Korean Artists in Transcultural Spaces: Constructing New National Identities

Jeong-Ae Park
Gongju National Univ. of Education, Korea
Jeong2967@gmail.com

Introduction

Increasing numbers of Korean artists are educated abroad, they live in other countries, produce and exhibit their artworks in international venues. The artists who are active abroad also routinely exhibit their artworks in Korea, their artworks are collected and exhibited in Korean art museums and art galleries, consequently they maintain a close relationship with the Korean art community. Additionally, when Korean artists obtain art qualifications and develop careers abroad they may increase their chances of obtaining teaching positions in Korea. These artists who have lived abroad and who are now engaged in teaching college and university students are instrumental in disseminating art world concepts from abroad. Through these cross-cultural influences, Korean culture is in a continual process of change. In this context, the stereotypical concept that culture as mainly ethnic needs to be reconsidered.

Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha (1994) states that all culture is hybrid and dynamically shaped by interactions among a great many international and external forces. Nations do not construct themselves out of some sort of basic or foundational essence, rather they form their identities through interactions and transactions with other cultures.

The concept that cultures coexist, interact, and enrich one another is a basic premise of this inquiry. Although the characteristic of culture is itself adaptive and dynamic, the Korean national art curriculum in the primary and the secondary school levels simply appears to imposes upon students what may be conceived as essential characteristics of culture, while emphasizing the excellence of that culture. This ethnocentric attitude may impede students’ openness and willingness to acquire knowledge about how other cultures are different from their own. This ethnocentrism reinforces an inability to view other cultures as equally viable alternatives for organizing reality (Gollnick and Chinn, 1991). The inability to view another culture through its distinctive cultural lens rather than through one's own prevents the development of global citizenship education, because students do not learn that culture is diverse and relative and also changes over time. According to Banks (1988), an American expert on multicultural education, the major goals of global education should include helping students develop an understanding of the interdependence of cultures, enhancing unbiased attitudes toward other nations, and having reflective identifications with other world communities.

This study seeks to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic and adaptive aspects of cultural identity, as it is altered and expanded by Korean artists working abroad, and it has implications for arts education. For this, the identity formation of Korean artists working outside of Korea will be investigated, as they raise important issues about the relationship between Korean culture and cultures in other parts of the world.

Interviews with Korean Artists in New York

The interviews with New York-based Korean artists were conducted in January 2010. The primary purpose of the interviews was to understand the way transcultural Korean artists maintain, extend, and build new conceptions of Korean identity, by illuminating the dynamic dialogic process of their artistic production in international spaces. For those who have lived abroad it is perhaps easier to see clearly subtle dimensions of the character of their own culture than it is for those whose entire lives are bound within one culture. According to Giroux (1988), culture develops within “unequal and dialectical relations that different groups establish in a given society at a particular historical point” (p. 116). These differing and unequal power relations have a great impact on the ability of individuals and groups to define the achievement of their goals (Giroux, 1988). New York is a symbol of multicultural society, and it is the final destination for many successful Korean artists. New York provides them with a space in which to expand their artistic visions. For these reasons New York was chosen as the place in which to investigate the dynamics of those power relationships in the formation of Korean artists’ cultural identities. The questions that guided this inquiry are: Do Korean artists working in New York City produce artworks that reveal a struggle to explore, refine, clarify, and extend conceptions of Korean identity? In what ways do they maintain, reject, expand, or extend conceptions of Korean identity? How are these various identities represented in their work?
The Artists

