

## INTRODUCTION

My work considers ‘in-between space’, which is based on my autobiographical experiences of moving from Korea to America. The ‘in-between space’ I occupy is locational one that is neither here in America nor there in Korea. Furthermore, the space is also a psychological gap; on one side, I have been conditioned to become a ‘proper’ woman according to Confucian ideals that are expected of women in Korea while struggling, on the other side, to be more self-confident, independent, and assured in my new American homeland.

Having lived in two countries, I struggle to adjust to each different space and culture emotionally and physically. Each situation summons different roles, customs, and habits, which bring upon different mental challenges. In Korea, I felt social pressure for performing the traditional role of the feminized woman. As Estelle Disch states in *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*: “In Asian cultures that have been heavily influenced by Confucianism, women are regarded as secondary to men, existing for their service.”<sup>1</sup> Within these constraints, I could not reveal my true self or my feelings to other people. After moving to America, I faced obstacles with language and varying cultural expectations. In America, the norm is for one to express one’s emotions, thoughts, and beliefs actively and assertively. Not only did I have difficulty allowing myself to express my feelings but also when I finally did make the attempt, I felt my English verbal skills were lackluster and I was constantly plagued by miscommunication and misunderstanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Estelle Disch, *Reconstructing Gender: A Multicultural Anthology*, (2nd. Ed., Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000), 39

Through my experiences, I have become acutely aware of how my body has become a medium between the way I express myself and the world that encompasses me. As Douglas Kahn explains in *Noise Water Meat*: “When one speaks, the act of hearing one’s voice is the most widespread private act performed in public and the most common public act experienced within the comfortable confines of one’s own body.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, I have decided to use my body in my art as a connector between my private thoughts and the public world. In all my work, the body is either trapped, under scrutiny, and on view; thus, implying that my body is a nexus for a direct exchange and interaction with the viewer. Not only do I wish to convey my struggles to the viewer but I also hope to experience resolution and relief through the use of my body in my external.

All of my artwork is initially inspired by my personal experiences, my emotions, and my in-between state. Through my process of making, I attempt to illustrate my resistance against the conformities of society and of American and Korean culture by showing variable perspectives and physical dissonance. This process of expressing and exhaling my unconscious dissatisfaction and frustrations allows me to release emotional stress and burden. Also, my art pieces work as a reminder of immigrant problems by publicizing the societal problems.

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat: A history of sound in the arts*”, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 7

**INSTALLATION 1. *I = Water: My mind ripples like waves of water***

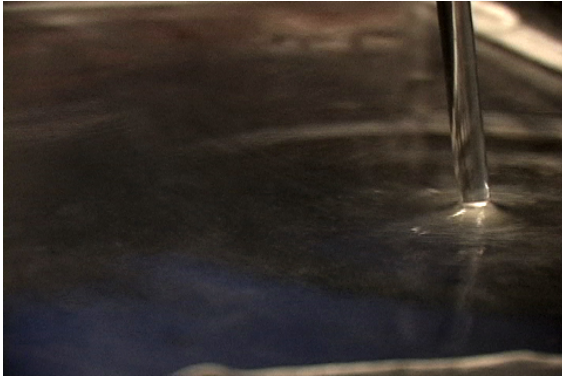


Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.4

Fig.1~Fig.4. *I = Water: My mind ripples like waves of water*, acrylic stick, mike, speaker, sound system and PC, 20x15x35inch, 2005. (© Hye Yeon Nam)

When I was in my twenties, I moved to the United States from Korea, I found that my experiences as a foreigner separated me from those who were native-born or who moved to the U.S. at a much younger age. I always felt as if I was in transit with no destination. I continued to feel as if I was in an in-between perpetual state of I am not entirely comfortable in my new home. Simultaneously I felt great nostalgia and yearning for my native country. Now several years later, this state persists. The sense of dislocation,

while not as pronounced, is still vivid in my day-to-day reality.

As a multimedia designer, I decide to create digitized work conveying these sentiments as if analog nostalgia and memory in my installation *I=Water*. The piece is set in the middle of a small room with a pool situated at waist-height. Two speakers hanging from the ceiling graze the surface of the water (fig.1) and beside the pool is a microphone. Playing from the speakers are audio clips of departure and arrival information I have recorded from bus stops and train stations as well as bilingual messages in Korean and English and footsteps crunching gravel. The audio clip in Korean is a friendly message while talking with Korean friends and that of English is a lecture in a class. Compared with the Korean message, the English one is much more blatant and less warm. The sound emanating from these speakers causes the water in the pool to ripple.

