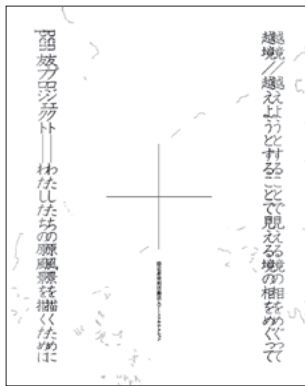


# Border Crossings: Discovering What Lies Beyond Borders

+

## The Pen-tomo Project – Depicting Our Imaginary Landscapes

### Contents



003 Border Crossings: Discovering What Lies Beyond Borders  
Miho Miyashita

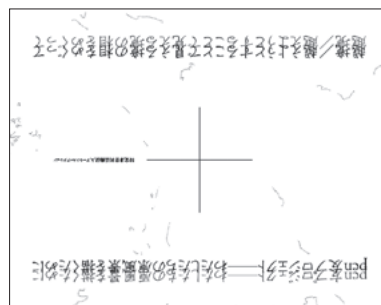
005 [Interview] The Pen-tomo Project  
Depicting Our Imaginary Landscapes: Point of Departure of the Project  
Haji Oh (Artist)  
Risei Sato (Program officer, Arts Council Tokyo)  
Miho Miyashita (Artfull-action, Non-profit organization)

019 The Pen-tomo Project – Depicting Our Imaginary Landscapes  
Haji Oh

015 Would You Like to Participate in the Pen-tomo Project?

014 Triangular Letter Exchange by Wi, Haji and Nozawa

010 Appendix: Letter Pad



Border Crossings: Discovering What Lies Beyond Borders  
+  
The Pen-tomo Project – Depicting Our Imaginary Landscapes

Production:  
Artfull-action, Non-profit organization

Published:  
June 20 2020

Publisher:  
Arts Council Tokyo, Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture  
Kudan First Place 8F, 4-1-28, Kudankita, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, 102-0073, Japan  
TEL +81-(0)3-6256-8435 / FAX +81-(0)3-6256-8829 / www.artscouncil-tokyo.jp

Book Design:  
Yoichi Matsuda

ISBN 978-4-909894-13-7 C0070  
No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, without permission in writing from the publisher.  
©2020 npo artfull action  
Information on this book at:  
Artfull-action, Non-profit organization  
Koganei chateau 2F, 6-5-3, Honcho, Koganei-shi, Tokyo, 184-0004, Japan  
TEL+81-(0)50-3627-9531 / mail@artfullaction.net / http://artfullaction.net/

#### Koganei Artfull Action!

(Arts and Culture Promotion Plan Promotion Business, Koganei-City):

This project aims to provide an opportunity for local Koganei residents to encounter art and culture on the streets and pursue new, spiritually-rich ways of living. It will facilitate efforts to spur community development through art and culture and encourage the public to become involved in various programs.

Info about Arts and Culture Promotion Plan Promotion Business, Koganei-City:  
Koganei City Culture Division Cultural Promotion Section TEL +81-(0)42-387-9923

Organized:  
Tokyo Metropolitan Government / Koganei-City / Arts Council Tokyo, Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture / Artfull-action, Non-profit organization

#### Bio: Haji Oh

Artists. A third-generation Korean immigrant born in Japan, now based in Australia. She combines textiles made by the techniques of dyeing, weaving, embroidery and knots with photographs and sound materials and creates works relating to silent memories. Incorporating the results of workshops and the dialogues that took place there, her art focuses on the concept 'postmemory' to explore how the memory of others can be passed on. Since 2017, she has been working on the series *the grand-mother island project*, in which she recounts the stories of individuals that are connected by themes of the sea.

# Border Crossings: Discovering What Lies Beyond Borders

Miho Miyashita

Koganei Artfull-action! is launching the Pen-tomo Project with artist Haji Oh. This small leaflet has been prepared as a memorandum to record its starting point from which various projects and studies will develop. This will provide an ongoing platform to which people can always return to, discuss and update.

\*\*\*\*\*

In this year when the Olympic Games was scheduled to be held, we have been witnessing all sorts of violence caused by the extraordinary, unseen virus across the world. Meanwhile, news programs show images of people who are still traveling the ocean on small boats, who lose their lives at borders or who are suddenly shot to death. And in Japan, although the country is not in a war, the issue of children killed by their own parents makes the news. In addition, natural disasters such as large earthquakes, tsunamis and huge forest fires cast a dark shadow upon us.

Even though these events—with their complex, historical backgrounds—have taken place far from us and we are only allowed to know them through the media, we are somehow responsible for them. And our indifference, ignorance and superficial sympathy also accelerate the violence.

Susan Sontag and many other critics have discussed the images of war and disaster conveyed through the media. They have questioned not only the role of the media that broadcasts them but also the responsibility of the recipients who consume them on streets or in their living rooms.

#### ●How Should We Approach, Interact and Behave towards Such Images?

No, things may not be as simple as that.

