

**Performance Art as Mirroring Identities:
As Examination of Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* (1997-2001)**

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Abstract

This paper examines how South Korean artists use performance art as a medium to explore the complexities of identity formation and the transnationalism in the context of globalization. It focuses specifically on South Korean artist Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* (1997-2001). I argue that Lee addresses the relationship of self and other through a conceptual strategy of simulated assimilation to reveal how transnational identity formation is shaped by imagined communities and a desire for group belonging. Lee's conceptual approach to identity formation is contextualized through a discussion of the relationship of performativity to photography, and by a comparison of *Projects* with artworks by South Korean artists such as Do Ho Suh, and Sooja Kim. In so doing, the paper seeks to demonstrate how contemporary South Korean artists have challenged their derivative ties to international Western art practices, and made unique contributions to the contemporary art scene.

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To My Parents in South Korea

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Contextualizing Nikki S. Lee's Work in Relation to the Emergence of Performance Art in South Korea	5
Chapter Two: Collectivity and Individuality as Markers of Identity Formation	16
Chapter Three: Performance Art and Its Documentation	26
Chapter Four: Performance Art and Mirroring Act	33
Conclusion	41
Bibliography	43

Introduction

Since the 1980s, almost half a million South Koreans have decided to live abroad, with eased restrictions on travel and improved access to various countries permitting them to relocate to cities such as New York and Paris, and to immigrate to countries such as Canada.¹ This rapid growth of immigration has led to the recent rise and international popularity of South Korean artists in the West. Many of these artists were born and raised in South Korea but live abroad, enabling them to position their artworks within the transnational flow of people and goods in a globalized world, and providing opportunities for them to mark their presence in the international art scene that is dominated by the Western, and specifically American, interchange of ideas, products, and cultures. Margo Machida, the author of Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian Artists And The Social Imaginary (2008), has termed Asian artists' works that invoke self-awareness in the social imaginary of the West as "iconographies of presence."² This term draws attention to artists who as immigrants exert themselves to become more connected with cultural commonalities of a global context rather than privilege the essential cultural identity of their homelands. One such artist is Nikki S. Lee, whose series of artworks entitled *Projects* (1997-2001) explores the relationship of herself to group identities, and employs a conceptual strategy of simulating her assimilation with these groups to create a critical site for thinking about her migratory identity.

¹ Gerard Chaliand and Jean-Pierre Rageau, *The Penguin Atlas of the Diasporas*, trans. A.M. Berrett (New York: Viking, 1995), p.181.

² Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: Contemporary Asian Artists and the Social Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p.19.

Projects documents through snapshot photography Lee's integration into different social and cultural subgroups, such as punks, Latinos, exotic dancers, and tourists, which is enacted through a performative process in which she spends extended amounts of time with these groups and seeks to become like them through mimicking their appearance and gestures. For instance, in *The Ohio Project* (1999), Lee completely puts aside her Asian image; she dyes her hair blonde, gains weight, and wears a loose t-shirt and jean shorts to modify herself and fit into the cultural mores of a working-class neighbourhood.³ From one project to the other, the photographs that document her performative process of becoming someone other than herself reveals how Lee has successfully entertained the possibility of remaking her identity through an affinity with different ethnic and social groups. In doing so, Lee's photographs of herself with these groups, in which she has altered her appearance and attitude, make the viewers question where she is, what she is doing, who she is with, and why she has chosen to "become" one of the group. Lee pushes the boundary of identity and place, of how we define 'ourselves' in proximity to the others we choose to surround ourselves with. In so doing, she exemplifies how a new generation of South Korean artists are using performative strategies to interrogate how identity is constructed and enacted in the context of globalization.

In order to contextualize the cross-cultural issues raised by Lee's self-representational artistic practices, each chapter of this paper discusses Lee's work in relation to how performance art has played critical role in representing and reimagining

³ Images can be found in Nikki S. Lee, *Projects: Nikki S. Lee; With an Essay by Russell Ferguson and An Interview by Gilbert Vicario*, ed. Lesley A. Martin in Association with Umbrage Editions (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), pp.62-67.

how identity is constructed. Chapter One discusses the chronological history of performance art in general, and specifically the genealogy of South Korean performance art as it developed both in the domestic and international arts world. I consider how South Korean artistic practices interact with Western art world in terms of methods and aspirations, and how an understanding of the cultures of the East and West differ in history and traditions, while discussing how South Korean artists achieved recognition in the international art world.

Chapter Two considers Lee's approach to the collective and individual dimensions of identity in her *Projects* (1997-2000) series. In order to emphasize how Lee's strategic identification with subculture groups constructs a collectivity that imagines a local rather than a nationalist sense of belonging, another diasporic South Korean artist, Do Ho Suh is discussed as a point of comparison. Lee's strategy of examining fluid identity through illustrating shared characteristics with subcultures in United States and her attempt to illuminate cultural belongingness within specific groups distinguishes her work from a nationalist search for belonging, and highlights the significance of Lee's transformative approach to identity through blurring the boundaries of herself and others. Chapter Three explores Lee's use of analogue photography in order to represent artist's interventions into the signifying process, and thus the formation of the self, by using technologies of representation. Drawing on Philip Auslander's theory about the documentation of performance and body art, I explore Lee's use of photography to document her performances within subcultural milieus, and how photography reflects her construction of identity as determined by relationships with others.

Finally, Chapter Four compares Lee's *Projects* with *A Needle Woman* (1999-2005) by Sooja Kim, who is also a significant performance artist from South Korea. Even though both of these works are made in similar period, and the artists share the same nationality, their artistic strategies differ in presenting South Korean contemporary art to international audiences. The comparison of these two artists' works reveals how their bodily approach to the social structures of identity raises questions about what it means to be both an individual and a member of a community defined by globally determined (and over-determined) concepts of race, culture, and nation. Through my specific focus on Lee in the second and third chapters and the comparative discussion of Lee and Kim in the last chapter, I seek to illuminate the complexity of South Korean artists' use of performance and media and the diversity and vitality of contemporary South Korean performance art, and to demonstrate how South Korean artists' positive approaches to the imagined communities of group identities are key aspects of this complexity.

Chapter One: Contextualizing Nikki S. Lee's Work in Relation to the Emergence of Performance Art in South Korea

Before turning to in-depth analysis of Nikki S. Lee's work, it is important to contextualize her work in relation to how performance art has developed within art history. Unlike other forms of art such as drawings, paintings, or installations, works of performance art are uniquely produced through the focus on the artists' gestures and actions related to body and to elements of process and time. The genesis of performance art can be traced back to the works of Jackson Pollock, John Cage, Lucio Fontana, and Shozo Simamoto, influential artists of the post-war period of the 1950s who investigated the primacy of the gesture in painting.⁴ This significant artistic movement changed the traditional relationship between the artist and the art object, and provided a different perceptive framework for audiences. Jackson Pollock's action paintings, for instance, allowed the viewers to experience a gestural immediacy, and each performance was worth attending for audiences, who became witness to his alteration of his paintings. Since Pollock's paintings encompassed a performative dimension, their creation took place in real place in real time, and completely moved out of traditional convention of the medium. Another example of an early type of performance art is 'Happenings,' which were initiated in the late 1950s. In Happenings, the primary goal of performed actions was to focus on "the process of creation rather than the production of objects."⁵ This dematerialization of the art object was an attempt to separate art from material, and to value the artists' action itself. Instead of following the traditional theatrical formats,

⁴ Gregory Battcock, *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas (New York: Dutton, 1984), p.18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.17.

Happenings were characterized by their strong visual dimensions rather than by a conventional narrative, and involved the active participations of audience during the performance. This primacy of the "process of creation" remains core to contemporary performance art today, and informs Lee's emphasis on the performative process of becoming part of a group to reimagine her identity.

