

“Image/nation”

(Please do not translate “image/nation” into Japanese since the phonetic word play in English that sounds like the word “imagination” would be lost.)

by Yong Soon Min

Borders and Crossings

Much of my artistic practice is predicated on a proposition that a border exists between Korean America and Korea. This proposition engenders a search for productive means to discern and understand this border. In my art work, the border has both an indexical and a metaphoric function. The border then is an intellectual laboratory, a conceptual territory to explore the complex relationships between cultures. When I was young, I used to enjoy imagining when standing on the beach what it's like on the other shore and who it might be on the other side mirroring my activity and thoughts. Perhaps the border that exists between what I identify as Korean America and that of a Korea on the other shore can be best understood by analogies offered by Pacific Ocean itself, a vast expanse that is also in perpetual flux. Much objective data can be had about this separating mass and there is evident transparency and accessibility in the ebb and flow closer to the shores but beyond a certain distance, a profound and impenetrable depth belies the increasing technological ease of crossings, via virtual or actual space.

In the current climate of increased migrations, in which one in every 35 people world-wide are migrants, transnational flows of people, culture, capital and labor management render the interrelated issues of borders, nationalism and identity all the more pressing and relevant. Much of my recent work as an artist and curator has focused on the case of the two Koreas with their extensive and complex legacy of migrations both in and out of the country within a larger discussion of diasporas and identity in an effort to better understand identity formations, including my own, that are generated and produced by this history and evolving conditions of migrations. In 1945 for instance, on the eve of independence from 35 years of Japanese colonial rule, nearly 1/5 of all Koreans were living outside of the homeland. In 2001, I met some of the Koreans who had left before 1945, living in Kazakhstan, victims of ethnic cleansing by Stalin, purged from the Soviet Far East to the gulags of Central Asia. Currently Korea is the 4th largest diaspora (in terms of proportional relations of those who left in relation to those who stayed--derived from data culled from 2002 Korean Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Trade release) with an estimated six million Koreans living in one hundred and sixty countries. In the recent decade, Korea has also become an in-migration site for over 300,000 migrant workers predominantly from the developing countries of Asia.

Interstitiality

Since the 1980s, I have been invested in examining the shifting modalities of cultural and geographic constructions of race, history and nationalism. (See images from artworks

“Whirl War,” “Defining Moments,” Ritual Labor of a Mechanical Bride,” “DMZ XING” and Rainy Day Women #63: Bangapsbnida.”) I am increasingly drawn to examine my relationship with the country of my birth where every visit to Korea (mainly to South Korea, which is my shorthand designation for Republic of Korea; I have been to North Korea, my other shorthand to stand for Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, only once in 1998) 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. Much of this recent work attempts to underscore the ambivalence and heterogeneity of underlying national affiliations. The bifurcated moniker of Korean American or Asian American points to an interstitial identity, a positioning that is in-between--neither here nor there; neither-nor OR both here and there; both-and. Furthermore, I am a “1.5 generation” Korean American. This unique generational moniker was coined by a Korean American in the 1980s to refer to a growing sociological phenomenon of Korean Americans who immigrated to the U.S. at an early age and are considered to be in-between or straddling the immigrant generation and those who are native to the new country. In this respect, I epitomize the interstitial subject. Considerable discourse has been established in U.S. academic disciplines of Cultural Studies that engages this complicated positioning, opening up a full spectrum of ramifications and resonances between and including the positive and negative. Feelings of being de-territorialized, being bereft of a sense of belonging or committing allegiance to a nation can oscillate between discomfort, alienation or liberation, all at once. This terrain of the in-between is rife with contradictions, ambiguities and conflicting emotions.

In any discussion of identity formation, an underlying ideological concept of race and its social consequence of racism is necessary to confront. It can be argued that identity constructions rely on stereotypes, a process of racialization whereby difference is produced and codified and that stereotypes are a byproduct of racism. The phenomenon of race has to be situated economically, ideologically, historically and geographically. While it is not my intention to rehearse here the myriad of debates that were waged in the multicultural heydays of the past several decades in the U.S., I do want to point to certain key concepts that have productive resonance in the examination of the cultural relationship between Korean America and Korea.