In one of my few visits to Fukushima, I met several female evacuees from the seaside village. They lived in a housing complex where little external sound or human voices could penetrate. They used mobile phones to check if their neighbors were at home before visiting each other. And they lived there alone.

These women whose lives had completely changed after the nuclear power plant accident welcomed us with pleasure, shared their memories and stories about farming or pelagic fishing, and waved their hands for a long time when we left. They never questioned us. They just seemed to exist there on the other side of a 'border', quietly, embracing difficulty and unfairness.

We have to be attentive to what we see and hear; otherwise, as Sontag has written, we conveniently consume events and fall into a false compassion. In *Against Hate*, German journalist Carolin Emcke writes, quoting Martha Nussbaum:

Those who worry must tolerate a distinction between a concern and what the philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls 'projective disgust'—that is, the rejection of other people on the pretext of self-protection. There are many affective forces which undermine the social will to empathy, and which are in fact distinct from concern. For Nussbaum, one of these forces, along with fear and projective disgust,

is narcissism. (Translated by Tony Crawford. Polity Press, 2019)

Equally ugly as violent narcissism is the sense of pity, feeling sorry for those who are weaker than ourselves. While the reason why people oppose violence is relatively simple, the repulsiveness of compassion from someone placed in a safe, protected position is difficult to understand. No one overtly criticizes or blames such people because compassion is generally considered 'good'. Perhaps this 'compassion given from a safe haven' lies at the bottom of the mind of those who constitute contemporary civil society.

Lack of understanding, ignorance and compassion which only affirms one's safety. Despite a spatial and temporal distance that separates us from events taking place around the world, how can we sincerely respond to them? How can I put myself in someone else's shoes and involve myself in the events? Is it possible to improve the way I live?

To examine, reflect on and make judgments on the social causes of events and how the state, government, corporations and people respond to them—this process requires plenty of time and effort.

As for myself, the emotions respond first. I feel as if I am obliged to know everything, even minor things. I wish to offer help without falling into self-indulgence. Emotion is important, yes. It is sometimes much more important than the reason. That is because the emotions drive reason.

However, it is sometimes difficult to keep the emotions and reason in balance. If consumed with anger or sorrow, we often exclude others without thinking, or create imaginary enemies in order to put ourselves on safe ground.

Meanwhile, the complexity, severity and cruelty of events make us feel helpless and we tend to become resigned to giving up. How can we not fall into these emotional traps and keep contemplating these phenomena that are beyond our understanding? I have chosen 'border crossing' as the theme of this text so that we can explore what lies between you and me, standing on different sides of a border.

### ●Corporal Sensibility and Scrutiny of What Lies beyond Borders

When written in Japanese, the word 'border crossing' is made up of two characters, one meaning boundary, the other to transcend. Historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki writes in *Past within Us: Media, Memory, History*:

Postmodern writings illuminate the fact that the lines we draw around particular pasts—the spatial lines around national, regional or civilizational history and the temporal lines around eras like the Middle Ages or modernity—are mental constructions, and that the texture of the past looks very different when the lines are redrawn. And they remind us that the same events can generate many different narratives, each with its own internal 'regime of truth'.

As Morris-Suzuki claims, boundaries are not completely fixed. What is seen as a borderline from a certain perspective (position) can be seen from another perspective (position) and by redrawing a line, we can acquire a different world view. In other words, what is at stake here is our stance towards history. Moreover, today, world-historical problems have become more complex and the borders have also become multi-layered and multi-faceted. As people, resources, money and information become increasingly global, different kinds of borderline/division existing between nation-states, regions, religions and genders intersect and create a complex pattern. We also witness that the relationship between the weak and the strong can be easily turned over by the emergence of even weaker or stronger beings.

Under such circumstances, how can we position ourselves alongside others and continue thinking while our lives demand constant change and adjustment? How can we avoid being confined within an academic framework, for example, of learning history or geopolitics, and enhance our sensibility in order to understand and respond to the human suffering involved?

Here are two texts I'd like to introduce. One is an excerpt from an impressive book review of Lee Chonghwa's *Murmurs as Political Thought* written by

cultural anthropologist Ryuta Imafuku (<http://www.cafecreole.net/corner/essays/reviews/r7-lee.html>). He writes:

[...] Accepting one's individual physical memory and emotional structure, the will to reflect slowly, firmly establishes a precise 'inner dialogue' which differs widely from introverted or narcissistic ventures.

[...] A series of issues mentioned in this book are connected directly to the author's geographical, historical corporality and visceral memories. Through this complex corporal context, the book vividly explores and responds to various themes of human suffering. At its beginning, the author clarifies her determination to undertake the difficult task of listening to the voices expressed on the edge of survival. She writes; "Something that is beyond understanding. Something you must not understand. Something you have to accept, rather than consume. It makes us—I who tell stories and we who listen—feel uneasy. However, [...] we must refuse to interpret it. That's because it represents their life".