At the same time as Happenings were moving beyond traditional theatrical formats to privilege actions as an art form, Japanese Gutai artists were creating richly metaphorical works that paralleled the visual gestural arena of Happenings.⁶ The Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai (Gutai Art Association) was established in 1954 by Jiro Yoshihara, and included diverse artists who lived through the devastating experience of World War II.⁷ Under the slogan of "Create What Has Not Been Done Before," Gutai artists continuously challenged traditional art forms such as oil paintings, which were an imported art form from Europe, and actively engaged with the conditions of post-war modernity.⁸ The name for Yoshihara's group of artists, Gutai, is derived from Japanese word of "concrete," reflecting the artists' desire to produce works of art that represented the postwar world context in a concrete manner.⁹ For example, Gutai artists used unorthodox materials such as old newspapers, light bulbs, mud, smoke, and even when they used paint, parts of their bodies became paintbrushes. The works of Gutai artists in the 1950s and 1960s brought Japanese contemporary art one-step closer to the global stage. The prominent Japanese

⁶ Gregory Battcock, *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas (New York: Dutton, 1984), p.25.

⁷ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed), *Art In Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p.698.

⁸ Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.22.

critic Haryu Ichiro characterized this growing sense of internationalism in Japanese contemporary art as "international contemporaneity":

In my opinion, the concept of art internationally underwent a major change around 1955 or 1956. In retrospect, the tendency varyingly called "informel" and Action Painting" arose like an avalanche in this transitional period. As far as Japan is concerned, we have now transcended the dualism of East vs. West, the choice between the borrowed Modernism and Japonica-traditionalism. We have finally achieved the consciousness of "contemporary" in the sense of "international contemporaneity."¹⁰

While Japanese Gutai artists were achieving international acclaim for their active participation in deconstructing conventional art practices, artists from other Asian countries also began to define their artistic activities in innovative ways to produce a truly new kind of art in terms of the creation and destruction of the art object and the merging of Eastern and Western influences. Most significantly, South Korean-born artist Nam Jun Paik made works that entered the mainstream of the international contemporaneity. Born in 1932 in what is now South Korea, Paik and his family fled the country during the Korean War (1950-1953), and took up residence in different countries and cities, including Hong Kong, Japan, Germany and New York.¹¹ Paik's upbringing and artistic experiences in diverse countries enabled him to be actively involved in the international art movement of the 1960s known as Fluxus, which was closely identified with creation of artworks and performances in musical form and which encompassed a diverse range of

¹⁰ Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.99.

¹¹ Korean war is a war between North and South Korea, which happened after liberation from World War II. This three-year war of attrition resulted American administrators to divide North and South Korea by the 38th parallel (38 선), which still remains up to present day. Youngna Kim, *Tradition, Modernity and Identity: Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 2005), p.3.

artists and composers.¹² Paik's use of mix media works and ephemeral actions had the objective of upsetting conventional notions of daily life and art, and within the Fluxus movement Paik featured prominently as an artist who merged East and West through the idea of a "flowing streaming."¹³ Scholar Yong-woo Lee elaborates the significance of Paik's South Korean background in shaping his artworks in Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists From Korea (2009), stating that "[Paik has] an Eastern spirit who create[d] with a Western touch, and a Western thinker who manifest[ed] glimmers of Eastern reasoning [...] there is no opposition between Western art and the artist's Taoist ideas, Confucianist background, and Oriental sensibility."¹⁴ With Yong-woo Lee's comments in mind, Paik's artworks can be seen to have been instrumental in combining Eastern ideologies with Western art, which later had significant impact in the South Korean art world and the formation of the generation of artists to whom Lee belongs.

At the same time as Nam June Paik was actively producing his works of art on the international scene with the Fluxus movement during the 1970s, for South Korean artists living and working in South Korea the international recognition that Paik enjoyed and participating in international exhibition was merely a dream. During General Park Chung-hee's twenty-year-long presidency (1961-1979), South Korea was in the grip of a military dictatorship that resulted in the rise of nationalism and emphasized the slogan of

¹² According to Simon Anderson's Fluxus: A Brief History and Other Fictions (1993), the founding member of Fluxus, Maciunas, used the actual dictionary definition of 'flux' as part of the definition of Fluxus as an "[a]ct of flowing, a continuous moving on or passing by, as of a flowing stream, a continuous succession of changes."
Simon Anderson, "Fluxus: A Brief History and Other Fictions" from *In The Spirit of Fluxus*, ed. Janet Jenkins (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), p.71.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Christine Starkman and Lynn Zelevansky. *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists From Korea*, ed. Joan Kee and Sunjung Kim (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2009), p.46.

"Things Korean are Things Global," which in context of South Korea exhorted artists to disregard all foreign influences and privilege all things South Korean.¹⁵ The government strictly controlled international travel for artists, and South Korean artists were limited to obtaining their information about art related issues through art journals or exhibition catalogues from art museums abroad. This narrow-minded idea of Koreanness and restrictions on travelling abroad limited South Korean artists' knowledge of and inclusion in global trends in contemporary art in the 1960s and 1970s at a time in which performance art emerged as a significant art movement in the West.

By the late 1970s, a critical mass of private funders had entered the South Korean art world and enabled South Korean artists to enter the world stage. For instance, top newspaper companies such as 조선일보 (Chosun Newspaper), 동아일보(Dong-a Newspaper), and 중앙일보 (Jung-Ang Newspaper) started to sponsor art competitions to acknowledge and support contemporary South Korean art and potential artists.¹⁶ Conglomerates (재벌가) such as Samsung were another critical force in the South Korean art market. In the context of this influx of private funding and the opening of South Korea to external influences, Nam June Paik was one of the first South Korean artists to be both recognized internationally and gain internal support and recognition within South Korea through the sponsorship of conglomerate companies like Samsung and Daewoo. These companies donated television monitors for Paik's video installation, *다다익선 (The More, The Better)* (1988), at the 국립현대미술관 (National Museum of

¹⁵ Youngna Kim, *Tradition, Modernity and Identity: Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 2005), p.42.

¹⁶ Christine Starkman and Lynn Zelevansky, *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists From Korea*, ed. Joan Kee and Sunjung Kim (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2009), p.17.

Contemporary Art) located in Seoul of South Korea, and this event sparked many youth artists' curiosity about video art and brought new vitality to their works.¹⁷

Despite Paik's recognition and success in South Korea as a significant artist, performance art has remained a relatively obscure art form in South Korea until recently. For example, another significant South Korean artist Ku-lim Kim, who was part of the first generation of the Korean post-World War II avant-garde, was not recognized in South Korea until very recently. Ku-lim Kim experimented in seemingly every area of art, from paintings and object art to Happenings, land art, mail art, body art, experimental film, engraving, and video. In other words, if one decided to use terms like experimentation and avant-garde, then Ku-lim Kim clearly belongs among the very top names in the development of contemporary art in South Korea. However, at the time he was working in the 1960s and 1970s, South Korean art critics did not recognize Ku-lim Kim's active engagement with bodily artistic practice. Even today, performance art has yet to be fully recognized as non-traditional art practice and remains a new field of study in South Korea's art world. Most of South Korea's art schools are still heavily focusing on the traditional art education such as drawings, paintings, and sculptures. Professor Jin-sup Yoon from 호남대학교 (Honam University) elaborates this lack of understanding about avant-garde movements in South Korea in his article A Vindication For The Reappraisal Of Kim Ku-lim, stating that:

[Ku-lim Kim's] works that had been impossible to realize back in the day for a variety of reasons, not least the lack of understanding of avant-garde art. Realizing a work of art is one of the biggest frustrations for the artist, so perhaps an art museum exhibition [is] an important opportunity both for

¹⁷ Youngna Kim, *Tradition, Modernity and Identity: Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 2005), p.84.