The viewer can passively listen to the audio and watch the rippling patterns, or she can choose to speak into the adjacent microphone. (Fig.2) If she does, a monitor located under the water, on the pool's floor, turns on and begins to show a pre-recorded video, including images of footsteps, the residue of ashes (Fig.4), and drawings I produced with thick brush strokes following a traditional Korean drawing style (Fig.3). If the viewer decides to start speaking, her voice triggers the audio to turn off; if the viewer decides to stop speaking, the silence triggers the video to turn off and the audio to turn back on.

Many of the components of this installation are obviously personal: the use of both Korean, my native tongue, and English, my second language in the pre-recorded audio; the use of video footage of my drawings; and the use of other imagery that I find

particularly sentimental. However, I chose many elements in the installation that are more “universal” or “anonymous” in their qualities and that are also used in the works of other artists to conjure up particular emotions when the viewers interact with the installation. Specifically, the use of water and the use of sound are particularly important to me.

Water is fluid, constantly vacillating and in flux. I think these qualities metaphorically characterize not only immigrants and their mixed feelings about their new countries but also all people in times of confusion and displacement. Everyone seems to be constantly moving through psychological spaces of settlement, transition, and dislocation.



Fig.5. *he weeps for you*, video and sound installation, 1976, (© Bill Viola)

Also, water has the quality of acting as a mirror that reflects myself. Bill Viola as a digital video artist examines this reflexive quality of water in his early video installation *he weeps for you*. In it, water drips out of a faucet and is immediately magnified by a

video camera and projected onto a large screen. (Fig.5) The viewer can see himself in the water drop in the projection until it finally lands on floor, in which case a new drop emerges and the cycle continues.



Fig.6 *The Nantes Triptych*, video and mixed media, 29min., 1992, (© Bill Viola)

In *I=Water*, I examine these philosophical concerns from a different perspective. Viola's work deals more with the cyclical nature of life, which is further evidenced in his piece *The Nantes Triptych* in which three panels depict a woman giving birth on the left, a woman dying on the right, and a figure moving under water in the middle (Fig.6) which connects with my installation dealing with suspension. The viewer who enters *I=Water* must make a decision: to view herself through the pool of water and hear the audio that reflect displacement or to hear her own voice but watch video footage that reflects dislocation. The two decisions, however, are not limiting nor confining. When listening to the linear audio the viewer is given time to contemplate and to consider the moment. When the viewer decides to speak, she can express her thoughts and emotions by using her own voice and look at changing of water waves. Therefore, the choice and

what occurs after that choice has been made allows the viewer to become aware that in fact they are constantly in motion physically, mentally, and psychologically like water. Furthermore, after the viewer experiences *I=Water* the viewer may realize that the space she occupies is not a dead space but an active one that informs her relationships with memory and origin.

Allowing the viewer to speak in my installation using her own voice makes the piece interactive and allows it to be experienced deeply. In *Noise Water Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, Douglas Kahn argues that voice is one of the most intimate properties humans have and that the use of voice can transform a public experience into one that is individualistic; he claims, “Hearing one’s own voice almost always passes by unnoticed, but once acknowledged it presents itself as a closed system remaining within the experience of the individual.”<sup>3</sup> The switch between the pre-recorded audio and the viewer’s own voice is highly relevant. The sounds I specifically have chosen for my audio come from my own history and I believe accurately convey feelings of ambivalence, belonging, and alienation that all of us are struck with and that foreigners in the United States are particularly struck by and yet a viewer may want to react to these sounds by speaking. The viewer may want to affirm the sentiments conjured up by my audio clips or she may actively disagree or she may wish to express something different altogether. Whatever she does ultimately say (or not say) makes her involvement in *I=Water* her own experience.

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise Water Meat: A history of sound in the arts*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 7.



Fig.7 *Itinerant*, sound installation, 2005, (©Teri Rueb)

In *Itinerant*, an augmented reality artist Teri Rueb explores similar issues of displacement and identity through the use of sound as well. The viewer is encouraged to walk with a small audio device linked to a Global Positioning System (GPS); when the viewer walks around Boston Common (Fig.7) with this device, she experiences sounds that are specific to certain locales. The sounds are not continuous, allowing the viewer's mind to roam as she is physically roaming in space.

