

YONG SOON MIN

XEN



## Foreword

Hong-hee Kim, Director of SSamziespace

SSamziespace presented Yong Soon Min's XEN: Migration, Labor & Identity as its special exhibition, featuring a video project begun in 2003 as SSamziespace's Artist in Residence Project and also a performance entitled, "X" by Allan deSouza.

The question of migrant labor has become a prominent social issue, while influencing Korea's economy and culture in general. In 2003, Min began actively working on the migrant labor project after realizing that the issue, like two sides of a coin, cannot be separated from her wider focus on exile and diaspora. In the summer of 2003, Min visited many places to interview and videotape migrant workers and this exhibition is the outcome of those activities. Through interviews, documentary video, multimedia installation, sound pieces, and performance, the artist discloses the exploitative conditions that these migrant workers are facing in Korea, at the same time addressing the necessary legal issues that enable them to stay under humane conditions.

Following the exhibition on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in 2003, this year's exhibition by Yong Soon Min is a meaningful occasion through which one could examine realities of Korean American artists and their works from the perspective of postcolonialism and feminism. As in the case of the late Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, a fellow graduate from Berkeley, Min has dealt with subjects of diaspora, language, the gendered body, and identity, while experimenting with interdisciplinary practices using multimedia such as photography, language, text, drawing, etc. in the context of conceptual art. Her consciousness about identity has recently expanded to issues of migrant labor. Through the exhibition, Min critically explores national and ethnic identity, and geopolitical sites. A Cold War baby as she has called herself, Min was born in Korea in 1953 and emigrated to the U.S. in 1960, where she works as an artist and cultural activist.



*Field/Work*, partial installation view

## **Transnationalism from Below**

Yong Soon Min

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### Background

*Between the man and the citizen there is a scar: the foreigner.*

In a country where non-Koreans readily stand out, the initial catalyst for this project was a sighting in 2001 of a large group of foreign men in Dongdaemun, a popular, sprawling market in central Seoul. My question of who they were and what they were doing in Seoul was answered later that year at a lecture in Los Angeles' Koreatown at an immigrant labor advocacy organization. A labor media activist mentioned a migrant worker's union as part of a larger discussion about the history of the Korean labor movement.

*One in every 35 people in the world is a migrant.*

Research led me to realize that these men were some of the over 300,000 migrant workers (I use this term to refer to those foreign workers who are not involved in the professional sector) in South Korea who come from developing countries, mostly from Asia. During my research residency in the summer of 2003, I conducted over thirty video interviews with laborers from countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma, Pakistan, Philippines, Indonesia, as well as with ethnic Koreans from China and former Soviet states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. I interviewed them in various locations of work and residence throughout Seoul's extensive subway system, including the neighboring city of Incheon, where the majority of migrant workers are based. Lesser yet significant concentrations are also found in the other major South Korean cities of Busan and Daegu.

*My name is Mohammed Hussein. In Korea they call me Ali.*

My research visit coincided with the passage of a new migrant labor law commonly referred to as EPP (Employment Permit Program), which went into effect a year later in August, 2004. While this new legislation confers some necessary labor rights to migrant workers, critics of this bill note serious flaws, the most detrimental being the maintenance of the industrial trainee system that is notorious for leaving generous leeway for employers and recruitment brokers to exploit workers. In the ensuing period



between the passage of this bill and its implementation, government officials began the process of voluntary and at times forceful expulsions of migrant workers who had been in Korea for over four years (which includes most of the migrants I interviewed). Compliance continues to be uneven and messy as controversy over this bill still rages. Many of these overstayed workers have left voluntarily, some have gone in hiding, some continue to stage protests against this bill and a number have even committed suicide.