Kim Ku-lim as an artist, and for the viewers who had longed to see his unrealized work over the years.¹⁸

In this respect, both the latent recognition of Ku-lim Kim's endeavors in his artistic activities in past decades, and Paik's reputation as an international South Korean artist, were important markers for the next generation of South Korean artists, setting the stage for their engagement with performative art practices.

Following on Paik, Sooja Kim is one of the most important South Korean artists to have opened more doors to South Korean artists at the international level.¹⁹ Similar to Paik, Kim was not recognized until she received the attention from international exhibitions, even though she has produced various works of art in South Korea. Born in 1957 and raised in South Korea, Kim studied at the Lithography Studio in Paris in 1984 then moved to New York in 1992 to actively participate in the art world. Kim has produced multiple works of art in a various forms such as installations, photographs, performances, videos, and site-specific projects. Her initial artworks involved South Korean traditional cloth materials and colored bed covers to emphasize both traditional female labour of South Korea, and to represent the history of the daily lives of South Korean women. In an interview with Oliva Maria Rubio in 2006, Kim explained the South Korean nature of the materiality of these works:

[t]here are two different dimensions in my use of traditional Korean bedcovers: one is the formalistic aspect as a tableau and as a potential sculpture. The other is as a dimension of body and its destiny that embraces my personal questions as well as social, cultural and political

¹⁸ Jin-sup Yoon, "A Vindication for the Reappraisal of Kim Ku-lim" from *Exhibition Catalogue of Kim Ku-lim: Like You Know It All* (Seoul: Seoul Museum of Art, 2013).

¹⁹ Youngna Kim, *Tradition, Modernity and Identity: Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 2005), p.7.

issues. [...] for a country that is going through such a transitional period: from a traditional way of life to a modern one.²⁰

As such, Kim's artistic strategies involving traditional South Korean clothing materials allowed her to engage with her childhood memories and nostalgia for her homeland while living in a foreign country. In this sense, Kim created a context for postmodern and gender specific artworks that referenced issues of dislocation and nationalist belonging, while Paik created a context for modern South Korean experimentation and internationalization.

Today, South Korean artists in the context of globalization continue to build upon this history of experimentation and the exploration of issues of dislocation and belonging.²¹ Of this younger generation, photographer and filmmaker Nikki S. Lee is a prime example. Lee was born in 1970 and raised in South Korea, then moved to New York in 1993 to continue her studies in commercial photography. Her famous photographic series, *Projects* (1997 - 2000), initially began as a school assignment in which she explored performing her assimilation into American subculture. Subsequently, Lee expanded her performing of cultural communities to various kinds of social groups such as punks, tourists, young Japanese, lesbians, Hispanics, yuppies, swingers, seniors, people from Ohio, exotic dancers, and skateboarders. Lee's choice of communities and

²⁰ Carmen Calvo Poyato and Oliva Maria Rubio, *Kim Sooja aka Kimsooja: To Breathe A Mirror Woman/ Respira Una Mujer Espejo* (Spain: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia Ministerio de Cultura, 2006).

Retrieved from http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/rubio_Interview.html.

Accessed date on October.12th.2013.

²¹ When South Korea entered 1990s, many South Korean young artists were inspired to study and produce artworks in places like New York, London, Paris, or Tokyo in order to actively participate in the international art world. In fact, many believed and still believe that it is necessary to not to limit oneself to artistic activity within South Korea.

Youngna Kim, *Tradition, Modernity and Identity: Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 2005), p.96.

her integration into them as a visual sociological experiment raise the question of how one becomes part of, or more specifically, belongs to the particular group. Lee simulates each group's semiotic codes of clothes and appearances, attempts to mimic their bodily gestures and postures, and joins the activities that are typical and often stereotypical of them. According to E. Ann Kaplan in Post Modernism And Its Discontents: Theories, And Practices (1988), "we will never be able to understand the desires that move people in our world, that bind them to certain powers and make them resist others, until we understand the role(s) of culture in relation to desire."²² In this sense, Lee's desire to represent multiple identities of herself through social groupings brings forth her own notion of understanding her subject position as one framed by multiculturalism and a post-nationalist identity.

Similar to the way in which Gutai and Nam Jun Paik were emblematic of a desire to re-examine the role of art as experimentation in a radically altered culture and society following the end of World War II, so Lee's *Projects* is emblematic of a desire to interrogate the current condition of globalization in which contemporary artists are concerned with issues of identity beyond national borders. Lee's making of critical connections between herself and social groups provides the possibility of her engagement with social, cultural, and historical issues that extend beyond her South Korean heritage. Her manifestation of the characteristics of different ethnicities, sexualities, and ages through her simulation of assimilating into these groups makes the viewer question the fluidity of human existence when viewed in different social and cultural contexts. In turn, Lee's documentation of her intimate relationships with these different social groups

²² E. Ann Kaplan, *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), pp.45-46.

through photography, which records a constantly shifting relationship of self to bodily image and gesture, highlights that her identity is always in the "process of formation."²³ In other words, *Projects* allows Lee to experience identity both as an individual and as a member of the group, and her body serves as a symbol of presence and physical engagement, which accords a significant role for artist as a performing subject.

In this respect, what distinguishes Lee's work from historical examples of performance art in South Korea is her use and transformation of her own body to question identity construction rather than the art object. In Body Art: Performing The Subject (1998), American art historian, art critic and curator Amelia Jones prefers to use 'body art' instead of using the term 'performance art' in order to emphasize how the artist's body is the "locus of a disintegrated or dispersed self," and thus central to the interrogation of identity.²⁴ British and Australian sociologist Bryan Stanley Turner argues in Body And Society: Explorations In Social Theory (1984) that

[t]he body is at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing - a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and multiplicity. The body is the most proximate and immediate feature of my social self, a necessary feature of my social location of my personal enselfment and at the same time an aspect of my personal alienation in the natural environment.²⁵

In the sense of these concepts of the body and social self, Lee uses her body to perform a self-conscious process of defining one's self within dynamic flow of people and places.

²³ Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities" from *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.47.

²⁴ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp.12-13.

²⁵ Bryan S. Turner, *Body and Society: Exploration in Social Theory* (London and California: SAGE, 2008), p.8.

Accordingly, *Projects* acknowledges the significant shifts since the 1990s that have occurred in the demography and cultural politics of South Korea within a globalizing world context. Lee's unique way of locating her own body to represent a globalized self reminds Asian immigrants, including myself, about the relationship between dislocation and "positions of enunciation."²⁶ Lee's presence in each project and her use of performative strategies to experience being the other represents the immigrant experience as a positive one of adaptation. In other words, her performances remind us of how we strive when living abroad to thrive by fitting in, how we define our identity in relation to others, and how this process of constructing one's own identity has become one of the more important issues in an ever increasing globalized world.

²⁶ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" from *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), p.222.

Chapter 2: Collectivity and Individuality as Markers of Identity Formation.

Until I moved from South Korea to Canada, I never thought about how to understand different cultures other than my own due to South Korea's emphasis on the homogenization of its citizenry. Even though thousands of foreign workers have relocated to South Korea and the international marriage rate has increased, the immigrant experience in South Korea is still one of racism and the struggle for citizen rights.²⁷ In turn, while Canada is distinguished from South Korea in its conception of the nation as a multicultural one since 1970s, there are still invisible boundaries between different races, genders, cultures and nations that are operative in the daily life of the Canadian immigrant. In considering my own positionality as a non-white minority living Canada, the fundamental question of identity that arises is how I can overcome the stereotypical image of being Asian, and how I can fit into groups of people from different backgrounds. These concerns about my own identity lead to broader questions concerning identity formation. Who has the power to assign identities, and to whom? What shapes people's sense of who they are in relation to other people? How is identity socially constructed, and how is it performed? And why do we try so hard to claim an identity? In considering this array of questions, my argument in this chapter is that Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* (1997 - 2000) exemplifies the process of constructing one's identity as one which is constantly in flux and which affirms self-representation and artistic agency in a transnational context.