Korean artistic engagement with New York can be traced back to the 1920s when Korean artist Chang Bal studied art history and aesthetic at Columbia University. Whan-Ki Kim who was active in New York between 1963 and 1974, expressed Korean sensibility in his modern paintings while engaging and accommodating Western cultural influence. And perhaps most importantly of all, Nam June Paik, the internationally famous Korean artist, lived in New York from 1964 until his death in 2006. It was in the late 1980s when the Korean government adopted a free overseas travel policy, that increasingly numbers of Korean artists gathered in New York where they developed successful careers. Currently, it is estimated that there are more than 3,000 Korean artists, including art students, living and working in New York. Therefore the findings of the interviews with only thirteen successful Korean artists in New York will not represent the entire landscape of what’s going on in New York Korean art community. Fortunately, while I was conducting the interviews, I could visit “The Faces & Facts: Korean Contemporary Art in New York” which was held to celebrate the 30th anniversary of The Korean Cultural Service NY (KCSNY). The exhibition which was held at three different venues of Gallery Korean of KCSNY, the Sylvia Wald and Po Kim Art Gallery, and the Queens Museum of Art featured over 60 works of 54 Korean and Korean American artists helped me to gain also some insights that are different from the information through the interviews. In other words, the exhibition helped me to gain a broader survey of the artists than will be possible through the interview alone.

The artists I interviewed are Sook-Jin Jo, Do-Ho Suh, Chong-Gon Byun, Ka-Kyung Lee, Sooja Kim, Il-Joong Kang, Sung-Ho Choi, Myong-Hi Kim, Ju-Yeon Lee, Sang-Man Lee, Nikki S. Lee, So-Hyun Bae and Miru Kim. Except for So-Hyun Bae and Miru Kim, each of these artists achieved their first art qualification in Korea and left for New York for the purpose of obtaining their second art qualifications, an MFA, or they settled in New York because they saw it as a place where they might present their works to the international artworld. So-Hyun Bae and Miru Kim were those who left Korea in their teens. Considering that the artists I interviewed were those who have left for New York for the distinct purpose of artistic success on the international stage, I should mention that the artists I interviewed would be quite different in their identity formation from those Korean artists who were born in the USA and experienced racial difference from their early ages while their sense of values or world view was not yet fixed. In this study characteristics of several artists’ works and their value systems will be discussed as they relate to the challenge and formation of their identities.

Sook-Jin Jo

Jo says that her intentions in her current works are mainly to contemplate the cycle of life and death. She works with natural materials to create something that is beyond usual meaning of these materials and thus to lead her audience to experience a variety of spiritual qualities. By doing so, she hopes to purify people’s mind and inspire them. Her work, Model of Wishing Bell/To Protect and To Serve, which is located near the entrance of the new Los Angeles Metro Jail uses 108 bells to symbolize the 108 afflictions in Buddhism. In this work, she says that she hopes to eliminate one affliction whenever a bell rings and by doing so humans can be freed from all suffering—inasmuch as a bell symbolizes peace, love and hope. Her work 300 wishes, 2003-4 is composed of diverse objects found in her environment. Her works are related to those of David Nash, a British sculptor who has worked worldwide with natural materials, and Louise Nevelson who is known for abstract expressionist “crates” grouped together to form a new creation using discarded objects and materials found on city streets in order to make “Assemblages.” However, although the main artistic languages Jo employs are minimalistic and formalistic, what defines her artwork as uniquely her own is achieved by incorporating or combining a Korean sensibility with Western formalistic elements. For instance, Space Between/We work with Being, but Non-Being is a loosely knit construction of logs, branches, and old barn flooring. In this work, she applies the concept of natural space as found in Korean traditional architectures and crafts, with irregular spaces that have an affinity to nature. Therefore her works are not as mechanically or artificially precise as might be expected if viewed in light of a Western sensibility. This different aesthetics can be easily understood when we compare Jo’s Space Between/We work with Being, but Non-Being with David Nash’s Cuts Up and Cults Down.