The text begins like this but does not fall into an emotional or introverted narrative while it rejects oversimplified structures such as comprehension and interpretation. This is possible only because the author discusses others' problems within the scope of difficulties and uncertainties relating to her own life. The author's intuitive observation becomes especially sharp when she examines the ambiguity in which a certain kind of memory existing as a result of one's own life affects our historical present. When we apprehend and label the comfort women's voices as historical 'testimony' or as an ideology of resistance against colonialism, most of us forget the fact that their lives will be put at risk by the very act of speaking memories. [...]

The author states that the essential materiality of life is only accessible through an individual's consciousness with its incessant negotiations between memories of the past.

The future possibility of the act of thinking lies in this kind of strong, resilient philosophical exploration.

Another text I'd like to introduce is taken from Morris-Suzuki's essay which was written for the art exhibition *In Search of Critical Imagination* held in Fukuoka Prefectural Museum of Art.

Art has a special role in seeking a better vision of life. It not only makes a physical connection between our sight, nerves and brain but also clarifies the world that surrounds us by stimulating our imagination and evoking memories. Without our imagination, most of what we see in front of us would be invisible.

Lee Chonghwa's invitation "to open up our body and meet the essential materiality of life" and Morris-Suzuki's 'imagination'—these may sound personal, emotional and socially inept. However, they show us an alternative approach differing from academic discourse in which author's motives or reasons for writing are hardly visible; these merely provide superficial analysis and annotation of events. The possibility of acquiring corporal knowledge that enables us to stay close to others and their suffering taking place in the distance lies in Lee and Morris-Suzuki's attitude, their struggle to "slowly, firmly establish a precise 'inner dialogue' which differs widely from introverted or narcissistic ventures."

### ●The Art as a Living Body

In the dialogue "Memory and Expression" (with artist Yoshiko Shimada) transcribed in *Murmurs as Political Thought*, Lee says:

Every human being who is born with consciousness about themselves lives with sweet, disturbing or painful memories of the past. The fact they are alive now makes them reach for others and seek their understanding. And that's when their sense of identity becomes involved. Especially regarding the issues of comfort women or AIDS, it is important to explore the possibility: how and to what degree can people who come out and people like us who are currently not obliged to do so, share

memories? It's a tough job for artists but how much you can express the emotional states of those who come out, their vacillations, tension and extreme emotions through your work, is important. Whichever identity you associate yourself with, be it society, woman, dance or language, art can reveal the process in which people find something that helps them live or something that supports their life.

Moreover, she writes:

Narratives that depend on the mind are easy to understand. They can be summarized easily. People often say telling stories brings them liberation but this is only possible for those who are articulate enough to speak intellectually. For those who can't speak well or are illiterate, the problem is more complex. The extent to which you can understand these kinds of hindrance the speaker's experience as they share their memories is important.

Art has the potential to express this kind of dimension. Probably artists are the only people who can reveal the precise mechanism of the phenomenon.

Cultivating a corporal, visceral sensibility that can question and respond to historical events—isn't this more important than being trapped within your own positionality? Such an attitude should lead us to overcome a lack of dialogue crossing borders.

#### ●The Pen-tomo Project: How Can We Get Involved?

We are launching a new project with Haji Oh, the Australian based, third-generation Korean immigrant artist who was born in Japan.

Putting yourself between various borders, making attempts to create dialogue and artistic expression; from different angles you examine the boundary, its nature and the phenomena it reveals. Moving back and forth, you examine, disturb and dislocate it so that you can clarify some of its features.

The Pacific Ocean that lies between Australia and

Japan is a huge boundary. As we gaze, boundaries reveal the difference existing between individual beings and manifest diverse qualities that constitute focal events. The borderline itself is not bad. Careful scrutiny of various borders of different scale will enable us to make real encounters with other people and their suffering.

This project finds creative inspiration in the memory of landscapes shared by those who have roots in Asia and live beyond this boundary.

In the book quoted above, Lee questions, "how and to what degree can people who come out and people like us who are currently not obliged to do so, share memories?" We who witness this project are not artists in a general sense. However, learning from an artist who tackles the subject, we can question ourselves and link these questions to our own compelling problems.

A third-generation Korean immigrant artist born in Japan, her pen friends who have lived as immigrants and we who witness their interaction and exchange from a distance—art creation mediates between them. The participants will witness the emergence of a multilayered, complex temporal space which experiences constant change.

The image I hold of this project is this: the ends of elastic with which we played jump rope games in our childhood are held by so many people; rubber strands intersect with each other and create a number of nodes and multiple layers. Crossing the sea or striding across time is not easy. However, the overlapping layers of fine strands will lead us to reflect on the question "to what degree we can share memories?" and enable us to intimately imagine the landscape that lies beyond the border. I wish to meet the vulnerability of others through that of my own, even if it is naive, avoiding the trap of falling into superficial compassion or sentimentality.