As a New York-based South Korean artist, Lee's initial interest in making artworks focused on how people think about their bodies within the context of the

²⁷ Soyang Park, "'Xen: Migration, Labor, and Identity: Young Soon Min with Allen deSouza" from *Third Text* (Vol. 19, Issue 4, July 2005), pp.427-429.

differences between Eastern and Western cultures.²⁸ Living in New York enabled Lee to notice how the Western perspective of identity focuses on the individual as culturally and ethnically defined. However, Lee did not want to limit her identity to her specific cultural background as a South Korean, and wanted to explore her identity in relation to different situations and groups. This led Lee to produce multiple artworks that interrogate how her own identity as South Korean is not derived from an essential set of cultural traits and stereotypes, but rather constructed through and in relation to her surroundings. In so doing, she drew attention on the notion of identity in South Korea as determined more by the relationships one has with other people than by individualism. This way of identifying the self in relation to the other is constructed through the nature of Korean society, in which the first-person singular is used much less frequently than in European cultures and 공동체 의식 (roughly translated as community sentiment) shapes identity formation in relation to "we" rather than "I."²⁹

To demonstrate how this subtle boundary between the individual and collectivity functions in South Korean society, it is helpful to examine a work by the internationally acclaimed New York-based South Korean sculptor and installation artist Do Ho Suh. Since late 1990s, Suh has continuously produced works of art in relation to a South Korean ideology that imposes mechanisms to construct a collective identity for the nation.

²⁸ Lee attaches herself to various communities, adopts herself according to their bodily gestures and behavioural norms, and has herself photographed in more or less amateurish snapshots, supposedly unstaged, and normally shot by any bystanders or group members. Nikki S. Lee, *Projects: Nikki S. Lee; With an Essay by Russell Ferguson and an Interview by Gilbert Vicario*, ed. Lesley A. Martin in Association with Umbrage Editions (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), p.100.

²⁹ Christine Starkman and Lynn Zelevansky, *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists From Korea*, ed. Joan Kee and Sunjung Kim (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2009), p.34.

His photographic work, *Who Am We?* (2000), is particularly instructive in this regard.³⁰ The title of Suh's artwork in itself alludes to the lack of a distinction between the singular and plural in Korean. While grammatically incorrect, it is intentionally so, intended to address the conflation of collective and individual identity in Korean society, which in *Who Am We?* is represented by 3700 South Korean high school yearbook pictures of uniformed students spanning three decades that have been reduced to the size of tiny dots. Through the sheer number of the high school pictures that Suh has collected, and the diminished scale in which he re-photographs them, he creates a unified field of signification rather than an aggregation of images in which viewers see cluster of dots rather than the students themselves. In *Who Am We?*, both Suh's title and the work itself successfully represent what South Koreans understand when they refer to themselves by the pronoun of “we” rather than “I” without any differentiation.

Through the process of making *Who Am We?*, Suh was also addressing his strong longing for his childhood and his nostalgia for South Korea after living in New York for a few years.³¹ *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists From Korea* (2009) describes Suh's feeling when he arrived in the United States in the early 1990s: “Suh felt as if he was dropped from the sky, then all of a sudden living in someone else's body. He was not comfortable with his new body and he had to established new relations with his new

³⁰ Through middle school to high school (from grade seven to twelve), it is mandatory for South Korean students to wear their name badges and school uniforms when attending school. School uniforms signify that the students exist collectively, not individually, and also function as a measure of social control.

³¹ Christine Starkman and Lynn Zelevansky, *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists From Korea*, ed. Joan Kee and Sunjung Kim (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2009), p.59.

surroundings.”³² In this sense, *Who Am We?* brings to the fore Suh’s connection with his home country, and how the collective identity of South Koreans influences their struggles of their encounter with other cultures in a foreign country.

Miki Wick Kim proposes in Korean Contemporary Art (2012) that the tension between individuation and the social collective has a positive dimension, proposing that “individual identity is not necessarily diminished by the forces of the larger community but rather enhanced and empowered by it.”³³ This argument about the empowerment of collective identity provides a notion of how South Koreans think about society as a whole, and how being South Korean is more determined by a relationship with others than by individualism.³⁴ It is in this context of seeking a group identity that many Asians, including myself, who live in Western countries (especially English-language dominated countries), decide to adopt American names. Similarly, when Lee came to America in 1994, she decided to use the first name Nikki, which is named after a model Niki Taylor, instead of her original name Sung Hee Lee.³⁵ This taking of an American name is often done to avoid mispronunciation of one's original name, and to facilitate everyday encounters in American or Western societies. Using an American name enables the individual to blend in as a member of an English-language society, and to resist the otherness of cultural difference.

³² Christine Starkman and Lynn Zelevansky, *Your Bright Future: 12 Contemporary Artists From Korea*, ed. Joan Kee and Sunjung Kim (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2009), p.56.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Miki Wick Kim, *Korean Contemporary Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2012), p.166.

³⁵ Nikki S. Lee, *Projects: Nikki S. Lee; With an Essay by Russell Ferguson and an Interview by Gilbert Vicario*, ed. Lesley A. Martin in Association with Umbrage Editions (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), p.17.

Through *Projects*, Lee extends this common practice of changing one's Asian name in North America to an artistic strategy of performing and documenting the process of blending in and resisting the otherness of cultural difference. Lee's deliberate integration into different groups is based on her research of global subcultures and reveals her genuine interest in understanding herself in relation to different social identities through interacting with others. In the interview with Gilbert Vicario, Lee states:

I don't care if people call me a chameleon [...] changing myself is part of my identity. That's never changed. I'm just playing with forms of changing. My work is really simple, actually. I wanted to make evidence, as John Berger calls it. I always feel like I have a lot of different characters inside and I was curious to understand these things. I wanted to see some sort of evidence that could be all those different things.³⁶

In asserting that "changing myself is part of my identity, that's never changed," Lee understands her inherited features cannot change but that by performing different identities she can experience of becoming and being with the other, while at the same time enabling her to re-position her relationship of place and self to understand the process of adapting to a new environment.

In this respect, Lee's simulated assimilation into different groups evoke the two aspects of her identity: 'Nikki S. Lee is there,' (at the time that she is performing) and 'Nikki S. Lee is not there' (once she leaves the group). The way in which Lee becomes someone else in each of the *Projects* series and also exists as herself in-between each specific project makes the viewer realize that we live in the society where we perform

³⁶ Nikki S. Lee, *Projects: Nikki S. Lee; With an Essay by Russell Ferguson and an Interview by Gilbert Vicario*, ed. Lesley A. Martin in Association with Umbrage Editions (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), pp.99-100.

different identities as a daily project. According to Steph Lawler, the author of Identity: Sociological Perspectives (2008), every person has a unique identity at the same time that as we share the common identities of gender and ethnicity, and so on.³⁷ In this regard, Lee's *Projects* explicitly epitomizes both understandings of identity: that identity is formed by shared similarities among a group, yet within this group individual differences are recognized. This double understanding of identity provides a framework for contextualizing how Lee can embody multiple identities by placing herself within and fitting into different ethnic and social groups.