It is interesting to see how Jo’s work, Tombstone Landscape/Being is Born with Non-being reveals Korean sensibility that relates stylistically to Korean traditional artwork, such as Tile with Landscape in Relief, which was produced in the 7th century in Korea. Her work may also be related to An Kyon’s Dream Journey to the Peach Blossom Land, 15th century painting because both are the landscapes of Shangri-la. Although, Jo’s is a depiction of tombstones and An Kyon’s is one of mountains, they both have repeated round shapes as a paradise image. The subject of Peach Blossom Land as a utopia is related to “An Account of Peach Blossom Land” by the famous Chinese poet Tao Qin (better known as Yuan-ming) (A.D. 365-427) (Bush, 1971). According to Ahn and Lee (1991), ever since Tao Yuan-ming’s tale was introduced into Korea in the 13th century during the Koryo period (A.D. 918-1392), it has been a subject of Korean literati, and still lingers in the minds of Korean scholars. In
other words, depiction of a vision of mountain paradise has been firmly grounded within the Korean artistic tradition since the Koryo period.

Because Jo’s artistic intention was to convey spirituality in a place like New York, she brought different cultural elements to her works; the unique quality of her artworks was achieved by integrating her Korean sensibility with her experiences of another culture.

**Ik-Joong Kang**

Installation artist, Ik-Joong Kang, who has lived in New York for over 20 years works primarily with Korean subject matter—things such as Korean letters or Korean white porcelain jars, called Moon jars. What inspires him even higher are his early childhood memories of Moon jars in his parents' house, the water sounds heard through Korean paper doors, the images of small streets, and Korean mountains. For him, these memories always refresh his recollections of life in Korea. Kang said to me that his early life in Korea holds deeper and more profound memories than his more recent experiences of living in New York for 26 years. The Moon jar has been his major subject matter since 2004; it relates directly to the following story.

His Dream Moon which was installed in Ilsan in Korea on September 11, 2004, is composed of 139,000 children's paintings. He collected children's artworks from around the world to make the artwork. On the opening day, because it was too windy, the ball composed of children's artworks was exploded. Therefore he made the image of a Moon jar in which one side was slightly slanted. This is because the white porcelain of a Moon jar is made of white earth and because its viscosity is low, thus the whole porcelain jar is not made at one time but the upper part and the lower part are made separately and then united together to be baked in a kiln.

The very process of making the Moon jar has special meaning to him. Because the upper part and the lower part are made separately, joined together, and then fired in a kiln, he associates the process with the issue of the division of North and South Korea, and the desire for unity and harmony between the two entities. Returning to New York, he made artworks based on the imagery of the white porcelain Moon jar. For him, a Moon jar is not just itself; its pale sky blue color and its roundness evoke the cosmos. Thus when he draws it, he doesn’t want to draw its appearance, but wants to draw it with an empty mind because this is how he understands essence of the Moon jar. His attitude can be compared with the Ancient Korean literati who drew “Four Gentlemen (四君子)” which are composed of plume, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum motivated by the desire to draw not their appearances but their meanings, the so called hsieh-i (寫意) in Chinese, a practice of literati painting in Ancient China and Korea. For Kang, making artwork is a search for an essence. Because he was born in Korea, and because he is still a Korean, Korean subject matter continues to influence his artworks even in New York.

**Chong Gon Byun**

Chong Gon Byun's artwork is characterized as an assemblage of diverse objects and elements in his two dimensional painting. When he arrived in New York 30 years ago as a political refugee, he first settled in Harlem and it was difficult for him economically. To make his artworks, he collected things he could find in the streets —things such as discarded window frames, rusted keys and old electric bulb. The street became his “mixed media supplier” which consequently expressed the new world in which he lived, the time in which he lived, and the new narrative he was creating as he walked the streets. In his work Byun ingeniously combines art and politics, art and text, art and fashion, and art and religion with Dadaist and surrealist style. Byun's artistic indebtedness to Joseph Cornell can be easily detected in his works wherein every found object functions as a symbol of the world in which he lives, just as Joseph Cornell arranged a wide assortment of objects in small wooden boxes to create surrealist microcosms. Consequently, Byun’s artworks are hybrids—hybrids composed of appropriated iconic images from art history from the diverse cultures through which he has traveled. As seen in his The Silent Renaissance, where he places seated Bodhisatvas with Piero della Francesca’s portraits of man and woman, the combination of the sacred, the profane, and the political with humor and satire is a characteristic of his works which actually shows his profound artistic depth.

