

Reviews

'Xen: Migration, Labor, and Identity'

Yong Soon Min with Allan deSouza

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I saw Allan deSouza dressed in a white shirt and trousers, and serving drinks at the opening of 'Xen: Migration, Labor, and Identity', an exhibition by the LA-based artist, Yong Soon Min. I greeted him and asked, 'Where is Yong Soon?' But as soon as I took a drink, he turned his back, and moved on to other guests as if he had not seen me.

I realised later that I was a participant in a performance, titled *X* and with multiple references: it is used in mathematics, and more generally, to denote an unknown or unknowable factor: it refers to a branding mark as used in slavery; it also marks the place where one writes one's signature. 'X', then, is both a marker to inscribe individual distinctiveness and, paradoxically, a marker of the unknown.

The way deSouza avoided eye contact with the guests reminded me of the habitual mode of encounter between Koreans and foreign workers. Even though Koreans have lived with foreigners before, not least the 27,000 American soldiers stationed in Korea since the end of the Korean War, the Korean relationship with Americans, although it is taboo to admit, is ambivalent. Americans are viewed both as benefactors and as mercenaries of expansionism, reminding Koreans of the fact that they have been and continue to be colonised. Unlike Americans, Asian migrant workers – from South Asia, Nepal, Mongolia, and China – who have been channelled into 3-D jobs (dirty, difficult, and dangerous) have been regarded as invisible, although their presence in the social landscape has become an increasingly significant part of this supposedly homogenous nation.

The influx of workers since the 1990s has led to more discussion of working conditions and abuse and the government's Industrial Trainee System, which is renowned for giving employers and recruitment brokers generous leeway to exploit foreign labour.

'Xen', the title of the exhibition, is derived from the Greek root word, 'xenos', meaning foreign or strange, and is also a homonym of Zen, the Buddhist method of enlightenment. The show raises an urgent question for Korean viewers, as to how they deal with these foreign workers who fulfil the nation's growing need for labour but who face systemic racism.

DeSouza emphasised this ambivalence towards foreigners in the second part of the performance by shaving his face and head, and serving the used water to the viewers. In contrast to the drinks served earlier, this water contained his corporeal debris, the body parts of the servant, requiring us to accept his body too, not just his labour. Min, on the other hand, constructed different physical and intellectual spaces on three different floors of the gallery building. The combination of heterogeneous and multilinear elements complements and provokes questions of alterity. Through the different spaces, her project evolves from ethnography towards a contemplation that implicates viewers.

In 2003, Min conducted interviews with migrant workers from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma, Pakistan, and the Philippines. The interviews are viewed directly on the LCD screens of eight video cameras located as different sculptural 'viewing stations' around the main gallery. This arrangement nullifies the illusion of transparency. It mediates the gap between the sites of the immigrants' labour, suffering, and struggle, and viewers in the gallery. Second, in the gallery, viewers needed to sit down on a mat on the floor or on a small chair to listen to the interviews through small headphones and to lean into the small LCD screens to see the images. This is not as comfortable as viewing a large projection and creates circumstances similar to how the interviews were conducted. It also suggests that what we are seeing is raw material, untouched by secondary manipulation. Indeed, the interviews are only nominally edited.





The interviewees included Samar Thapa from Nepal, a member of the Equality Trade Union (ETU); Aishya, a Korean convert to Islam and an active member of a mosque for South Asian workers; Pakistani and Bangladesh workers at a moulding factory in Gunpo; Mishah Don and Saroni from Bangladesh; Korean volunteers for a Korean language class in Incheon; a Korean and Pakistani married couple at their home; Netanyahu, a Brazilian soccer player who is pursuing an engineering career in Korea; and Lee Minh, a producer of the TV programme, 'Asia Asia' at MBC. Min asks about coming to Korea, their experiences of everyday life, their hopes, their experience of racism and struggle for their rights, and about encounters with Koreans.

Among the voices of hope, difficulties, and desperation, I found some of the interviews intriguing because of the mode of communication established between Min and the interviewees. For instance, Min could communicate best with some in Korean, though she has hardly spoken it since her family moved to the US when she was seven years old. In one interview conducted in English with a Burmese man, communication was difficult because of his limited English. He proposed that they switch to Korean. Min accepted, but had to dig hard in her memory for the Korean she needed. This flawed Korean was soon mixed with English, but the inter-

view proceeded better than before. An imaginary community was formed in this encounter between different cultures. Globalisation accelerates the movement of people, the fusion of their identities, and the flow of ideas in which previously unrelated Others become interlinked. The language of the ebb and flow of diaspora, between a Korean American and a Burmese in Korea, in this instance is a mix of English and Korean, secondary languages to each of them and through which their mutually marginal and marginalised identities can be mediated.

When Min asked if he liked living in Korea, he said he would go back if his country were 'democratised'. His reply reminds Koreans of their own history. Emigration of Koreans to the US and elsewhere is circumscribed by Korean political instability, in turn initiated by invasion and occupation by outside forces. The Korean War and the military dictatorships installed since the 1960s displaced massive numbers of people. But now, other Asians see Korea as a democratic country and as a place of asylum. While discrimination against these workers continues, a question is raised for Koreans: is it not time to rethink the current ideas of 'democracy' and citizenship that are limited to one 'race' and 'blood'?