The physical transformation of self is an essential component of how Lee understands this double nature of identity as both shared and unique, collective and individual. To manifest the characteristics of the group that Lee has chosen, she transforms her appearance by applying make-ups to whiten or darken her face and body, changes the style of her hair, put more weight on her body, attempts to mimic the group's bodily gestures and postures, and participates in the activities that are typical and often stereotypical of them by spending weeks or even months with her chosen groups in order to be accepted by them. In each project, Lee forges a bond with the community she is 'performing,' and the photographs that document this bond remind the viewers of what makes us who we are within a particular group. For instance, in *The Hispanic Project* (1998), Lee died her original black hair into light-brown color and curled her hair so that her hairstyle matches with other Spanish girls she has taken photos with. She dressed in tight crop shirts with baggie jeans, complete with big golden hooped-earrings and golden

³⁷ Lawler introduces readers to the root of the word 'identity,' which is derived from the Latin word 'idem,' means same or identical. Steph Lawler, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2008), p.2.

chain-necklace saying "Genie" as if it is her name. Compared with other projects she has done, Lee appears to have gained weight to "become" a stereotypical glamorous Hispanic girl. In some of the images that Lee has taken with other Spanish girls, it is almost impossible to distinguish her ethnicity as an Asian.³⁸ The way Lee sits, her hand gestures, her facial expressions, her make-ups and dress codes, all enable Lee to convince viewers that she belongs as a member of the group. In so doing, Lee demonstrates how people tend to define their social identities in relation to others, and how this can be derived from which group you belong to, who you hangout with, and what particular characteristics that group has. Thus, as much as collective identity is socially, historically, and politically constructed, one cannot define the term identity into a single, overarching definition of what it is, how it is developed, and how it works.

Lee extends her exploration of simulating assimilation to address her Asianness in *The Tourist Project* (1997), *The Young Japanese (east village) Project* (1997), and *The Schoolgirls Project* (2000). In each of these projects, Lee's Asian features are clearly visible, yet her performativity mimicry makes belonging the group rather than being Asian the key construct of identity, which raises the question of how we define our cultural identities. Do we become a member of a group by choosing the same clothing and hairstyle? Do all lesbians have short hair? Lee's representation of 'otherness' in *Projects* indeed unsettles our own biased and perceptions of class, age, race as well as sexual identities. Satya P. Mohanty addresses this notion of identifying with the social group in *The Epistemic Status Of Cultural Identity*:

³⁸ Images of *The Hispanic Project* can be found in Nikki S. Lee's *Projects: Nikki S. Lee; With an Essay by Russell Ferguson and an Interview by Gilbert Vicario*, ed. Lesley A. Martin in Association with Umbrage Editions (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), pp.38-45.

If multiculturalism is to be a goal of educational and political institutions, we need a workable notion of how a social group is unified by a common culture, as well as the ability to identify genuine cultural differences (and similarities) across groups. Whether cultures are inherited or consciously and deliberately created, basic problems of definition - who belongs where or with whom, who belongs and who doesn't - are unavoidable the moment we translate our dreams of diversity into social visions and agendas.³⁹

In relation to Monhanty's observations about the basic problems of defining culture, Lee's transformation of her physical appearance by mimicking a group's characteristic gestures realizes a dream of diversity in which one can shed an over-determined identity as Asian, yet cannot fully escape being perceived as Asian. Viewers can still distinguish the presence of Lee in each project even though she successfully simulates the community's semiotic codes of clothes and appearances. An important realization arises when the viewers notice that Lee is different from people surrounding her and notices that she is has Asian features, which makes her, however subtly, distinguishable from the subcultures she tries to mimic. In an interview with Gilbert Vicario Lee states that she realized that she can never fully assimilate.⁴⁰ Instead, as Lee experiences the groups that she has chosen to "perform," the whole process of simulating assimilation with the group helps her to know herself better not as one identity, but as an identity that continuously changes through contact with and understanding of different cultures.⁴¹ Thus, the performative aspect of *Projects* enables Lee to look beyond the surface markings that

³⁹ Satya P. Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity" from *Identities: Race, Class, Culture, and Nationality*, ed. Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p.392.

⁴⁰ Youngna Kim, *Tradition, Modernity and Identity: Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym, 2005), p.79.

⁴¹ Ibid.

define us to one another and keep us separated rather than privileging the end result of assimilation, which is to dispense with the other.

In this sense, instead of simply or ontologically belonging to the group she has chosen to perform within, Lee's artistic process of integration becomes a process of inhabiting new environments, and globalizing one's self. Vikki Bell elaborates on the self-conscious process of performing identity in Performativity And Belonging (1999), stating that

[a]n emphasis on performativity, does not mean an assumption of fluid, forever changing identity. Indeed, taking the temporal performative nature of identities as a theoretical premise means that more than ever, one need to question how identities continue to be produced, embodied and performed, effectively, passionately and with social and political consequences.⁴²

In this respect, Lee's experiences of different subcultures for a certain period of time construct an identity for herself that reaches beyond a fixed set of communities. Lee's simulated assimilations connect her construction of identity through both becoming a member of the group to the idea that hospitality can negate foreignness. Through performing as a 'member' of the chosen group for each project, Lee's simulated assimilation "visually blends into divergent subcultures" and registers as real for the viewers.⁴³ In other words, the collective identity of the group offers both Lee and the viewers a sense of belonging, and thus privileges a relationship to "we" rather than "I."⁴⁴

As Lee notes in an interview with Gilbert Vicario, "other people make me a certain kind

⁴² Vikki Bell, *Performativity and Belonging* (London: SAGE, 1999), p.2.

⁴³ Jennifer Dalton, "Look At Me: Self-Portrait Photography After Cindy Sherman" from *PAJ* 66 (Vol.22, No 3. September 2000), p.47.

⁴⁴ William L. Hamilton, "Shopping With Nikki S. Lee: Dressing the Part Is Her Art." from *The New York Times* (December 2nd, 2001)

of person. It is about inner relationship and how those really address the idea of identity."⁴⁵

Post-colonial theorist Stuart Hall argues that the word 'identity' embraces the possibility of multiple identifications, whereby one can be identified in multiple ways and different identifications are prioritized at any given moment.⁴⁶ Lee's cross-cultural performances put into practice Hall's notion of an identity in constant flux through her active transformations and dynamic interactions with different groups. Through performing these transformations and belonging, Lee's interrogation of identity in *Projects* exemplifies post-structuralist Judith Butler's theory of performativity, in which Butler argues "an identity [is] instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."⁴⁷ In the context of globalization, Lee's stylized repetition in *Projects* of her positionality as South Korean artist who simulates assimilation also becomes a testing ground for interrogating the complexities of identity formation as a transnational phenomenon.

⁴⁵ Nikki S. Lee, *Projects: Nikki S. Lee; With An Essay by Russell Ferguson and an Essay by Gilbert Vicario*. ed. Lesley A. Martin in Association with Umbrage Editions (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), p.101.

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, "Subject in History: Making Identity Diasporic" from *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), p.291.

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" from *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2009), p.356.

Chapter 3: Performance Art and Its Documentation

Another significant aspect of Lee's work is her use of the analogue photography. In *Projects* (1997 - 2000), the analogue camera functions both to document her performing identities and to impart a documentary "feel" of realism. According to Philip Auslander in The Performativity Of Performance Documentation (2006), most of the documentation of classic performance and body art from the 1960s and 1970s belongs to one of two categories: the 'documentary' and the 'theatrical.'⁴⁸ The documentary category is the traditional way in which the relationship between performance art and its documentation is conceived, in which documentation provides both a record of the performance event and functions as evidence that the performance actually occurred. Theatrical performance uses the photography as the sole product of what is framed: the performance never took place except in the photograph itself. *Projects* straddles both categories, in that Lee's photographs document a series of performative events, and also stand in for the theatrical performativity of identity, in embody the contradictions of identity being simultaneously real and fabricated.