What makes *I=Water* different than *Itinerant* is that Rueb's work uses a large space and the viewer's exploration of that space in addition to sound to create feelings of dislocation; whereas, my work uses a confined space and the viewer's own voice. Rueb's work is highly site-specific (especially considering the use of GPS) and my installation could be located in any anonymous space. I am intentionally trying to evoke anonymity and the feeling that the viewer could be anywhere, any place, and any nation.

What makes these two works similar is the use of sound. Sound and water are integral to *I=Water*; they have not only worked consistently as metaphors in other artists' work but they have done so in particularly powerful and poignant ways to express a



variety of emotions such as roaming and passion. My goal is that *I=Water* takes advantages of these metaphors; thus, allowing the viewer to become more aware of the psychological displacement that she encounters and to provide to her the opportunity to experience the feeling of the foreigner. With in the installation she can navigate through her own histories and express her own thoughts with her own words.

## **INSTALLATION 2. *Suffocation***

In Korea, Confucian principles convey social structure and, therefore, they have a significant influence on how I lived my life. Being young and a woman meant I was subordinate to most people: my parents, elders, teachers, men, boys and my older sister. One of the primary Confucian doctrines is that the young are always subservient to their elders (長幼有序). In my family, this not only meant that I obediently listened to my grandparents and to my parents but also to my sister, who is only 2 years older than me. For example, whenever we argued, I was expected to defer my opinions to her and allow her to have the final say.

Another primary Confucian doctrine is that men are considered noble and that women are meant to carry themselves with humility (男尊女婢). For example, when I was looking for employment I found the standards for hiring men and women to be remarkably different. Granted, women throughout the world are consistently in positions of lesser power but in Korea the role of women in the workplace is very specific. When I was finally hired at LG (<http://www.lg.co.kr>), a conservative corporation, and the second largest business conglomerate in Korea, I noticed not only the huge discrepancy between the ratio of women to men—in my division, there were sixty men and only five women—and the limitations to how often and how far women could be promoted but also in the manner in which they were supposed to behave. Women were supposed to be like flowers in the company. That is, women were to always be attractively presented, graceful, and pleasant to be around; they could not share the same attitude and behaviors that confident, assertive men possess.

When I moved to the United States, I noticed significant cultural differences; theoretically, America follows a creed of freedom and diversity where everyone is ‘equal’ and differences do not exist between gender, race, sexuality, and age; however, I often faced prejudice and discrimination because I had difficulties learning the language and assimilating the culture. In reality, the ability to speak English perfectly is a measure of social evaluation. As Ann Hamilton makes claim in *Tropos*, “How one read, spoke, and wrote was considered the superior accomplishment of a refined enlightenment and erudition.”<sup>4</sup> However, what happens when I am “refined” and “erudite” but unable to express myself well in a foreign tongue?

The way I spoke, with accents, improper grammar, and halting confidence, often leads native speakers to conclude that I was less intelligent or less educated. Gary Hill notes that language becomes an evaluation tool for one’s intelligence: “Language is at the heart of what makes sense in the world for us”.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Ferguson, *Ann Hamilton, Tropos*, (Dia, 1993), 102.

<sup>5</sup> Robert C. Morgan, *Art+Performance Gary Hill*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 27.



Fig.8



Fig.9

Fig.8 ~ Fig.9. *Suffocation*, wood, glass, plaster, projection, 50x60x50inch, 2005. (© Hye Yeon Nam)

In my piece *Suffocation*, I attempt to convey and explore the two cultural spaces that I inhabit: having grown up as a girl in Confucian Korean society and now living as a foreigner in America. The piece exists as a grid composed of forty-eight plaster heads with a video projected onto glass in the center. (Fig.8) The video depicts an Asian female figure attempting to break out of the glass (Fig.9); she is pounding and knocking on it only to be ignored by the heads that surround her. Instead, they are facing in directions away from her.