When you're strange, no one remembers your name

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## Exhibition

Given the continued media attention to migrant worker issues, the exhibition held during the months of August and September, 2004 received considerable mainstream media attention along with the usual art press coverage. The exhibition, "XEN," consisted of four distinct video installations, and a performance by Allan deSouza during the opening reception. While the video interviews conducted last summer adopted a documentary, fact-finding approach to the issue, the resulting exhibition offered more open-ended visual explorations that defy a singular or conclusive 'message.' Rather, its operative contrapuntal interweave of fact and interpretation was an attempt to suggest a contingent critique of nationalism and the politics of representation, or, to expose the medium as much as the message.

Politics must be conceived as a relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective or immediate sense, relating across time and distance.

A key component, entitled "Moving Target," was composed of a rotating video projection in which the apparatus containing the projector was like a sculpture situated in middle of the gallery. Shot last summer, the footage was of a street demo (one of many) in the popular shopping area of Myongdong, organized by a migrant workers union against EPS. The footage begins with a fixed view of pedestrians and proceeds to an unexpected and complex interwoven image of pedestrians and the demonstrators. The voiceover throughout the five minute looped image is of a Bangladeshi worker, Kabir Uddin, a well-known migrant worker activist who was addressing the assembled in Korean. Without closer scrutiny, viewers may assume that the speaker is a native Korean rather than a foreigner fluent in the Korean language--as were many of the workers I interviewed. This piece would suggest that both the migrants and Korean nationals are moving targets in a rapidly evolving social and political context. Viewers in the room are also implicated as the projection beam cyclically "targets" them as it circles the room. The projected video image passes over collaged text of information and analysis culled from a variety of sources, including my own formulations, a variety of migration facts and theories, and from Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves* (Columbia University Press, 1991, translated by Leon Roudiez), which offers a dimension of philosophical and cultural critique to the discussion of the figure of the foreigner. This text served as a primary source for the project.

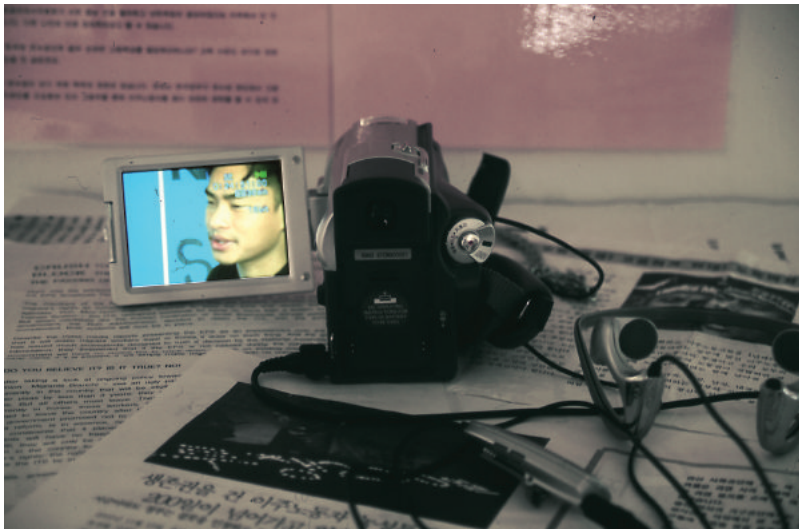
...the foreigner lives within us...he is the hidden face  
of our identity...The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference  
arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners.

In another installation entitled, "Field/Work," eight video cameras—with footage of various interviews I conducted as well as group meetings that I attended and documented (in one such meeting, migrant workers seated in a large circle sing "We Shall Overcome" in English, Bengali and Korean)--are scattered in the anthropological/social 'field' of the spacious gallery. Each camera is installed as part of a sculptural tableau or viewing station, suggesting some of the improvised original conditions of the interviewing process. Images are displayed on the camera's LCD monitors in part to replicate a sense of intimacy with the subject's image. This installation underscores the importance of direct one-on-one dialogue in which the viewer is positioned as the interviewer, mediating the interview through the image on the LCD monitor and the sound through the headset. The 'object-ness' and the primacy of the camera became an integral instrument not only for recording and producing a moving image but a physical mediator between the interviewee and myself. In many respects, it was the camera as much as

my credentials as a university professor (my identity as an artist was not useful) that conferred to me a measure of authority and trust in the eyes of the interviewee. As with most oral history projects in which testimonials are recorded, it is paradoxically the presence of the camera itself that I think encouraged most of the interviewees to be more open and generous, by giving them a sense of responsibility and purpose in going “on record.” Most of the video passages on view were real-time and unedited so as to approximate the spontaneity of the interview process including the often banal or embarrassing questions or comments on my part.