Lee's performance as a member of a subculture community would not exist without the visual proof of the photographic record. According to Gilbert Vicario, in the earlier stage of *Projects*, Lee's friend Soo Hyun Ahn took photographs for Lee, but later on, Lee decided to hand over the camera to random passerby's or a member of the

⁴⁸ Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation" from *PAJ* 84 (Vol.28, No.3, September 2006), p.1.

group.⁴⁹ This allowed Lee's framing of herself to become casually framed by others in order to convey that her photographs are not meticulously constructed but document real communities. Lee's use of analogue photography enables the viewer to perceive her series of photographs as amateurish, yet simultaneously conceive them as works of art by virtue of Lee's intentional miming of the snapshot conventions of the photographic document. Some critics have taken issue with *Projects'* amateurish feel and her use of the ordinary snapshot camera to achieve the production of simulated identity.⁵⁰ In response, Lee states in the interview with Vicario that "I just want to have really boring snapshots - people just standing in front of a camera taking pictures with a smile. If people think it's boring, that's fine. But somehow it is emotional, because I do have an attachment with those people, although I never force it."⁵¹ For Lee, the act of taking photographs is a way of valuing the relationships with the others. For this reason, Lee also deploys multiple photographs for each project she performs, and each project is connected to another through photography to create an overarching narrative of performing identity. This blend of documentary realism, staging, and improvisation in her photographs is what makes Lee's work so compelling.

Lee's conscious use of the date-stamp on each photograph adds more layers of context to Lee's strategic evocation of documentary realism. Lee provides an interesting

⁴⁹ Nikki S. Lee, *Projects: Nikki S. Lee; With an Essay By Russell Ferguson And An Interview By Gilbert Vicario*, ed. Lesley A. Martin in Association with Umbrage Editions (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), p.47.

⁵⁰ Lee also states in the article "Faking It" for *W magazine* that "I don't live with the people. I just hang out. I have to have boundaries. What I do is fake documentary." Jessica Kerwin, "Faking It" from *W magazine* (September 2001), pp.416-418.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.103.

perspective on using dates on her photographs, asserting their function to affirm the perverse logic of simulation. In My Artistic Manifesto (1999), she states:

[t]o include the date on the photo is an affirmation of this use. There is irony in the partly traditional utilization of accurately documenting the record of someone's life, and instead to document a simulated life. The irony becomes more complex if one considers the role that photography has in determining our reality. A good documentation of our simulation, in fact, renders the simulation more true.⁵²

Lee's simulated assimilation in her analogue photography becomes more realistic from the date on each of the photographs. In other words, even though her amateurish skill cannot overcome the professional quality, her analogue photographs successfully provide the viewers with believable photographs.

By highlighting both the intricate visual marking and broader social functions of our cultural boundaries, Lee strives to enter the mainstream art world from a position of immigrant and a member of marginalized group. Overall, *Projects* reveal the multiple strategies of simulation and documentation that enable a post-essentialist identity, in which fixed notions of race and ethnicity unravel in relation to specific social circumstances. American art historian Amelia Jones discusses how artists' use of themselves as the subject matter is linked to social context in Self/Image: Technology, Representation And The Contemporary Subject (2006), noting that "[a]mong other things, the photographed face or body takes on depth through the displacements, identifications, and projections of the interpretive relationships ... thus, opening them to

⁵² Nikki S. Lee, "Il mio manifesto artistico" (My Artistic Manifesto) from *Guarene Arte 99* (Italy: Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo per l'Arte. 1999), p.35.

the interpersonal but also the social register."⁵³ In *Projects*, each amateurish snapshot captures individual moments of Lee demonstrating "I" in order to perform her collective identity within the group. Lee explores the powerful confluence of "identity politics" and "representational artifice" through analogue photography that references self-portraiture.⁵⁴ This process of performing the self through photographic works means that the function of portraying oneself in photography is closely related to a highly technologized and rapidly changing environment. As Louis Martin proposes in On Representation (1994):

The very term 'portrait' is interesting and revealing: the 'pro-trait' is what is put forward, produced, extracted or abstracted from the individual portrayed. It is a model in the epistemological sense, but it is also what is put in the place of [...] this design drawing is the very structure of the project as an intended, targeted, meaningful action, as intentionality; in short, it is the structure of the enunciation.⁵⁵

Martin's point about "the structure of the enunciation" is closely related to Lee's representation of her identity through self-portraits. Each project encompasses both the mirroring act of performance and of photography in order to reveal how identity becomes a function of who we hang out with. In this way, Lee's use of mimicry is unique for the way it blurs the boundary between what is spontaneous and what is staged.

When discussing the relationship of mimicry and self-portraiture in Lee's *Project* series, it is important to acknowledge the artistic practice of Cindy Sherman, who

⁵³ Amelia Jones, "Beneath This Mask Another Mask" from *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p.44.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.66.

⁵⁵ Louise Martin, "The City in Its Map and Portrait" from *On Representation*, trans. Catherine Porter (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp.204-5.

preceded Lee in pioneering the exploration of this relationship in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Sherman has produced over 400 photographic works of art over a twenty-five year span, and many of her photographic series, including her iconic *Untitled Film Stills* (1977- 1980), focus on the idea of how vision and photographic representation internalizes the representation of otherness in constituting the subject and gender identification. As does Lee, Sherman completely changes her appearance through make-up, wigs, and different dress codes in order to transform herself into a wide array of characters. Thus, both artists' artistic activities involve self-portraiture and focus on the transformation of their bodies as markers of identity. Where they differ is in their imaginary of how markers of identity are constituted and how they use photography and site frame this imaginary.

Most of Lee's photographs, which are spontaneously taken by a bystander or any member of the group, feature the artist herself with members of a group in public places such as parks, streets, schools, and shopping malls. As such, Lee produces self-portraits that reflect her careful staging of her simulated identity, yet are at the same time completely improvised as a form of documentation. In contrast, Sherman's photographs usually feature the artist alone in the frame, and are produced in her studio in New York using a professional camera. While *Projects* does include some images of Lee alone, most of her photographs represent her strong bonds with the group that she decides to perform. Lee's attempt to mimic the outlook of particular community through facial and shared body postures and gestures, reveal that Lee and members of the group are comfortable each other. In this sense, Sherman's conceptual photography can be seen to emphasize the relationship of the subject to an external mediascape, while Lee's more

documentary approach privileges the subject's relationship to other people within the photographic frame.

In Cindy Sherman (2003), Sherman mentions that "I try to get something going with the characters so that they give more information than what you see in terms of wigs and clothes. I'd like people to fantasize about this person's life or what they are thinking or what's inside their head, so I guess that is like telling a story."⁵⁶ Sherman's comments about her characters in her photographs reveal a significant difference in intentionality from Lee's use of photography. Lee's primary objective in staging her appearance is to be able to get close to the group (both in terms of looking like them and in terms of participating in their every day activities) and consequently, to be able to represent the fluidity of identity. Thus while *Projects* is indebted to the pioneering work of Sherman, Lee's self-conscious performance of identity seeks a much broader socially interactive frame than Sherman's staging of identity as an imaginary self. Each of Lee's documentary images ultimately provokes a consideration of the relationship of simulating assimilation to heterogeneity of multiple identities. Lee wants the viewers to recognize who she is surrounded with and what is around her. She states:

The way I tried [...] was to look at others, those people around me, even if they are not directly related to me. To get to know where I am and who I am requires for me to see myself through the eyes of others, those who live their lives around me, a society to which I belong. This explains the overarching concept of my work quite well. I believe that the broad scope of my work adds depth to the investigation of identity.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Cindy Sherman et al, *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Rochelle Steiner and Lorrie Moore (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2003), p.12.

⁵⁷ Phil Lee, *Indefinite 'Nikkis' in a World of Hyperreality: An Interview With Nikki S. Lee* (Chicago Art Journal 18, January 2008, p.81.

For Lee, this process of staging oneself "through the eyes of others" begins with mimicking a subculture's characteristics. In turn, imitating different identities to stage their semiotic codes of clothes and body languages leads her to be immersed into various subcultures. In other words, Lee does not aspire to belong to mainstream America but to its margins, exemplifying what Arjun Appadurai describes the "imagination as a social practice."⁵⁸ *Projects* as an identity-based expression of culture both embodies and questions Lee's post-identity in the globalizing condition of United States where cross-influence between cultures actively occurs. Thus, Lee's position as an artist assumes a critical role for both herself and viewers to rethink issues of the stereotyping, indifference towards, and discrimination of the other. Following upon Frazer Ward's proposal that "documentation does not simply generate image/statements that describe an autonomous performance and state that is occurred: it produces an event as a performance and the performer as 'artist,'"⁵⁹ Lee's documentation of herself as other suggests how identity is determined through the event of interacting with others, as well as how our bodily gestures convey critical aspects of what it means to be both an individual and a member of a group.