Initially, the figure in the video appears to be the one who is being suffocated, as she is abandoned by the plaster heads that surround her and as she is metaphorically trapped within the confines of the glass. However, in reality, everyone in the piece is being suffocated: the female figure as well as the plaster heads and the viewer. Although there are forty-eight heads, they actually only exist in five different forms;

some are forward-facing, some have their mouths open, some are looking down, some are looking to the right, and some are looking slightly down to the left. My decision to use multiples of the same mold in the same size was to demonstrate how standardized the world has become as we enter a late-capitalist, globalized period.

The expectation to conform culturally weighs on me heavily. Recently, I was having breakfast when the server asked how I would like my eggs prepared and if I wanted them “sunny-side up.” I had never heard this term before and had misunderstood him as saying “sun inside up.” I could have easily answered him affirmatively but instead I questioned him to what “sun inside up” meant. This led to a frustrating interaction where he could not understand what I was saying and I could not understand the colloquialisms associated with ordering eggs. In retrospect, I wonder if I should have just agreed with my server rather than causing the confusion to occur? Or was it best that I asked him so that not only did I have my eggs prepared the way I actually wanted them to be prepared but so that I could also learn what “sunny side up” meant to avoid future such situations? How should I have proceeded in the way that was most culturally complacent? What does cultural complacency imply?

Often I cannot conclude what is the ‘correct’ way to proceed and I realize that cultural acceptance is usually ambiguous or not obvious. When the viewer encounters *Suffocation*, he too becomes one of the suffocated. He cannot literally release the figure from the confines of the glass and by viewing her, he is allowing her to remain trapped. But he is also alienating himself; he is neither with her nor with the plaster heads but rather by himself. In a sense, he becomes both *part* of the problem and simultaneously a *victim* of the problem. What is he to do? The work positions the viewer in an

ambivalent position parallel to my own struggle. In this way, I aim to make the personal encompass the collective as we all become subject to the forces of social conformity.



Fig.10. *Art must be beautiful, the artist must be beautiful*, 1975. (© Marina Abramovic)

In Marina Abramovic's performance *Art must be beautiful, the artist must be beautiful* (1975), she questions certain stereotypes while being trapped within them. The piece shows her brushing her hair repeatedly with a metal comb while repeating the two phrases: "Art must be beautiful" and "The artist must be beautiful." (Fig.9) The first stereotype she confronts is the centuries-old belief that the basis of art is beauty, a belief that was being actively examined at the time of her piece with Conceptual, performance, video, and Pop art. Her performance now exists only as video documentation; it is not an object to be looked at, it does not possess qualities that aesthetic work has such as form, color, and sheen, and it is not precious or material. Ultimately, the video is quite disturbing as her repetitive motion of her saying the two phrases and her hair-combing negate each other and her.

The other stereotype the performance addresses is how women should exist

socially. By making claim that “the artist should be beautiful,” she reinforces what I encountered while I was working at LG: women should always be attractive and put-together. However, in the performance, her continued hair-brushing, which is an activity encouraged for women to perform in order to have beautiful, shiny hair, leads her to destroy not only her hair but her face, as her comb often slips and scratches at her skin. In the end, Abramovic critiques the ideals of beauty in art and feminine ideals but does so by existing as a piece of art and by employing traditional feminine practices.