## [Interview] The Pen-tomo Project Depicting Our Imaginary Landscapes: Point of Departure of the Project

Haji Oh (Artist)

Risei Sato (Program officer, Arts Council Tokyo)

Miho Miyashita (Artfull-action, Non-profit organization)

### ●The Two Difficulties Involved in the Project

Miyashita: When reading Ms. Lee Chonghwa's *Murmurs as Political Thought*, I noticed the significance of 'vertical' dimension of events, that is, a realm that relates to memories and events experienced by others. On the other hand, in terms of Great East Japan Earthquake and the subsequent nuclear powerplant accidents, for example, we experienced the event 'horizontally'. It still affects us who were there and, in this sense, it is not yet 'past'. There are vertical and horizontal dimensions in how we are involved in events. As we launch the Pen-tomo Project, I'd like to emphasize the potential of artists. As Ms. Lee suggests, they can stimulate our imagination about issues such as how to involve ourselves with others and their various experiences which are unknown to us, or how we can sincerely respond to and pass these on to the next generation. She writes; "How much you can deepen your understanding about the hindrance the speaker's experience as they share previously untold memories is important. Art has the potential to address this dilemma." I really expect artists to assume this role although how to actually achieve it is a difficult issue. I think it is such an important question that we should discuss it together here.

Sato: Reading the texts written by you both, I have the feeling you two are headed in the same direction. But it seems that implementing this project has not been easy and you two have had extended discussions. What are the difficulties?

Oh: There have been two different kinds of difficulties, one of which I anticipated and the other which became

apparent only after we had started. The first difficulty was finding a practical method to facilitate the project. I eventually decided to adopt a form of correspondence but later came to realize the difficulty of finding people who could exchange letters with me. I tried to find those who had immigrant backgrounds or had roots overseas but I soon found I didn't know anybody like that and we didn't know how to get in contact with such people. I was surprised at the fact that living in Tokyo, where so many foreign laborers work in convenience stores and other places, we had no real contact with them. This made me focus on how we could actually meet them....

Miyashita: What you just mentioned was, above all, the motivation to start this project. The problem you just outlined is a feature of living in Koganei. For example, you don't usually come across people who are disabled. It doesn't mean they don't live in our community but most of them spend their daytime hours at the facility for the disabled so we don't have a chance to meet them. Although this kind of centralized governance system catering for disabled people may seem easy and practical to administrate, it hinders us from coming together or encountering each other. Plus, it makes them invisible. When we visited the artist Tari Ito, a wheelchair user, she told us about the meeting room of the city council which is on the third floor of a building with no elevators, saying she couldn't observe court proceedings even though she is a citizen.

Oh: Amazing, it's literally a physical barrier....

Miyashita: On top of that, it functions as a psychological barrier that prevents us from being emotionally connected with others. Similarly, we

often see people who come from overseas but hardly encounter them. It's distressing to see how the society makes these people invisible and the majority behave in a condescending manner, offering help. We have chosen the title 'Border Crossing', hoping it will give people a chance to think about the issue. The difficulty in finding pen friends puts a finger on the problem of our community: various boundaries separate people and hinder their meeting each other. That's why, I believe, this project is significant.

Oh: I've also noticed that people become defensive when asked, "Do you know anybody who can become my pen friend?" Someone even asked me once if artists looking for volunteers to participate in their projects, are not actually exploiting others for their own advantage. When I experienced this kind of response, even though my intention was completely the opposite, I had mixed feelings.... Those who decide to participate voluntarily do so by their own choice so I only hope to create a reciprocal relationship.

#### ●Borderline: The Visible and Invisible

Sato: That shows how the community is strongly affected by borderlines, I guess. The border between the visible and invisible gives us a much deeper insight into the society. Artists begin projects in the hope of encountering invisible others but in fact what should be more important is to make these people visible. They are invisible because of social factors and the fact of being invisible makes them susceptible to exploitative relationships. Although this boundary is not explicit, I understand it strongly affects people's mindset.

Miyashita: People who exist right in front of you are invisible—that is very scary. I suppose we all need to be a bit less rigid and be aware of who's around us. There is a girl who looks Vietnamese, working at a midnight convenience store and she is always friendly to elderly Japanese male customers, treating them with kindness. This kind of story probably receives attention because she is an outsider but I also feel encouraged when I hear it. The borderline is very complex as it can take various forms; it can be strong, weak or even non-linear.

Oh: I agree. If this girl has to behave like that because she is a foreigner, I have a complicated feeling. Living in Australia as a foreigner, I'm sensitive to this kind

of situation. Maybe that's her personality, she may be a kind person with a polite attitude or it's natural to be like that in her own society. I hope we can create a relationship and communicate respecting each other.

Miyashita: When presenting an art project, things become rather formal. We have to explain our intention, need to prepare with care, etc. I bought a dog recently and discovered that dog owners, even though they've never met before, say hello to each other on the street. This surprised me at first but it's interesting that such relationships can exist naturally without standards or norms in some situations. Organizing art projects can create new exclusions and conflicts. And this is an inevitable question that we have to tackle.