Multiple Positionings

W.E.B. Du Bois, a turn of the century African American scholar and theorist, posited that African Americans occupy a split identity, a “twoness” wrought from what he termed a “double consciousness” that he explained as a “sense of always looking at one’s self though the eyes of others. This notion that the history of slavery and the ongoing systematic racism directed at blacks in the U.S. compelled them to regard and evaluate their identities through the lens of dominant white culture was developed by DuBois in his 1903 publication The Souls of Black Folk. Half a century later, utilizing a more internationalist framework, Franz Fanon’s book Black Skin, White Mask traversed a similar ideological terrain to unmask the processes by which the black psyche was distorted by colonial subjugation.

I recall this concept to suggest that Korean Americans, like other marginalized groups in the U.S., struggle with a similar sense of double consciousness. An earlier art work, a four part photo ensemble, "Make Me" (see illustration of one panel) depicted a bifurcated self portrait with a series of alliterative Asian American stereotypes--Model Minority, Exotic Emigrant, Objectified Other, and Assimilated Alien cut out of the face image. The incised removal of parts of the face along with the fragmented whole were meant to evoke the violence that these stereotypes inflict up a subject. Assimilation by Korean American has always been in question according to some scholars who maintain that Korean Americans, as compared to Chinese or Japanese American, have never fully claimed America and have maintained a closer attachment and involvement with their country of origin. Within the construct of Asian America, these scholars argue that Korean Americans have been a particularly unreliable and troubling constituent. U.S. based Koreans for instance have consistently been compelled to maintain an active engagement with their country of origin from the very early contract workers in Hawaii to the activists of the 80s who were inspired by the "Minjoong" (people's) movement in Korea. Korea's history of colonization, the ongoing military occupation by the U.S. as well as the continuing division of the country contribute to a sense of unfinished nation building that prevents many diasporic Koreans from fully 'claiming America' as they aspire to claim an undivided Korea at the same time.

Specifically related to the U.S./Korea nexus, Professor Elaine H. Kim, suggests that the U.S. is profoundly implicated in the three positionings of Koreans: the diasporic Korean American position, which because of racism is in but not of the U.S.; the postcolonial South Korean position, which because of a half century of U.S. military and economic intervention as well as its powerful cultural influence, is of but not in the U.S. and the subaltern North Korean position, which is neither in or of the West but has been "problematically constructed by the U.S."

With 1.1 million Koreans settled in the U.S. and despite some measure of economic stature and cultural visibility attained by Koreans in the country, "Saigu," more widely known as the LA riots, alerted Koreans as to just how tenuous, vulnerable and politically impotent they really were. Koreans bore much of the brunt of the worst urban upheaval since the 1965 Watts riots, with 58 dead, 2,400 injured, 11,7000 arrested and \$717 million in damages. A primary lesson still being addressed is the need for effective coalition building and political empowerment. This lesson cannot be learned from Korean political models but from domestic models that have worked for other U.S. minorities. It can be argued that there is a great need for Koreans to "claim America" in order to insure that this painful past will never be repeated.

The political and cultural consciousness derived from Saigu that seemed so clear and pressing even at the turn of the millennium, now seems blurred and rendered irrelevant as Koreatown in Los Angeles has more than recovered from the 1992 conflagration and is in fact experiencing an economic boom. Also complicating the political picture in the U.S. among Koreans is the fact that South Korea appears to have recovered from the 1998 IMF crisis and has been on the rise in international stature and visibility both economically and culturally, as evidenced in part by capturing center stage during the

2002 World Cup event and the current popularity of Korean popular culture in Asia dubbed the “Korean Wave.” Increased prominence of South Korea compels Koreans in the diaspora to feel more connected to Korea than ever before. Given that the U.S. has lost its luster internationally, Koreans increasingly regard South Korea as a viable socio-political and cultural role model.

