roles of each representation of the “comfort women,” I came to the conclusion that the role of art shifts every time the needs of the people change. Art responds to the needs of the people. When the war crimes committed to the victims were going unnoticed, those who were aware about the existence of the “comfort women” wanted to raise awareness. Thus art, in this case the survivors’ artworks, took the role of a “propaganda art” to disperse the truth about the war atrocity in an accessible way. When the controversial agreement of 2015 was passed, the need of the public had changed; they wished to express themselves and participate more actively in the contested “comfort women” dispute. The role of art shifted accordingly – it played a role of “social art,” which facilitated a conversation between the public and art in order to engage with a political issue. In the case of Spirits’ Homecoming, the role shifted once again; the “dialogic” nature of the film fulfilled the wish of the people to see more intellectually stimulation artistic representations of the “comfort women” since it offered a space where the spectators could be in conversation with the victims and share their experiences, in which the public could eventually start questioning their own role within the issue to bring about a change. Therefore, art really is a tool of activism for the public to stand up for a cause they believe in.
The different, shifting roles of art in relation to the issue of the “comfort women” are worth studying because the representations of the “comfort women” are not found only in Korea. The paintings have been offered as gifts to people outside of Korea, the statue of peace is now located in several countries, and the movie *Spirits’ Homecoming* was released in other countries and can now be watched online from anywhere. This brings in a new question to the study of these representations in a more global context. What does it mean for a culturally significant artwork to be placed in a different setting within a different culture? Does the artwork loses its significance and its role?

While movies might not require further explanation as they are already telling a story, the meaning behind paintings or statues may not be so obvious without additional historical or political background. The paintings, for example, were only given to those who would understand the meaning of the artworks. The statues were spread by Koreans themselves (those in Korea and those living outside of Korea as well). And when I went to see *Spirits’ Homecoming* in the U.S., I noticed that the majority of the spectators were Koreans. Simply because the artworks are located globally does not necessarily indicate that the meaning of the representations is understood universally. Though I have not been able to delve further into this question, I hope that more research will be done in the future. As our world is becoming increasingly more globalized, studies on whether art and its role are, or can be, universal – especially when the artwork’s significance is specific to one culture or country – will be more relevant and needed than ever before.

I stated in my introduction that in addition to exploring the different roles of art, my other goal was to examine whether the “comfort women” literature (focusing on visual art only) has evolved in terms of feminist and gender studies. In my opinion, I do believe that there is
certainly a growing consciousness regarding those perspectives. For the statue of peace, the wife, Seo Kyung Kim, prevented her husband from touching the sculpture as much as possible because she did not want the statue to be tainted by a male person, since it represented sexually violated victims. Furthermore, the director of *Spirits’ Homecoming*, Chung Rae Cho, asserted in an interview that it was indeed a pro-women’s rights movie that was supposed to empower the survivors and women in general. Therefore, it is safe to say that Stetz’ prediction was accurate, and does in fact offer a new insight as to how to interpret a “comfort women” literature.

However, I refrain myself from declaring that there is a linear progression, since although there is a clear consciousness to delve into the question of gender and sexism in both the statue and the film, I would not agree that there is a significant gender development from the statue to the film. This could be due to the short amount of time that has passed between the production of the two representations. Perhaps this is an area of research that can be done later, when additional representations are available for an improved comparison.

We have seen throughout this thesis that we cannot pinpoint one single, specific role of art in the ongoing public debates about the “comfort women” and Japanese wartime atrocities. The role is ever changing and very dependent on the society. As different representations of the “comfort women” are increasing by the year, especially after the agreement of 2015, I think it is necessary to study the roles of various representation and see what they can bring in to the scholarly debates. There already is an abundance of research about the historical and political nature of this particular issue, yet there is an apparent lack of scholarly research in the domain of visual arts – and I hope that this thesis will encourage further research in that area of expertise.
Bibliography


WIWCT Judgement, supra note 8, pp. 43–69.


**Images of Chapter 1**

Figure 1: Kim, Bok Dong. *Hometown*. Kwang Ju-si: House of Sharing. Print.
Figure 2: Kim, Soon Duk. *Flower Yet To Bloom*. Kwang ju-si: House of Sharing, 1995. Print.
Figure 3: Kang, Duk Kyung. *Punish the Responsible!*. Kwang ju-si: House of Sharing, 1995. Print.
Figure 4: Kim, Soon Duk. *Meeting*. Kwang Ju-si: House of Sharing. Print.

**Images of Chapter 2**

Images of Chapter 3

Figure 1: Kang, Il Chul. *Burning Young Girls*. 2016. Print.


Figure 3: Cho, Chung Rae. *Spirits' Homecoming*. Korea: N.p., 2016. film. (screenshot)


Figure 5: CJ E&M. *Poster Of The Battleship Island*. 2016. Print.