Oh: When inviting people to join the letter exchange in this project, I made clear what kind of participants I was actually looking for. That is to say, I also drew a borderline. And some encounters were only possible because of this. It is also important to constantly redraw this line.

Miyashita: Sometimes borderlines make things visible so drawing borders is not necessarily bad. Rather, how we accept what has become visible is important. And we need to respect differences. But if the border appears out of discrimination, superficial compassion or ignorance, we'd better reconsider. In order to closely examine various boundaries, correspondence is an effective method. Or another good idea would be to read out loud as in Ms. Oh's work exhibited at the Art Tower Mito (*The Program of Creation and Discussions, Publicness of the Art Center, Phase I, II, 2019-2020*). Reading letters out loud creates a unique experience and it makes readers realize many things. Organizing projects is not easy but preconceived frameworks can sometimes deepen our understanding, which is the strength and attraction of projects like this.

Oh: How a project will develop is generally difficult to foresee; even with a preconceived framework, when you actually start, the results always differ from my prediction. That's the way it goes.

#### ●Intimate Imagination Towards the Invisible

Sato: Without borderlines or given frameworks, it's quite difficult to meet others. Giving a too precise

request is a problem but as Ms. Oh did, explaining our intention is necessary. And how we can re-encounter people after the first contact is also important. The act of reading and writing one's corporal memories certainly brings about a personal encounter with others.

Miyashita: Writing letters is a solitary action and especially in this project you, the artist, probably haven't met some of the participants face to face. Addressing someone you haven't met and writing something very personal—this is an introspective venture but you have someone to send letters to and you might receive a reply from them. There is a strange dynamism in correspondence which differs from diaries; letter-writers are generally humble and caring towards their recipients. Correspondence is very interesting as a method when we think of how an intimate imagination can be constructed with others.

Oh: In my work presented at the Art Tower Mito, I hosted a workshop in which the participants read out the *International Marriage Social Gathering Newsletter*. This newsletter was a tool of communication between the so-called war brides of Japanese descent living in various countries including Australia and the United States. I was impressed by how these newsletters made up with no explicit structure functioned to bring women together. I think our kind of correspondence can provide a similar framework for communication. You are alone, thinking of the recipient but you also assume your pen friend is thinking about you; and a relationship based on mutual trust is thus created. In this current project, there are several participants whom I haven't actually met. However, we encounter each other by extending our imagination in this way. I hope this will open up an opportunity for exploring a new way of meeting others and developing relationships.

Sato: With how many do you exchange letters now?

Oh: Now, I have Ms. Wi. I've sent a letter to another person, and also there are two people I am planning to organize correspondence with, so four altogether. Between Ms. Wi and I, a staff member called Ms. Nozawa is working as the moderator.

Miyashita: It's a triangular correspondence. Ms. Nozawa is a friend of Ms. Wi. She asks Ms. Wi to tell stories of her grandmother and this stimulates Ms. Wi's memory

and an idea for letters comes to her mind. Ms. Nozawa plays the role of interviewer, which I didn't expect but is interesting.

Oh: Without our correspondence, this kind of method wouldn't have occurred to us, so it's interesting to see that a different type of communication has been established between them. This sort of interaction seems to stimulate their imagination.

Miyashita: Ms. Nozawa also started research about her grandmother. But that is only possible through familiarity with her mother's generation, which is something worth thinking about. Imagining our grandmothers' generation also leads us to think about the basis of modern Japanese society, from the pre-war to the post-war period, including such times as that of rapid economic growth and the collapse of the bubble economy. Moreover, the concept of a grandmother can lead to a micro-historical dimension, which differs from the abstract, linear history written by males. How people actually lived or details of their ordinary daily lives can be important and valuable for later generations.

Oh: Imagining something or recalling memories is a creative activity. The past is evoked in the present. And the present will eventually become the past but is also connected to a certain point in the future. Recalling the past is to identify yourself. It evokes various forgotten images of others. Not all memories are good; if you don't wish to, you don't have to talk about them. I'm not asking people to write letters confessing their secrets. For me, what is important is to create an interaction through the correspondence by my receiving their messages and responding to them. Hearing their stories is not the goal but the beginning and we are now standing in this gateway.

Sato: What Ms. Nozawa is doing interests me: working as a moderator made her want to retrace her own experience. We need some kind of motivation to activate our imagination. In the past few years, triggered by Great East Japan Earthquake, our focus has been on disasters and catastrophes, taking place at present and also in the past. Disasters have been always here, of course, but without our own experience of catastrophes, these events would not occupy our attention as much. Imagination thus creates a bridge over different events

experienced by different people. On the other hand, another important issue is, how we can pass the experience of catastrophes onto future generations; how we can motivate them to put themselves in someone else's shoes as more time passes after the Earthquake. For that purpose, art or creative expression has the potential to motivate people through re-reading and re-telling others' experiences.