In this respect, diasporic Koreans can generally be said to harbor a double consciousness not only in relation to U.S. or Eurocentric dominant culture but also in relation to cultural norms of South Korea. However, there are troubling assumptions that underlie Dubois’ notion of double consciousness. His concept and that of managerial multicultural policies are predicated on an assumption that a whole, authentic, and undivided or fragmented self exists for the imaginary other. This wholeness and authenticity was by default attributed to the mainstream and dominant subjects who are for the most part whites. “Whiteness” has only belatedly become recognized as a cultural and racialized construct to be interrogated akin to blackness, in which it’s status as the omnipotent repository for an assumed wholeness and integrated consciousness has been critiqued and dismantled. While double consciousness continues to have saliency just as racism continues unabated, it’s analytical utility has to be mediated with a broader understanding of the multiple sites of fragmentation and agency as well as a critique of authenticity.

Nations such as Korea and Japan that are invested in their perceived notions of homogeneity are not immune to issues of racism and identity politics. Given the relative invisibility and suppression of minority cultures, South Korea and Japan are perceived by foreigners to be ethnocentric, with a hyper developed notion of an authentic national identity.

The Problem of Diaspora

In 2002, I organized an exhibition, entitled, “THERE: Sites of Korean Diaspora,” about the Korean diaspora for the 4th Gwangju Biennale in Korea. It attempted to interrogate notions of home and identity and Korean nationalism. The title attempted to pose as a question the location of “there.” I have been evaluating the lessons to be learned from that project ever since. THERE was organized around five historic, cultural and geographically diverse sites of Korean diaspora: Almaty (Kazakhstan), Los Angeles, Osaka, Sao Paulo and Yanji (China). I chose to utilize cities rather than countries as the point of reference in which cities functioned as a synecdoche for a broader regional geographic identity that would not have to be defined exclusively by nationalistic identifications. This has become a popular practice for addressing various contemporary cultural developments which attempt to convey a globalized circulation of ideas that exceed nationalistic or nationalized containment. There have been numerous exhibitions and projects that have focused on key cosmopolitan cities in the world. In my case, several of the selected cities such as Almaty, Osaka and Yanbian are not major cosmopolitan centers with international recognition, however they were selected as urban centers with significant Korean population and symbolic weight. The multi-disciplinary exhibition brought together the cultural and artistic production from these sites exposing the differing degrees of cultural development. The dominant group of Korean artists that I

met in the three afore-mentioned cities were representational painters for the most part, whose works were questionably post-colonial in content or post-modern in form.

Translation and translatability readily emerged as a core issue since there were numerous foreign languages to negotiate--Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, Chinese--as well as my own lack of fluency in Korean. Perhaps the most revealing translation conflict concerned imposed selection of the subtitle: "sites of diaspora" into Korean. Since there is no easy equivalent in the Korean language and an unfamiliarity with a more open-ended, neutral understanding of diaspora, the translation that was given to me was "issan ttang" which roughly translates as "land of the exile." The implication of exile here is one of forced movement, devoid of agency. This was problematic in my view as it skewed the interpretation of the exhibition into one facet of diaspora negating the other kinds of movements and scatterings that were voluntary and with agency. The connotation implied in the Korean title of the exhibition was revealing of the dominant view of diaspora as an experience and a history that is sorrowful and to be pitied in which Koreans in the homeland assumed a patronizing position with respect to the diasporic subject.

In this view, the Korean are the assumed bearers of authenticity, with an apriori origin or apex from which everything radiates. This center/margin ideology would assume that the first part of the title, "THERE" unquestionably referred to the diasporic sites, negating the intended possibility of oscillation or even reversal. Most of the coverage from mainstream press tended to emphasize the toil, hardships and melancholy of separation. It was hard to assert another, radically different interpretation of the concept. It was difficult to persuade the mainstream media of my intended goal for the exhibition--to suggest different ways of being Korea and to problematize any essentializing notion of Korean-ness.