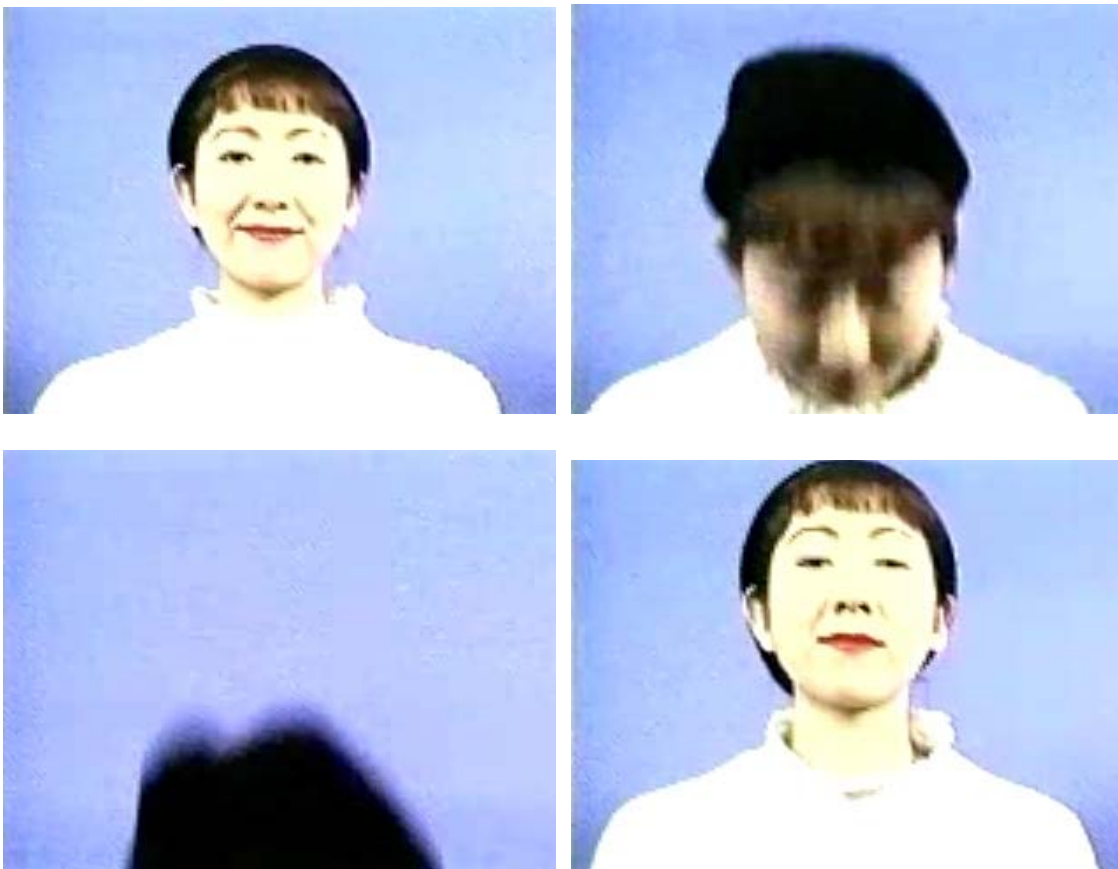


Fig.11. *Keep Smiling*, 1998. (© Miho Suzuki)

Another artist who reacts against cultural-societal oppression is Miho Suzuki, a Japanese artist. Her work challenges the Japanese Confucian prejudices that women

should be beautiful and mild. In her work, *Keep Smiling*, she keeps bowing while smiling. (Fig.11) She shows fatigue as time goes by and she repeats the bowing until she faints. This video installation reflects women's stress and stifled feeling under Confucian values that prescribe women as objects of beauty. The stifled feeling in *Suffocation* makes the viewer aware of the sort of suffocation that I have experienced by being in-between America and Korea. A viewer is prevented from 'rescuing' the female figure, which also makes him aware of his own personal suffocation and participation in such cultural oppression.

### **INSTALLATION 3. *Gaze and Pointing at Me***



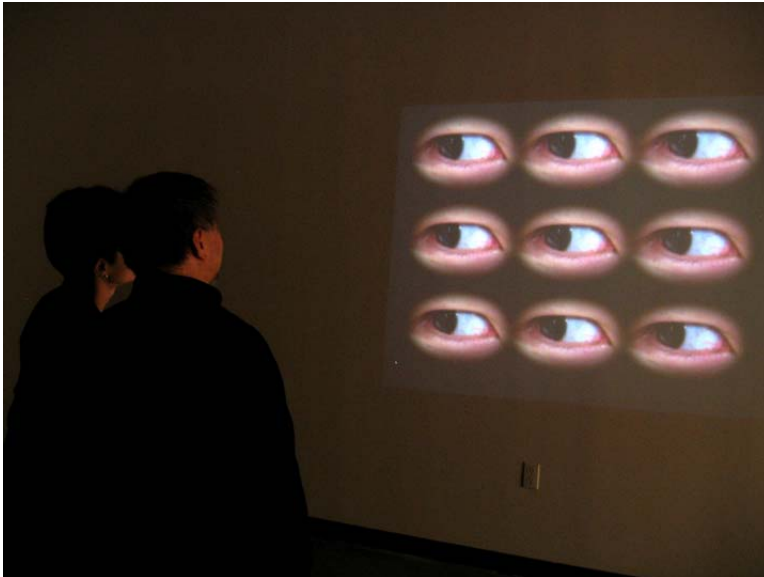


Fig. 12. *Gaze*, interactive video installation, 2005, (© Hye Yeon Nam)