Byun searches in his subject matter for what he conceives to be “international.” The Western musical instruments such as violin and cello are his oeuvre wherein he depicts the images of figures like Mozart, Ronchamp, Nam June Paik, Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol and Western landscapes. He says that audiences from Europe and the US are very much interested in his works and how he interprets Western culture from diverse perspectives. However, recently he has started to produce works related to Korean subjects—things such as Korean medicine and phrenological interpretations of the human figure's wrinkles.
Ju Yeon Kim

When Ju Yeon Kim arrived in New York she tried to escape from her Korean cultural identity with the purpose of being an international artist. However, because her Western approach did not appeal to a Western audience, she came to question her identity again. Consequently she added such artistic elements as open space, the spontaneous line made by one brushstroke, and subtlety which she described as a Korean sensibility. The works titled Untitled executed in 2004 and in 2007, shown at the Seoul Arts Center exhibition demonstrate well this tendency.

In 2007 she has started to produce installations. Her work symbolizing a human tomb which was exhibited in La Coste in the south of France was made as two forms whereby one part is a painting and one part is made as an installation. The cave was decorated with white flowers, thus making an association with the palanquins used in a traditional Korean funeral. The four sides of the installation were decorated with white flowers made of Japanese rice papers adorned with different periods of the human life cycle—the early period (purity), youth (sexuality or the difficulty experienced as an adult), the memorial service on the forty-ninth day after a person’s death, and a birth and death. The work’s interior used 7,000 LED lights to symbolize infinite space. According to her, the reason she uses Korean philosophy or religion in her art making is both because they are familiar to her and because she wishes to introduce them to West. She sees them as a “universal” philosophy—perhaps even a way for Western culture to deal with the inevitable human condition.

Nikki S. Lee

Nikki S. Lee’s artistic subject is her identity. Because she is an Oriental person, she is interested in understanding the different perspectives between Oriental and Western cultures. And she is interested in how these identities related to her. In other words, her interest is in “Who am I?” rather than “Who am I?” She understands that finding her correct identity is possible when she searches for it in social contexts related to her.

She has been producing identity-related work since 1997, when she arrived in New York. At that time because she was interested in theories such as simulacra, she was obsessed by the difference between what is reality and what is not; therefore she came to be interested in fake documentaries. Simulacra are French theory developed by Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007). Baudrillard explains that simulacra are signs of culture and media that created the perceived reality. According to him, especially in postmodern age, the simulacra precede the original and the distinction between reality and presentation breaks down. Lee became engaged in a project wherein she assimilated herself into different ethnic groups and in the process she accentuated the interactions occurring in everyday life. Her purpose was to express her identity from the perspective of the Orient and of the West simultaneously. Lee thought she was in an appropriate position to explore relationships between East and West, inasmuch as she was in New York, a place where seemingly every cultural group lives together and where she could observe herself as if she were a member of different ethnic groups. She became a member of sub-cultures from the relatively marginal (e.g. drag queens, white trash, exotic dancers, punks, extreme sports players, and lesbian) to the upwardly mobile (e.g. yuppies, seniors, Latinos, tourists, and swing dancers). Consequently her approach can be differentiated from that of Cindy Sherman in that Sherman’s work emphasizes monumentality by reconstructing the images from past and future, religion and art, whereas Lee participates a real part of that group.

As an artist who explored issues of identity, she explained that she doesn’t search consciously for her Korean identity. She emphasized repeatedly that because she is an Oriental person holistically, and simultaneously Korean, she wants to express identity interpretation from an Oriental perspective. She said to me that she wants to express in her artworks about human’s “universal” sensibility based on her experiences. For Lee, universal sensibility means people’s feelings associated with the everyday acts of living a life—to become happy when eating delicious food, to become uneasy after an accident, to miss people when departing from them, etc. Although every culture has different approaches to or ways of expressing these human feelings, Lee tries to search for “a universal understanding code” which transcends cultures that can be understood by the peoples from all cultures, because for her what is needed is a communication system with the audience.