XEN: Migration, Labor and Identity

I followed the Korean diaspora project with another project that I considered to be the flipside of the migration coin – a project this time about the in-migration of foreign workers into South Korea. In 2004, I presented an exhibition, "XEN: Migration, Labor and Identity" at the Ssamzie Space gallery in Seoul that was based on videotaped interviews that I conducted the year before. (See image of Samar Thapa, a Nepalese worker interviewed in the offices of ETU, a migrant workers union located in Seoul.) I interviewed about 30 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. They are 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. Like other advanced industrialized country, Korea has an embedded structural need for imported labor of the variety that Koreans have labeled, "3D" – dirty, dangerous and demeaning; labor that Koreans themselves were unwilling to do.

My research in 2003 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 (copied from a Japanese migrant labor law) 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.

My interest in migrant workers in South 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 in another part of Dongdaemun that was dotted with a few Nepalese/Tibetan restaurants where the clientele are mostly workers from Nepal. In my view, these and other signs of diversity produce 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 dominant culture. Most of my South Korean interviewees did not share my assumptions about the benefits of a multicultural society, at least not for the present.

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. (See installation and detail images from “Moving Target,” one of several video installations in the XEN exhibition. The video juxtaposed scenes of pedestrians with that of migrant workers during a street protest conducted by migrant workers. The revolving projected video image passes over collaged text of information and analysis culled from a variety of sources, including my own writings about migration, labor and identity. It also includes quotations from Julia Kristeva’s *Strangers to Ourselves* (Columbia University Press, 1991, translated by Leon Roudiez), that offered philosophical and cultural critique about the figure of the foreigner.) I began interviewing South Koreans since it became quickly apparent that Koreans and their views were intrinsically part of the equation. Koreans are central to the migrant worker issue and they needed to be part of the solution. Some of the South Koreans I interviewed were associated with migrant workers and their issues but most, like the vast majority of Koreans in Seoul, had no direct contact with migrant workers, much less knowledge or interest in this issue.

Operations of Difference

Despite Korea's long history of out-migration, and the legion of tales of hardships and perseverance 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 hold insular attitudes about foreigners, especially with regards to those 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; they have no interest in multiculturalism and want to preserve their notion of a pure, homogeneous national state.

Both the flattening of migrant identity as machine-like automatons as well as the frequent playing of 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 may be comprehensible whereas 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 perception that the migrant population includes a high percentage of Muslims has been easily manipulated by nationalists to propagate fear and negative ethnic stereotypes in context of the post 9/11 heightened tensions. This sort of scapegoating of the most vulnerable foreigners is unfortunately an all too familiar practice world-wide.

When I would raise the issue of race and racism with regards to the migrant workers plight, most Korean interviewees presented a variety of arguments as to why race and racism is not relevant to the situation. One common view is that since Korea had no history of slavery, racism is outside its epistemology. In this logic, racism is inherently located in the practice and legacy of slavery that is solely a Black and White issue. Another prevailing view is that Korea's own history of colonial subjugation renders it immune from the position of the oppressor. As a nation that suffered brutal subjugation Japanese Imperialism and Colonialism as well as the ongoing discriminatory treatment of Koreans in Japan, in addition to the ancient suzerain status under China and the ongoing subordination under U.S. military rule, the Korean psyche has long identified with a position as the oppressed and the underdog. Adherence to this identity and a false sense that the oppressed is immune to becoming an oppressor is beginning to show some