Miyashita: What you've just said about activating our imagination through our own experience is interesting. In *Murmurs as Political Thought*, the book I mentioned earlier, Ms. Lee states: when talking about comfort women with students, you can't just say "I can't say anything because it's a complex matter" or "I've never experienced what they went through, so I don't understand". That shows the negligence of the discussants because if you have ever been heartbroken in love, you should be able to understand the pain of others through your own experience of pain. If you have some kind of emotional experience that can open up common ground with others, we might be able to change how we see things.

Oh: That's what an 'intimate imagination' means, I think. When we come across something similar to our own experience or something we are familiar with, our imagination reacts intensely. When I went to the House of Sharing in South Korea and imagined the life of ex-comfort women living there together, this experience made me think of my own grandmother who had emigrated to Japan from South Korea. Therefore, I always believe in the possibility of imagination; when you encounter something linked to your own experience, it can be activated intensely. I always try to make some kind of framework to facilitate this idea. I intended to do this in the work presented at the Art Tower Mito in which participants read letters written by somebody else. By reading letters aloud, as if they actually experienced it, their body inevitably traces the experiences originally lived by somebody else. We can thus project our own imagination towards the others who wrote these letters.

Sato: Going back to the topic we started our discussion from, making the invisible visible through this project, I think, enriches our life. They have been invisible because other people were mostly content with their lives and didn't feel the necessity to acknowledge them.

Therefore, trying to change this mindset is important. When we talk about drawing lines, we tend to focus on the existence of borders or the fact of something being invisible but this is only the starting point for discussion. What is more significant is to change our way of living through encountering different individual lives.

Oh: Yes, we can't pretend as if they don't exist. What is invisible does actually exist...

Miyashita: Sometimes it's really distressing to see people talk only from the perspective of right or wrong and reach the banal conclusion that discrimination is bad. What is more important than affirming a division that exists between different sides, is to find a small hole, try jumping over it like a pole vaulter or peep through it.... If we can reach beyond a discussion of how to get rid of divisions and borders and look at them more closely, we can probably find a better approach. This was the basic concept when we launched this project.

Sato: Meeting people only through correspondence without seeing them face to face—this is one way to experience a deep encounter with others. Talking to someone face to face is not the only way to encounter people. Various other ways are also possible. It would be ideal if we could increase these options of how we come to know people.

Oh: That's true. If what is written in letters is detailed and personal, even without actually meeting the authors face to face, I can genuinely sympathize with them and the letters leave a big impression on me. I am planning to share these letters with the public. I hope some kind of interaction based on empathy can arise from there.

## The Pen-tomo Project – Depicting Our Imaginary Landscapes

Haji Oh

The term 'border-crossing' indicates the attitude or intention to transcend a line or boundary. Yet I feel a sense of alienation towards what the word suggests: it affirms the existence of a border that separates one side from another. Perhaps this feeling arises from my awareness of my own positionality in relation to borders.

People who live with diverse identities these days probably move back and forth between various boundaries on a daily basis; although most people who are in this position probably try to disregard this fact.

For a long time, I have been standing on a borderline which is drawn around me, trying my best to stay balanced. As a third-generation Korean immigrant born in Japan, currently living in Australia, this borderline has always been there right in front of me, disturbing my equilibrium. Even living overseas, I repeatedly think that there is a line at my feet drawn by some force in Japanese society that will never disappear.

Historian, Tessa Morris-Suzuki mentions in her book, *Past within Us: Media, Memory, History*:

Postmodern writings illuminate the fact that the lines we draw around particular pasts—the spatial lines around national, regional or civilizational history and the temporal lines around eras like the Middle Ages or modernity—are mental constructions, and that the texture of the past looks very different when the lines are redrawn. And they remind us that the same events can generate many different narratives, each with its own internal 'regime of

truth.'<sup>[1]</sup> (Morris-Suzuki, 234)

The borderline around me also constitutes a historical narrative with "its own internal 'regime of truth'". The more people enforce this line, the more impossible dialogue becomes, it seems. Through the historical narrative described above, what alternative perspectives can emerge? How can we break this deadlock? Perhaps it is only possible by the hands of those who have lived with and accepted this socially constructed borderline.

If this border is a mental construct as Morris-Suzuki claims, maybe it is possible to redraw it. For instance, we can examine the nature of each line to identify for who and for what purpose it has been made, or we can try to prevent individuals from being treated homogeneously, as if these lines never existed. This kind of approach can help us deconstruct these assumptions.

Reinventing the way in which history is told is equally important. I imagine a narrative which weaves stories as if linking scattered dots—this differs from a systematized narration based on pre-existing lines and categories. A mode of narrative with pliable, organic lines and elastic movements allows us to see a much expanded array of entities.