⁵⁸ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy" from *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.31.

⁵⁹ Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation" from *PAJ 84* (Vol.25, No.3, September 2006), p.5.

Chapter 4: Performance Art and Mirroring Act

This chapter analyzes and compares Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* (1997-2000) and Sooja Kim's *A Needle Woman* (1999-2005) in order to emphasize the importance of performativity as a strategy to represent the globalization of identity. While the artists' performances are documented in different mediums, Lee through photography and Kim through video, their works share a concern for the transnational movement of people and an engagement with ethnicity through performativity. By focusing on how Lee locates her identity by blending in with the others, and Kim expresses her uniqueness by standing out in crowd, a comparison of the similarities and differences between *A Needle Woman* and *Projects* serves to highlight the artists' distinct relationships to being South Korean in Western culture.

In *A Needle Woman*, Kim performs a motionless back-view of herself in relation to the flow of people around her, and repeats this performance in specific places and cultures such as Tokyo, Shanghai, Delhi, New York, Mexico City, and Cairo. Her initial performance took place in Tokyo, Shibuya, in 1999:

I was walking around the city with a camera crew to find the right moment and place where I could find the energy of my own body in it. When I arrived in the Shibuya area there were hundreds of thousands of people sweeping towards me, and I was totally overwhelmed and charged by the strong energy of the crowd. I couldn't help but to stop in the middle of the street amongst the heavy traffic of pedestrians. Being overwhelmed by the energy of the crowd, I focused on my body and stood still, and felt a strong connection to my own center. It was a moment of 'Zen' [...] as I continued

to stand still there and I decided to film the performance with my back facing the camera.⁶⁰

By filming the back of herself in the middle of the crowd, Kim allows the viewers to take a notice of the flow of people passing by her. She emphasizes this overwhelmed feeling of strong energy within the perception of time by slowing down the film by fifty percent from original speed. In the interview above, Kim addresses the Zen moment, which is sometimes identified simply as a "way of life," in relation to her art as personal expression of direct insight in the Buddhist teaching.⁶¹ Her Zen moment of seeing people and consciously absorbing her surroundings evokes the 'eyes of Buddha.' In South Korea, there is a saying “부처님의 눈에는 부처님만 보인다,” which is roughly translated in English as “the eyes of Buddha can only see Buddha himself.” It means people can only look at others as if one is looking at one's self. For instance, if someone's mind is full of hatred, then the world he/she looks at is full of hatred as well.

Although Kim does not change her appearance or mimic the people who are surrounded by her in *A Needle Woman*, her spiritual way of seeing and being with people certainly reveals the unique vision of herself in the globalized world. Standing in opposition to moving crowds, the presence of her body is gradually immersed by them to enact a spiritual and bodily transition of “internal time-consciousness.”⁶² Robert C. Morgan describes the effects of this “internal time-consciousness” in The Persistence Of

⁶⁰ An interview with Sooja Kim by Oliva Marina Rubio in 2006.

Retrieved from <http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/rubio.html>.

Accessed date on November.11th.2013.

⁶¹ Nancy Wilson Ross, *The World of Zen: An East-West Anthology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p.3.

⁶² Robert C. Morgan, "The persistence of the Void" from *Kunsthalle Bern Exhibition Catalogue*, 2001.

Retrieved from http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/morgan_02.html.

Accessed date on November.10th.2013.

The Void (2002) as follows: “[b]y going deeply within oneself, below the surface of narcissism (as defined in Western terms), one discovers the invisible self paradoxically asserting itself within a transcultural, transglobal world.”⁶³ This invisibility of oneself can be considered as characteristic of the collective identity of South Koreans who are mostly raised to not to be outspoken and to behave obediently when others are around. Kim’s description of the Zen moment can also be considered as a state of Samadhi: a way of making sense or controlling oneself in relation to disturbed surroundings that is often used in meditation, and offers “the possibility of feeling a sense of wholeness.”⁶⁴ In this regard, *A Needle Woman* clearly seeks to connect Kim’s positionality as a South Korean to an ever more globalized world in which one’s cultural distinctiveness is also part of the whole.

In contrast to Kim's *A Needle Woman*, Lee's understanding of her surroundings in *Projects* is much more active and physically present. Lee does not imply any religious or spiritual perspectives in her performances; rather her series of photographs taken by passersby or any member of the group create a spontaneous relationship to a "sense of wholeness." Lee's use of analogue photography in *Projects* conveys a more realistic view of everyday lives of social groups, featuring Lee's ability to blend into the background, to become one among many, and to lose herself in the collectiveness of her surroundings. Lee mentions that "[c]hanging myself is a part of my identity. That's never changed. I'm just playing with forms of changing. My work is really simple [...] I always feel like I

⁶³ Robert C. Morgan, "The persistence of the Void" from *Kunsthalle Bern Exhibition Catalogue*, 2001.

Retrieved from http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/morgan_02.html.

Accessed date on November.10th.2013

⁶⁴ Ibid. Accessed date on November.10th.2013.

have a lot of different characters inside and I was curious to understand these things. I want to see some sort of evidence that I could be all those different things."⁶⁵

Although *Projects* features her artistic intentions to become a member of the group in a temporal period, Lee's comments reveal her curiosity about her ongoing identity as an Asian immigrant living in a multicultural country like United States. Just as the growth of migration and globalization in the United States allows people to experience the various cultural groups, so *Projects* attempts to blur the categorization of people along ethnic and racial lines. Lee presents herself not as an Asian living in the United States, but rather as a cross-cultural citizen who can become anyone she wants. This blurred boundary of her identity discloses Lee's attempt to represent the desire for everyone to be free from racism and to truly become another when one wants to be rather than be classified based on her/his ethnic identity.

One of the key issues raised by both *Project* and *A Needle Woman* is the re-invention of self that occurs by moving from one place to another. In *A Needle Woman*, Kim represents her transitory process through her isolation within crowds. She wears 승복 (grey tunic) that is most often wore by 스님 (a monk), which symbolizes in way of living distinct from a contemporary lifestyle with the least amount of possessions, and of being free from the desire of belonging to mainstream America. Kim seems to have no fear of disconnection with vast changes happening around her. Instead of facing herself in front of the camera, she chooses to position herself back of the camera to capture the totality of her body, mind, and soul with the surroundings. In this way, Kim's

⁶⁵ Nikki S. Lee, *Projects: Nikki S. Lee; With an Essay by Russell Ferguson and an Interview by Gilbert Vicario*, ed. Lesley A. Martin in Association with Umbrage Editions (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany, 2001), p.100.

individuality as a contemporary global citizen may demonstrate her passive way of participating in a specific site and with people. On the other hand, Lee identifies with a cultural group, and actively performs the same everyday activities with the specific group in each project. Lee is not afraid of changing her appearances in order to connect herself with the others. In most of Lee's photographs, she faces the camera and "looks" with a strong gaze towards the viewer.

While Lee's *Projects* draws the viewer's attention to the artist's immersive process of spending time with individual groups, of altering her physical appearance and learning new skills such as pole dancing, skateboarding, and swing dancing in order to locate herself, Kim's *A Needle woman* draws the viewer's attention to the meditative distance of the artist from her surroundings. *A Needle Woman* presents the reality of the world as it is, without manipulating or making something new. In this way, Kim's performance creates an awareness of the surroundings by allowing the viewers to focus on the others, while Lee's performance allow the viewers to focus on how surroundings change the artist's identity. As counterparts, Kim's performance of absence and Lee's bodily interaction with others to privilege presence become two forms of representing demographic fluidity with the social and cultural communities.