In a similar context, the fact that immigrant workers are fighting for their rights in the name of Jeon Tae-il (the iconic figure of Korean workers' struggles),



as is clear from migrant community newspapers Min installed at one of the viewing stations, is astonishing. Jeon committed suicide in 1970 to protest against worker exploitation. He demanded that employers observe the Labour Standard Act, and that the nation enforce it.¹

One newspaper declared, 'never forget Jeon Tae-il', which, in the gallery, incites Korean viewers to link themselves to migrant worker rights. As Min notes, ideas flow as people flow. Migrants not only import economic opportunities, but absorb and export the legacy of Korean democracy. One must also therefore anticipate a reciprocation (as in the shaving water, for instance), with which they demand what they have lost using the very tool which is given them, and from which they have been excluded.²

In the same room as *Field/Work* is a video piece *Strangers to Ourselves*, titled after the book by the French cultural theorist, Julia Kristeva. The video, projecting a circular image, shows various postcolonial and feminist books – such as *The Location of Culture*; *Writing Diaspora*; *Women, Native, Other*; and, *Strangers to Ourselves* – floating on the rippling water. This floating bibliography of postcolonialism is a means for Min to expand the scope of the exhibition beyond its regional outlook. In the book, Kristeva links the notion of the foreigner or stranger as deriving from within, rather than from

outside, and connects them to Freud's idea of alienation caused by the self-imposed repression of desire, through which one creates the strangers to oneself. Min intervenes in this binary opposition of native and foreigner in the Korean mind (which continues despite experience of living in the shifting world that causes excessive production of diasporas).³ Koreans may be strangers to themselves if they do not see themselves reflected in the Other within their own border. These Others have adopted their own 'Korean' faces as they traverse the border in this age of globalisation.

In a separate space is a revolving projection of video footage Min shot in the summer of 2003. Entitled *Moving Target*, the video is reconstructed through the juxtaposition of two edited sequences. One is of an immigrant street demonstration against the passage of the EPS (Employment Permit System) in Myeong-dong, Seoul, which was organised by the ETU-MB (Migrant Workers' Union-Migrant Branch). The other sequence is of Korean pedestrians walking along a busy street, seemingly disinterested in anything other than their own business. Each sequence is cut in parallel horizontal strips, and then interwoven with the other. Min's manipulation highlights the struggles of immigrants within the indifference of the general public. The constant rotation of the image haunts the viewer as if it were a memory,

constantly reinscribed/projected onto the body as one stands in the space.

A collage of letters cut from popular magazines is glued onto the wall of the room, creating a contrasting layer of Min's thought-fragments, with notes on borders, globalisation, migrants, diaspora, labour, and identity. This layer begins with 'the border is an intellectual laboratory, a conceptual territory to explore the complex relationships between cultures', and continues, 'Free trade: the product is protected but not the worker', and ends with a quote that Min encountered at the Freud Museum in Austria: 'Everywhere I go, I find that the poet has been there before me.' I can only guess that this might be related to Freud's notion of the uncanny, a re-encounter with a long-forgotten memory activated by an unexpected object met in a foreign place. One may find the trace of the long forgotten memory of oneself in the face of the migrants, as they constantly remind us of who we are and of our Other identity. The irregularity of the letters creates a quasi-montage, cutting and reassembling fragments of meanings, images, quotations, and borrowings into new juxtapositions in a Benjaminian dialectic of seeing that reveals hidden meaning between fragments. Min brings to the surface the discourse of the forgotten through these fragments from mass culture. She appeals to us to see beyond the printed surface of the letters, to see the images of the forgotten, overcoming the distance lying between our conception of the present and the presence of the workers.

The final installation is on the floor below in a dark, almost empty space. A single light falls on a handwritten note on the far opposite wall. The note is illegible at this distance, but a video camera located in the front of the room reveals what is written there through its LCD screen: 'Samar Thapa [the worker from Nepal who Min interviewed, and who became an activist against the EPS immigration law that since 2001 perpetuated the enslavement of foreign workers] was captured on February 15, 2004 and deported.'

This highly mediated environment, which Min titled *3D Exit: Desperate, Disposable, Deported*,

reminds us of the impasse presently imposed on the migrant workers. She also reminds us of the existence of the media, literally mediating the distance between migrants and Koreans, and whose objectivity can never be assumed.

Only by experiencing being an Other is one able to contemplate the relative nature of foreignness and its latency in our transitional existence. With one in every 35 people in the world a migrant, we should understand the importance of this recognition. Foreign workers were in Korea long before I recognised them; I learnt of them later, recognising them only after I had lived in London for many years as a foreigner myself. Art often fails to deal with current realities, and the art gallery is a space where forgetting and appropriation can easily be justified in the name of sublimation, poetics, and visual pleasure. Foreigners – their labour and identity – unless treated as objects of fetishisation, are rarely subjects for artistic investigation. Projects such as this function always at the margins of art and politics.

Notes

All images are from Yong Soon Min with Allan deSouza, 'Xen: Labor, and Identity', 13 August to 18 September, 2004, SsamzieSpace, Seoul.

1. Jeon was a young worker in a fabric factory in Seoul in the 1960s who became a labour activist in order to improve the inhuman working conditions he and other under-aged workers endured. He organised a small seminar group with his colleagues to study 'The Labour Standard Act', and challenged the factory owner, and campaigned for the workers' rights by writing to the government and the media. But when he realised no one was listening to them, he conducted a suicide demonstration by burning himself, on 13 November 1970, stating 'Observe the Labour Standard Act and do not waste my death'.
2. This reminds me of CLR James's *Black Jacobin*, which is a study of a Haitian revolution against white French slave owners that ended in 1803, which used the legacy of the French Revolution against the French themselves.
3. Koreans constitute the fourth largest diaspora in the world, but have little experience of dealing with others within their homeland, let alone within their art.