The lines thus obtained and woven from deconstructed mental constructs may obscure the contours of original lines. Yet redrawing a line through unraveling and weaving can also be considered border crossing; in the sense that the border ceases to exist.

Out of such a narrative, what kind of alternative

entity emerges? And who would we find there? I would like to name this new space that becomes visible through such imagination 'our imaginary landscape'.

## The Pen-tomo Project

We started the Pen-tomo project in an attempt to depict 'our imaginary landscapes'. 'Pen-tomo' (pen friend) means someone with whom you regularly exchange letters. Pen friends sometimes build up trust through correspondence and experience close intimacy even if they have never met. This form of communication, although between people who are physically distanced, can actually encourage discussion about things that are usually hidden even from close friends. When writing a letter, we think about the recipient as we express our thoughts. The words thus chosen resemble a narrative told in everyday language.

I started this project in the hope of finding immigrants who live in Koganei and other areas around Tokyo <sup>[ii]</sup>. Through letters I hear their stories and ask them to share their memories of landscapes which they have known. First, I prepared a theme, 'grandmother's life: clothing, food and housing' for our correspondence.

Through the experience of creating art related to my grandmother's memory, I have come to realize something significant. The concept of 'grandmother' <sup>[iii]</sup> allows us to access a more vivid imagination of the past, which also leads to the possibility of opening up our imagination to others. This process enables us to realize that the past is not merely something finished but also points to the future.

Memory is not static, it constantly transforms itself within the passing flow of time and presents itself as a dynamic relation. [...] Remembering is a process of confirming one's deep relationship to the world and eventually leads us to the core of creation. <sup>[iv]</sup> (Ito, 30)

The letter becomes a medium of conveying the voices of immigrants in Japan who with their diverse backgrounds have been through transformations in their daily lives. The 'true' scenery imagined through their memories, the sceneries their letters make us see, will help us unravel the mentally-constructed past and

draw our own imaginary landscapes.

I am writing this text to people who share an interest in this project. Among them are included those who wish to exchange letters with me. The language issue always stands in the way for immigrants. This project might cause them distress. As a learner of English living in Australia, I also experience the frustration that accompanies learning new languages. The problem of facing obscure nuances of words on a daily basis makes us become hesitant. I know there are words that remain unuttered in an unfamiliar language. In other words, we all live embracing the incomprehensible. I am still looking for the best way to organize this project. Thanks to the tolerant participants who have accepted my invitation under the current uncertain circumstances, it has started.

Starting from letter exchange, I hope branches and leaves will grow out, extending to create a mesh on which a distant landscape will emerge...

### Endnotes

[i] Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *Past within Us: Media, Memory, History*, London; New York: Verso, 2005, p.234.

[ii] The participants include immigrants and women who have roots overseas (university students are not included) living in the Koganei / Tokyo area.

[iii] The word 'grandmother' here does not necessarily indicate a blood relationship. It refers to elderly women or people who belong to previous generations (about two generations before).

[iv] Toshiharu Ito, *Machi wa kioku de dekite iru* [The City is Comprised of Memories: An Art Project that Creates New Memory], Osaka, Breaker Project 2011-2013, 2014, p.30.

## 語彙リスト/ goi list / vocabulary list

原風景 / genfukei / imaginary landscape : the original view, scenery

越境 / ekkyou / border crossing: to go beyond boundaries

疎外 / sogai / alienation : to exclude someone

歴史 / rekishi / history : the form of transformation from past to present, or its record

観念的 / kannenteki / mental : the way you capture the subject in your heart, thoughts

構造物 / kouzoubutsu / constructions : something that is constructed

様相 / yousou / aspect : condition, state

真実 / shinjitsu / truth : fact with no lie

体系 / taiki / system : an entity into which individual substances are unified based on a certain principle

硬直 / kouchoku / stiffen : to become stiff, not easily bent

糸口 / itoguchi / clue : a hint leading to some fact

有機的 / yukiteki / organic : creating one whole by intimately connecting and relating to each other

想像 / souzou / imagine : to form an image inside your heart

信頼 / shinrai / trust : to trust and rely on someone or something

衣食住 / ishokujyu / clothing, food and housing

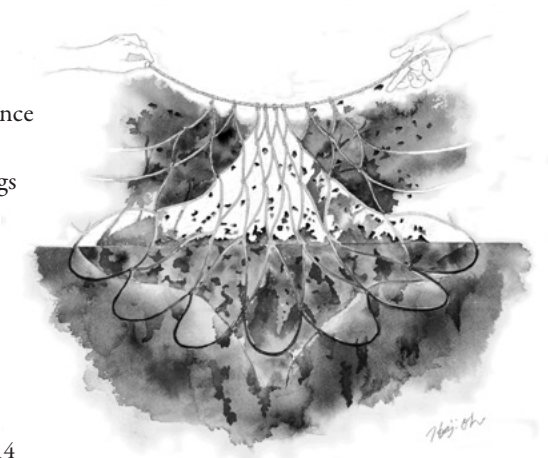
親密 / shinmitsu / intimate : warm friendship with trust

創造 / souzou / creation : the act of bringing something into existence

核心 / kakushin / core : the central or most important part of things

慎重 / shincho / prudence : acting thoughtfully and carefully

寛容 / kanyou / tolerance : accepting of people, broad minded



Reference/source: 三省堂 Web Dictionary <https://www.sanseido.biz> 2020.3.14

## Would You Like to Participate in the Pen-tomo Project?

Hello. My name is Haji Oh. I am an artist currently living in Australia and I create art work, traveling back and forth between Japan. I am looking for people who would like to participate in my project.