The focus in both *A Needle Woman* and *Projects* of the artists' surroundings as a critical dimension of their performances, and the titles of their works, allude to an imaginary collectiveness. In *A Needle Woman*, Kim situates herself, back to the audience, at the centre of the image to metaphorically become a needle in a haystack of people. *A Needle Woman* specifically interrogates Kim's existential relation to the surrounding

milieus, and her passive approach to human connection. Kim mentioned in the interview with Gerald Matt in 2002 that

"[w]hen I make indefinite identity for my presence as 'a needle woman,' it means it can be anybody, like an inexplicable neutral icon, and it is not necessary to define my presence and I wanted to keep distance between myself and the performer who is in the video and who will be seen to myself later on but not to imply any Korean woman issue."⁶⁶

When I first viewed *A Needle Woman*, Kim's fixed bodily relation to the world's continuous transformation appeared to address the idea of temporal pause for meditation as way of deemphasizing herself, and to focus on the people around her. It is clear from her comments that her static bodily relation to the social structure is intended to create a tension between the audience and herself as an uncertain figure, almost like a sculptural object. This interesting tension between the audience and unknown figure also brings the notion of Eastern thought which often takes a passive, non-verbal, and indirect form. On the other hand, the title of Lee's series of photographs, *Projects*, hints to viewers that Lee has carefully planned and designed each interaction to actively achieve a sense of collectivity. The exploration of different social groups in *Projects* envisions a fluid and provides her with opportunities to find other parts of herself that are not yet known or found.

Kim and Lee share the same background in terms of nationality as well as an artistic working environment, and their performative self-imaging strategies share a common idea about questioning the self, and connecting the self with others. Both artists

⁶⁶ Sooja Kim's comments from an interview with Gerald Matt from the *Kunsthalle Wien Solo Show Catalog* in 2002.

Retrieved from <http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/matt.html>.
Accessed date on November 11th. 2013.

use their own bodies as subject and object in their performances. Scholar Amelia Jones points out that the human desire articulated through the body/mind becomes one of the crucial components of how humans exist in modern and contemporary Euro-American cultures.⁶⁷ The sphere of human co-existence and interaction are not separable when discussing globalization. Whether people recognize Kim and Lee as either South Korean artists or Korean-American artists, their works provide the viewers insights into the social and cultural conditions of migration and the imperative to identify with and fit into new surrounding. Unlike other performance artists who express themes of displacement as the loss of home, and the suffering that arises from being different from others, Kim and Lee approach displacement positively in their performances. For Kim, the word 'mirror' is a meditative term to consider herself as a mirror to reflect the world around her. In *A Needle Woman*, Kim stands as a free individual in a middle of a crowd in order herself to act as a

a needle/body [...] and a mirror that embodies the depth of body and mind, defining our existence, through a needle. I am standing [...] as a mirror of the world, to question my own identity amongst others. At the same time, I am standing as a mirror that reflects the world, gazing myself from the reflected reaction the audience bounces back to me. A needle is a hermaphroditic tool that can be a subject and an object, and this theory can be applied similarly to a mirror. In that sense, I can consider a needle as a mirror, by definition and a psychological healing tool, and a mirror as a multiple and unfolded needle woven with the gaze, as a field of questions.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Amelia Jones, *Self/Image: Technology, Representation and the Contemporary Subject* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p.10.

⁶⁸ An interview with Sooja Kim by Oliva Marina Rubio in 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/rubio.html>. Accessed date on November.11th.2013.

Kim's bodily approach is to open herself as a mirror to reflect the images of the world. While Kim's performance makes a beautiful, peaceful, and spiritual way of connecting herself with others in *A Needle Woman*,

Lee's mirroring act in *Projects* involves the process of imitating socially and culturally structured images in order to explore the transnational movements of people that characterizes of globalization. In *Lying Bodies: Survival And Subversion In The Field Of Vision* (2001) Shimizu Akiko describes the act of mimicry as "both psychic and a corporeal identification [...] not revealing or questioning the functioning of ideality in the cultural image/screen but as reaffirming the existing structure of the visible field."⁶⁹ Unconsciously and consciously, Lee's involvement with others appears to reinforce our own notion of biased ideas of stereotyping. However, Lee has clearly stated that she "never thought of herself as minority, only as a majority"⁷⁰ to elaborate that her race or ethnicity is not a prime concern of hers in living a multicultural country. It is inescapable to notice Lee's Asian features, but it does not mean that she cannot change her appearance to fit into certain groups that she has chosen to perform with. Her artistic strategies emerged from her genuine curiosity of different subcultures of America, and her performances mimic these groups on her own way to become friends. Without any overt interrogation of issues of race and ethnicity in her work, Lee's mirroring act is her way of understanding and approaching others, and at the same time, finding dynamic identities in discursive milieus.

⁶⁹ Shimizu Akiko, *Lying Bodies: Survival and Subversion in the Field of Vision* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), p.39.

⁷⁰ Cherise Smith, *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper, and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p.230.

Conclusion

[W]here should the dividing line between outsider and insider stop? How should it be defined? By skin color (no blacks should make films on yellows)? By language (only Fulani can talk about Fulani, a Bassari is a foreigner here)? By nation (only Vietnamese can produce works on Vietnam)? By geography (in the North-South setting, East is East and East can't meet West)? Or by political affinity (Third World on Third World counter First and Second Worlds)? What about those with hyphenated identities and hybrid realities?⁷¹

Trinh T. Minh-Ha

Performance Art as Mirroring Identities: As Examination of Nikki S. Lee's Projects (1997-2001) has explored how contemporary South Korean artists approach issues of constructing and imagining identity. My specific focus on Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* illuminated the complexity of her artistic strategies as a self-conscious process of defining identity that is achieved through interaction with different groups of subculture and the dynamics of cultural interaction. Lee's performative strategies represent a critical dimension of performance art to experience, inquire, and respond to post-colonial issues where cultural codes are intentionally challenged and reconstituted. Lee's sense of self in relation to others significantly reinforces the notion of identity as not only fluid, but also as a process of consistently transforming oneself through a relationship with one's surroundings. The South Korean concept of *우리는 하나* (we are the one) can be seen as one of the major influences underlying Lee's desire to insert herself into the representation of the others. In this sense, *Projects* clearly epitomizes the subtle boundaries between individual and a group, the "I" and the "we" through performing as an individual divergent races, ethnicities, and classes.

⁷¹ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "No Master Territories" from *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Aschroft, Helen Tiffin and Gareth Griffiths (London: Routledge, 1995), p.217.

Without any doubt, the history of Asian contemporary art cannot be separated from engagements with Western art and its cultural influences. Thus, many Asian contemporary artists attempt to create a variety of artworks to reflect their personal, historical, cultural, and social contexts with the intention to re-contextualize fixed images of their otherness. In this respect, *Projects* is an invaluable example of a radical critique of the experience of 'being' Asian in Western culture. In turn, Lee's approach to re-imagining her identity as multiple and fluid is particularly salient for my own struggle as a South Korean immigrant to adapt to the multicultural country of Canada. Living in a multicultural country enables non-white people like myself to interrogate our/other's assumption of otherness with respect to contemporary issues that are often considered subversive and controversial in South Korea. In this respect, Lee enacts an imagined community where people have no fear of the others, and live freely across various subcultures. Through my exploration of Lee's work in this paper, I have come to understand the potential for my own identity to be one of fluidity and of the potential to engage with the flow of globalism. In turn, I hope this research paper has provided the reader with a similar opportunity to reflect on issues of sameness and difference, to question our biased notion towards the others, and most importantly, to bring us a step closer to valuing South Korea's performance art as a cross-cultural framework for understanding the affinities of cultural difference.

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