Psychoanalysis is then experienced as a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, towards an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable.

The camera also plays a key role in “3D Exit: Desperate, Disposable, Deported,” an installation that occupies a large empty room where the only other element is a handwritten note that states, in English



Close-up of Samar Thapa interview, *Field/Work*.

and in Korean, “Samar Thapa was captured on February 15, 2004 and deported.” Affixed to a distant back wall the note is only legible as a telephoto image through the LCD monitor of a camera positioned in the front of the room. This arrangement alludes to the highly mediated, distant and marginalized status of migrant workers who have expressed that they often feel like shadows in Korean society. Their ‘visibility’ as such is mediated through representations in the media or via host religious, NGO or other political support groups. Coincidentally, Samar Thapa was one of the migrants whose interview is included in the “Field/Work” installation. He rose to prominence due to his leadership role in ETU-MB (Equality Trade Union-Migrants Branch), a union representing migrant workers and therefore targeted by officials in their crackdown of over-stayers. After his well-publicized capture and deportation, he was returned to Nepal where he is reportedly organizing around labor issues. The title of this piece plays off the phrase “3D labor” that Koreans commonly use to refer to the kind of work that migrant workers are relegated to perform: dirty, dangerous and demeaning.

#### Korean Dream

The final installation component, entitled, “Strangers to Ourselves” (after Kristeva’s text), is a circular video projection on a wall that functions metaphorically like a visual bibliography for the project. In her book, and with the aid of the Freudian concept of the “uncanny,” Kristeva deconstructs the figure of the foreigner who, in relation to the national subject, provokes uncomfortable and unresolved feelings--an uncanniness. Images of books reflected in water (as in the catalog cover image) or floating evocatively propose that ideas migrate as much as people and are as integral to the formation and transformation of communities and identities.

The foreigner is the one who works. A vital necessity, to be sure, his sole means of survival, on which he does not necessarily place a halo of glory but simply claims as a primary right, the zero degree of dignity.

“X,” the title of the performance by Allan deSouza, plays off the overall exhibition title, and has multiple references. The term “X” is used in mathematics and more generally to denote an unknown or unknowable factor. Its use as a name suggests one whose former name is lost or unknown, as in Malcolm X, the black American activist who refused to be known by his “slave name.” “X” also refers to a branding mark, used in slavery and for livestock, but more commonly as a marker to make an object more visible, such as for a target or to denote ownership. “X” also marks the place where one writes one’s signature; in other words, the place where one marks one’s own individual distinctiveness, a paradoxical counter to the other ways that “X” is a marker of the unknown.

Are we nevertheless so sure that the “political” feelings of xenophobia do not include, often unconsciously, that agony of frightened joyfulness that has been called *unheimlich*, that in English is uncanny, and the Greeks quite simply call *xenos*, “foreign?”

In the performance, deSouza, dressed in white shirt and pants but barefoot, served refreshments to the gallery guests during the first hour and half of the opening reception, all the while avoiding eye contact and not speaking. In the remaining half hour, after collecting and refilling empty glasses from the different gallery spaces, he stood on a spot marked with an “X” next to a pedestal. He emptied the glasses into a basin where he proceeded to soap up and shave his face and head. After shaving, he



Allan deSouza, performance, X.

refilled the glasses with the soapy and hairy water from the basin and served this to the members of the audience.

Made in Korea, made by migrants.

In the Korean context, shaving takes on multiple associations. Shaving is often deployed in social protests as a gesture of defiance and determination as when for instance migrant workers shaved their heads to protest the crackdown of undocumented workers. Shaving is also seen as an act of purification, for example in the shaving of a monk’s head. In another sense, given the historic stereotype of westerners as being hirsute, deSouza’s act of shaving can be seen as a failed attempt to erase a marker of difference, and to assimilate.