erosion. There are activist movements in South Korea however that are beginning to confront the legacy of violence by Koreans forces against the Vietnam during the war in Vietnam which attempt to recast the Korean as a war time aggressor and oppressor just there are those who point out that Korea is viewed as an imperialist and racist power by some of the migrant workers. A related view which, on the one hand might acknowledge racism as a valid concern, would subordinate this issue, as was the case with feminist movement during the democracy movement of the 80s, to that of reunification and nation building which remains a paramount priority. Others have pointed out that the discrimination towards migrant workers in Korea rooted more on class bias than race bias. Certainly, class does play a significant role that is evident in the preferential treatment that is accorded foreigners who engage in professional fields that is vastly different that the treatment given migrant workers. However, it must be noted that majority of the professional class of foreigners are white or stereotyped as white while brown is the most dominant stereotype of the migrant workers. Epidural difference matters. We also know that identity is located in a matrix of differences in which dominant markers of race, class, gender, sexual orientation intersect in the construction of identity.

It is interesting to remember that the issue of race and identity was a bone of contention in one of the first exhibitions in the U.S. to combine Korean and Korean American artists. “Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art” took place first at the Queens Museum in New York City in 1993 and later traveled to the Kumho Museum in Seoul. About a dozen artists from each country were selected for this landmark exhibition. The artists from South Korea were either associated with the Minjoong art movement or younger artist who were influenced by the movement and also addressed socio-political issues. The U.S. based artists (and one Canadian artist of Korean descent) exhibited work that also addressed various cultural and socio-political issues. In a round-table discussion that was held at the Queens Museum, some of the artists from U.S. felt that their expressed concerns about issues of race and their ethnic identity in the U.S. were being treated dismissively by the Koreans as being self-indulgent and “navel-gazing.” Some of the artist from Korea suggested that their issues of identity culled from history of colonial and imperialism were more weighty and relevant. These differing perspectives point to a fundamental gap that exists in an understanding and appreciation of race as a fundamental social problematic between U.S. based Koreans and Koreans in South Korea. Korean immigrants who have lived for a period of time in other countries outside of Korea before finally settling in the U.S. have been known to comment that coming to the U.S. has made them confront the issue of race as never before. I would maintain that it is not because racism doesn’t exist elsewhere but that the issue exists in high relief in the U.S. as a core national issue.

Koreans can look to the treatment of Koreans in Japan especially in light of the “Yonsama” phenomenon to gain a glimpse into the intricate operations of racism. The popular craze embodied by Korean actor Bae Young Jun in Japan is part of a larger operation of appropriation and eroticization of a Korean male. This process of fetishization and objectification undermines the Korean male virulence and difference as to render him a tamed object of one’s gaze and desire. As Bell Hooks, a black scholar on

race has proposed, popular consumption of racial difference defies prevailing social norms and is like “eating the other,” a form of cultural cannibalism. In the logic of this consumption, all logical similarity between Bae Young Jun and other Koreans who are residents in Japan are erased in the operation of desire. Like many Black popular stars in the U.S., Yonsama functions as great window dressing to mask the continued economic inequity and social denigration of Koreans in Japan. There are of course examples of this similar flattening stereotyping of popular figures in Korea in which the unruly or nonconformist aspect of their identity, such as their homosexuality or their racial impurity is masked and effectively contained for popular consumption.

Conclusion

Korea is beginning to join the ranks of other nations that are grappling with an identity crisis in the face of transnational flows of migrants. This 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? Is homogeneity as some would claim an anachronistic tendency? Perhaps more to the point: is it even possible for Koreans to assert its homogeneity? As Koreans face a future that point to some measure of reunification with North Koreans, it will be confronted with accommodating and living with various kinds of difference and a sense of fragmentation and multiplicity. Insights can be gained from the fractured nature of diasporic identities today that explode the false promise of domesticated inclusion either in the country of residence or in the imaginary homeland. Perhaps the notion of vernacular cosmopolitanism introduced by British cultural theorist, Stuart Hall helps preserve a sense of localized cultural identity at the same time that it offers a productively skeptical affiliation of politicized, postcolonial identities that defy easy categorization and consolidation but nevertheless a desire for creating community. And in any community, denial or dismissal of difference or the importance of race is done at its peril.