Sung Ho Choi

Since arrived in New York in 1981, Sung Ho Choi’s artwork has changed several times stylistically and thematically. His artworks can be grouped into three series. Series 1 was about the revealing of natural images using mixed media, and while living Korea his subject matter also included nature. Series 2 was composed works expressing his experiences and feelings of American life that he began to produce in 1988 two years—after a blank period, a turning point after his graduation from the Pratt Institute. It dealt with social issues such as racial conflict, environmental problems, the relationship between Korean and US, immigrant problems, etc. The works of the Series 3 began in 2005 when he
renewed his interest in Oriental culture while exiled from it.

Korean Roulette executed in 1992 with mixed media on a wood panel uses the symbol of a dangerous game to explain immigrants’ daily lives which could be compared with gambling. He uses the objects with which a Korean grocer is confronted daily. American Dream (1988-1992), an installation work is about immigrant life and uses the immigrant bag he brought with him when he immigrated, a Kimchi bottle in which New York Times newspapers are crammed, and Korean American newspapers collaged on the American flag which is distorted like a target. My America (1993-1996) is his subjective image of the US where his fragmentary experiences are collaged. On the other hand, his mixed media Their Korea (1994), relates to the image of Korea from the perspectives of foreigners. It includes content which explains that Korea is affiliated with Japan, a letter to the Hawaiian Governor from Horace Allen, the first American minister to Korea, in which he recommends employing Korean people because they are mild, and a distorted account related to Korean that was introduced into the foreign mass media.

As a bicultural artist Choi claims that he wants to express both Korean and Western elements as both are fused within his experience. Because Choi’s intention is to search for his roots of identity and to challenge it, his works reveal tentative, dualistic, and sometimes contradictory identities.

Do Ho Suh

Do Ho Suh's works are metaphors for the dynamism of individuality vs. collectiveness, and homeland vs. displacement in a contemporary society. Suh uses objects such as school uniforms and Korean school graduation yearbooks, which he is familiar with and with which most Koreans can easily identify. In addition, Some/one exhibited at the Venice Art Biennial in 2001 takes the form of a traditional Korean man’s dress made up of a thousands of military nickel dog tags. In the interview, he told me that he never intentionally attempted to reflect his Korean cultural identity and that his interest is just in himself. However, he said that his work started from a slippage or discrepancy, the crack in the difference between his mother tongue and foreign tongue. He also said that he could see more objectively what was happening in Korea from his perspective as a residence of New York. Although Suh didn’t think that he was intentionally reflecting his Korean cultural identity, his main subject matters came from his memories or experiences of Korean life.

So Hyun Bae

So Hyun Bae who immigrated to the USA when she was in her teens, consciously reflects upon her memories of Korea and her dualistic existence. Consequently most of her works are double coded with Korean and foreign elements, as if she wants to reveal her identity both as a Korean and a Westerner. Her color scheme is bright and rich and deep, still it projects an alien atmosphere. Nevertheless, most of her use of line and her subject matter are related to Koreanness or Orientalism, as can be seen in Untitled (turquoise small), executed in 2008. The brush technique in the representation of birds between tree branches is executed in a bold and free style with a swiftness not entirely under control. It is as if this artist is impatient to externalize some force pressing upon her mind—a way of working that can be traced ultimately to the rough techniques of the ip'inn (逸品) or “unrammled style” manner of Ancient T'ang and Sung painters of China. Although depicted in cellulair blue to convey its contemporary atmosphere, the work can be said to be reminiscent of that of Xu Wei (1521-1593) of the Ming Dynasty of China, who produced his bamboo with furious attacks of the brush on the paper. Such a mixture of Western and Asian visual references frequently recurs in Bae’s work.