All forms of migration bring about socio-cultural change with an opening/closing dialectic; a self-doubting society fears for its future and is afraid immigration will alter its frame of reference; conversely, a strong, balanced society with well anchored identity traits knows that it can be enriched by immigration.

Also, the simple act of servitude had a profoundly unsettling and disturbing effect on the gallery-goers who are used to an informal atmosphere in which refreshments are usually self-service. With "X," deSouza enacted the figure of the migrant, whose labor services the nation but who, as a person, remains a foreigner or a stranger. South Korea's immigrant labor includes a large number of South Asians from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and deSouza himself is South Asian and a migrant now living in Los Angeles.

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### Subject Postions

The border is an intellectual laboratory, a conceptual territory  
to explore the complex relationships between cultures.

The exhibition title, "XEN," a phonetic pun on Zen, derived from the Greek root word for 'xenophobia' and its antonym 'xenophilia,' implies another subjectivity in relation to the migrant workers in South Korea — that of the Koreans. I interviewed many Koreans, some of whom were associated with migrant workers and their issues. Others, like the vast majority of Koreans in Seoul, had no direct contact with migrant workers, much less knowledge or interest in this issue. Among the former, for example, I interviewed Dr. Dong-Hoon Seoul, a recognized expert on immigration issues in South Korea and an advisor to the government on the work permit system legislation (also a contributor to this catalog) as well as Hae Woo Yang (Director of Korea Migrant Workers Human Rights Center in Incheon) along with other migrant worker advocates and service providers. One unique subject, Min-Ho Lee, who was one of the producers of "Asia Asia," a popular TV program in South Korea about migrant workers, offered cogent insights on his ambivalent attitudes toward migrant workers.

In 1945 on the eve of independence from 35 years of Japanese colonial rule, nearly 1/5 of all Koreans were living outside of the homeland. Some were even victims of ethnic cleansing by Stalin from the Soviet Far East to the gulags of Central Asia. Currently Korea is the 4th largest diaspora with an estimated six million Koreans living in one hundred and sixty countries.

Despite Korea's long history of out-migration, and the many stories of hardships and successes endured by Korean immigrants in foreign lands, this legacy does not necessarily translate into increased empathy or acceptance for migrant workers in South Korea. Although the pace of social and political change in South Korea has been remarkably accelerated, perhaps it is due to the relatively recent history of in-migration (a little over a decade since the arrival of a critical mass of migrant workers), that Koreans continue to be insular in their attitudes to foreigners, especially with regards to the migrants engaged in manual labor. Official policies pertaining to migrant workers seem to dovetail with general public sentiment that migrant workers are acceptable only in so far as they satisfy the demand for temporary, compliant and cheap labor. It would appear that most Koreans support a ban on family reunions and settlements by migrant workers; thus, they have no interest in multiculturalism and want to preserve their notion of a pure, homogeneous national state which some would argue is an anachronistic tendency.

### Oori naraism

Both the flattening of migrant identity as machines as well as the nationalist card is clearly evident in recent press coverage which has labeled some of the migrant protesters as "anti-Korean" ("Muslim Anti-Korean Activity a Real Concern, but Intelligence Lacking," Chosun Ilbo, October 4, 2004, and "181,000 Foreigners Overstaying in Korea," The Korea Times, October 4, 2004) for opposing the war in Iraq and the deployment of South Korean troops to Iraq. The articles seem to suggest that workers protesting work-related issues is comprehensible whereas taking on protests of a wider political nature is unacceptable and could be seen as a threat to national security. In light of Korea being on the al-Qaeda hit-list as a U.S. ally, these reports suggest the possibility of a link between a rise in criminal activity reportedly committed by illegal aliens (even as the article does acknowledge that the majority of the



reported minor crimes such as burglary are attributed to Chinese nationals) and foreign terrorist groups. The perceived high percentage of Muslims in the migrant population is easily manipulated by nationalists to generate fear and negative ethnic stereotypes in context of the post 9/11 heightened tensions.