I am asking those who have overseas backgrounds and lived in Japan as immigrants to talk about their grandmothers or their lives in Japan. Since I live in Australia now, I am looking for pen friends who can tell their stories through letters. I'd like you to tell me your stories through correspondence.

Regarding language, I am thinking of exchanging messages in 'Romaji'. For example, like this:

*Konnichiwa hajimemashite, yoroshikereba pentomo ni natte moraemasen ka? Yoroshiku onegai shimasu.*

Please use *hiragana* or *kanji*, if that is easier for you. In case you prefer using your first language, translators will work in between.

Please get in touch for more information.

I would be very grateful if you could become my pen friend.

Best regards,

Haji Oh

### Please send us a letter...

- When sending a letter, please use the letter pad printed in this leaflet. Or send us a postcard or email. Feel free to include photos, drawings; anything is welcome.
- Please write about the memory of your grandmother: her life, clothing, food and housing.
- The letters will be shown on our website or used as a part of my artwork.
- Language: Japanese, Romaji or your own language (translators will work in between).
- We will return the postage later by giving you the stamps you used. Please contact us for more information.

[Contact details]

Artfull-action, nonprofit organization

Address:

Koganei chateau 2F,  
6-5-3, Honcho, Koganei-shi, Tokyo,  
184-0004, Japan

Email: [mail@artfullaction.net](mailto:mail@artfullaction.net)

Please address to: Miho Miyashita

Website: <https://artfullaction.net/>

## Triangular Letter Exchange

Triangular Letter Exchange is the name given to correspondence between Wi and Haji, working together with Nozawa as a moderator. 'Grandmother's life, clothing, food and housing' was chosen as a theme and they began communicating after Nozawa wrote a letter based on the account given by Wi.

2020.02.16 20:50

Dear Wi,

Hello, my name is Haji Oh.

.....Nozawa has given me an outline of the stories of your grandmother.

.....There was a mention of a dish where you stuff glutinous rice, coconut milk, and red beans inside a bamboo. What do you call it?

Haji

2020.02.17 17:27

Hello, my name is Domon Wi.

.....

This dish is called 'sticky rice in bamboo'. We don't cook it at home these days. When we want some, we buy it at the store.

Wi :)

2020.02.20 17:41

Dear Haji,

Hi,

I met Wi yesterday and asked her to use her own language....Wring in Japanese seems to be difficult....

Nozawa

2020.02.21 14:50

Dear Wi,

Hi,

I received an email from Nozawa yesterday. Sorry for troubling you. You have sent me the material before so it's fine.

Thank you very much.

.....In Japanese, there are several ways to say 'grandmother', such as 'obaachan' and 'sobo'. In Thai, is there only one expression, 'yai' ?

.....

Haji



2020.02.21 15:14

Hi,

'Yai' means 'mother of mother'. Mother of father is 'yaa'...

Near the Inthanon Mountain there were many Mango trees.

Wi

2020.01.31

In Thai, we call grandmothers 'yai'. My grandmother's name is 'Kun' but I always called her 'yai'.

Grandmother gave birth to ten children and my mother was the oldest daughter.

She passed away when she was 84.

She lived in a town in the northern part of Thailand.

There was a river behind our house and I used to play there with my cousins.

Taking a bath with my grandmother after she had finished washing was my favorite moment.

In the day time, I played in the river with my cousins.

There was a boat shared by the villagers and we played on it.

In the garden, there were vegetables and fruit growing and my grandmother used them for cooking every day. She was good at cooking and she often made fried rice with eggs. It was really delicious and I loved it.

There was no gas in our house and we used a charcoal stove in the kitchen.

When I was small, it was cold in January and we made bonfires in the garden.

We put potatoes in the fire or cooked a Thai dish of bamboo stuffed with glutinous rice, coconut milk and red beans and ate it.

We ate one each.

In the countryside of Thailand, most houses are single-storey but my grandmother's was two-storied which was rare. Grandfather and grandmother's room was on the second floor.

There was no partition on the first floor and we all spent our time there together. When everyone gathered to sleep over, grandmother also slept with us on the first floor at night.

She helped me with my homework and study. She taught me very kindly.

She was a good teacher.

To be continued....

Wi's 'Grandmother's Life, Clothing, Food and Housing,' made into a text by Nozawa.

---