Sooja Kim

Sooja Kim’s subject matter is taken from traditional Korean fabric. Textiles provided her with a way to express her status as an immigrant, a nomad, and as an Asian or Korean woman displaced into Western culture. She is known as a “bottari artist.” Bottari Truck is a video work depicting her journey through rural areas of Korea on the back of a truck filled with bundles of bound bottari with Kim positioned in the center, motionless in the changing landscape. For her a bottari, a round bundle filled with cloth or everyday commodities is a metaphor for nomadic lifestyle in which people’s worldly goods are easily wrapped for convenient transportation. Because, with its flexibility, almost anything can be wrapped easily in a bottari, it becomes a metaphor for the reception or accommodation of Taoism. Using Korean traditional cloth Kim records her own story, and at the same time she addresses issues of gender and women’s labor in both Korea and other countries. By doing so, she redefines the social and cultural meanings of the domestic female environment.

In another well-known video work, A Needle Woman, where she plants herself in some of the world’s largest cities—and unmovong solitary figure while streams of pedestrians flow around her, Kim seems to be engaged in a quest for cosmic integration. In this work, she is the needle cutting through a landscape in order to weave the world’s people together. As art critic Herald Szeemann (2001) wrote in the catalogue of A Needle Woman, Kim’s works touch upon Zen Buddhism, meditation, suspension of the body, the emptying of the mind and force. In the interview, she said to me that her subjects and
subject matter are not for a specific culture but are “universal.”

Korean Culture as Signifying System

As the interview data show, most of the artists understand culture not as historical or materialistic but as symbolic. They had no compelling desire to reflect “consciously” their Korean cultural identity. This is especially true when the artists didn’t want to be known as “local” Korean artist in an international art stage. Indeed, most of the artists wished not to be categorized as “Korean” or “Korean artists.” Most of the artists believed, it could limit their thinking about their approaches to art making, and they didn’t want their artistic capacities to be contained in a smaller Korean vessel. Since New York is viewed as the center of the contemporary art world—a multicultural city where diverse cultures coexist—the artists primarily desired to appeal to an international audience. This can be understood that the artists searched their subjects and subject matter and communication code what they conceived as “universal.” Some artists’ consciously escaping from a Korean identity can be understood in this context. Generally they think that understanding Korean cultural identity through the use of physical patterns or schemas can be a hindrance for their art making. However, for some artists, their Koreanness is an important strategy for being differentiated from others. Consequently, they may be seen as existing on a continuum between these two poles. They seem want to escape from Koreanness while at the same time to reflect it consciously in their artworks. In other words, Koreanness is an essential factor affecting every artist’s work either through escape or discovery—or somewhere on a continuum of these two conflicting desires.

Although in fact, most of the artists couldn’t easily respond to questions regarding what is Koreanness in the 21st century, they wanted to engage their Koreanness in the dynamics of change, reflecting their Koreanness in contemporary society. Therefore, most of the artists understood that the two attitudes of reflecting their Korean cultural identities either consciously or unconsciously are quite different matters and that the latter was desirable, because it was less likely to inhibit their art making. Most of the artists thought that what was important was to reflect their Koreanness “naturally” and neither to be too conscious of it nor to escape entirely from it. In this way, Koreanness in the 21st century can be reflected in their artworks since they see that it is closely related to the artist’s evolving individual identities and the ongoing challenge of identity formation.

Challenge for Korean Identity and Its Implications for Art Education

According to Stuart Hall (2009), cultural identity is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. It undergoes constant transformation (Hall, 2009). Similarly, Nikki S. Lee explains that identity is a production in process and is always constituted within context. Korean artists in international spaces are implicated in many discourses, including that of their own identities. For the artists, identities are unstable, as they are made by the recognition and reconstruction of power relationship between Korean and Western cultures. For the artists, identities have to be conceived of in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes. Because the artists’ works constructed within the border context of struggle for cultural definitions in unequal and dialectical relationship with other culture, they always reveal the dualistic states, tentative doubling. Therefore their artworks are not bound by a sense of direct cultural heritage and also not related to national selfhood expressed in Korean traditional art. Their artworks are increasingly hybrid, raising the issues of their meaning and cultural interpretation both for Korean and for international audience. Then, it raised the question: what kind of cultural knowledge is needed for global citizenship education and multicultural art education?

References