The instability of the opposition between the inside and the outside, between interiority and exteriority is unheimely "unheimlich par excellence."

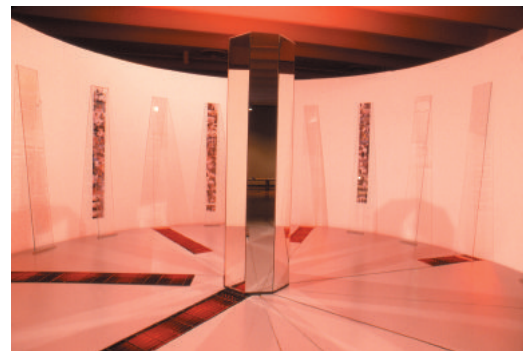
This project is a logical extension of my investment since the 1980s in the shifting modalities of cultural and geographic constructions of race, history and nationalism. Since then I have been increasingly drawn to examine my relationship with the country of my birth where every visit elicits a constant parsing of emotions in which I can never assume a stable register in the distance between belonging and alienation, between difference and affinity. A similar experience was in play during my curatorial research of the Korean diaspora in Brazil, Kazakhstan, China and Japan for the 4<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale.

We turn to the aesthetics of the uncanny in order to underscore the ambivalence and heterogeneity of underlying national affiliations.

With my interest in the intersection of history and identity, the collecting of oral histories that formed



(above) *Movement*, at Asia Society, New York, 2001; (above right) *Movement*, detail; (right) *DMZ XING*, partial installation view, 1994.



the basis of this project has been the modus operandi of several earlier projects as well, such as "DMZ XING" (1994), "Memory Matters" (1996), "BellyTalk" (1997), "Movement" (2001) and "Will \*\*\*\* for Peace" (2002 & 2003) a collaboration with Allan deSouza. A tension that pervades all of these works results from my desire to lay bare or complicate the processes of representation and reception without undermining the integrity of the subject and subjectivities.

Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided.

My interest in migrant workers in Korea is of course inextricably linked to my own questions about my own identity in relation to Korea. In scrutinizing them and their experience, I was gaining greater



insight into my own experience of Korea. In many respects, I felt a kinship with the outsider and marginalized position of the migrants in Korea. It genuinely excited me, whereas my Korean contacts seemed on the whole indifferent, to discover within the center of Seoul, fledgling ethnic enclaves such as a few block area near Dongdaemun market that is full of store signs in Cyrillic and a Russian speaking community center, or the area on the other side of Dongdaemun dotted with a few Nepalese/Tibetan restaurants where the clientele are mostly workers from Nepal. In my view, these and other signs of diversity have an additive not subtractive effect; that is, it makes for a more interesting and dynamic impression of a place without in any way diluting the particular characteristics of the culture. Most of my Korean interviewees did not share my assumptions about the benefits of a multicultural society, at least not for the present.

Free trade: the product is protected but not the worker.

Transnational flows of migrants, a dynamic yet vulnerable group who play a significant role in the development of receiving and sending countries, have become a major forces in shaping contemporary nation states. In this era of globalization, nations with neo-liberal economic policies are geared for a labor market without borders as well as a borderless capital market. Korea, like other advanced industrialized countries is confronted with an embedded structural need for migrant workers due to a range of common and specific push and pull factors. Given this reality, is it in Korea's best interest to maintain such a vested interest in the notion of homogeneity? Perhaps more to the point: is it even possible for Koreans to assert its homogeneity? I would hope that this project contributes in some measure to the growing debate about the changing face of nation and identity.

image/nation



*Will \*\*\*\* for Peace*, Oboro Gallery, Montreal, installation and interactive performance with Allan deSouza, 2003, (left) detail, (right) partial installation view.

Note: the interwoven passages in the above essay are excerpts from the wall text in the "Moving Target" installation.