As I was growing up in Korea, I learned how to become the ideal role of the good daughter and the good wife; after moving to the United States, however, I have tried to become more assertive and to assimilate to the ‘American way.’ In this way, America and Korea differ in cultural and cognitive aspects. How eye contact functions socially is a good example. In Korea, one is taught not to make direct eye contact lest they be considered rude but in America, during conversations, one who looks directly at the other person is deemed more trustworthy and confident. I have become painfully aware of this difference between Korean and American culture and of many other differences; so much so, that I feel like I am constantly on display. I am always aware that I am a foreigner. When I speak my accented English, how I wear my clothes, what I choose to eat—these are all ways I notice that I have a different style than native-born Americans. This social incongruence became the motivating factor for my piece *Gaze*, which consists of a set of

nine eyes projected onto a large screen. The video clips of the eyes are linked to a video motion sensor; as the viewer shifts around, the pupils follow her every movement. (Fig.12) The multiplicity of eyes brings an alien-like feel to the installation and the large screen overwhelms her. My attempt is to make the viewer feel as out-of-place and uncomfortable as I often feel; however, my decision to use images of eyes considers themes not unique to my own experiences.



Fig. 13. *Eye in the Sky*, Sony CPJ 200 projector, videotape, VCR, white acrylic paint on fiberglass sphere, 18x18inch, 20min, 1997, (© Hye Yeon Nam)

In Tony Oursler's piece *Eye in the Sky* (1997), he projects the single image of an eye onto a fiberglass sphere. (Fig. 13) The eye chosen is one that is watching television; the viewer knows this because he can hear sounds of channel-surfing as well as the rectangular screen of the television reflected in the pupil. Oursler's piece is, of course, a commentary on how mass media has become an incredible presence in our lives and how it has reduced our attention spans and reconfigured how we process information. His choice of using the eye, disembodied from the rest of the body, is also significant: the eye

is not like any other body part. One can learn an incredible amount about another's personality, psychology, and behavior by reading his eyes. In Korea, a popular proverb states that one's eyes are also the mirror of one's soul.

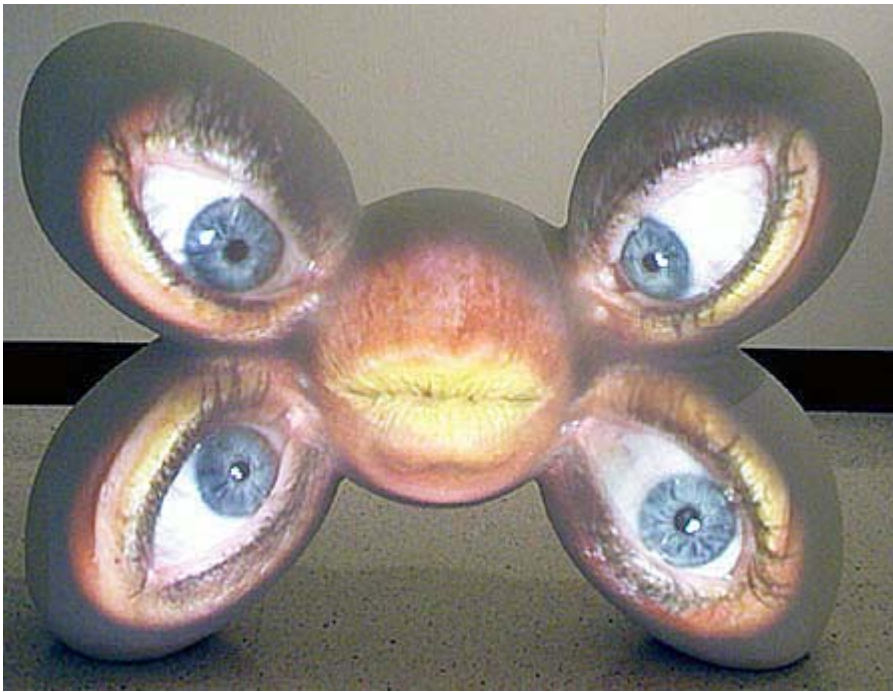


Fig.14. *Junk*, Fiberglass sculpture and DVD project, 29x39x16, Sarah Norton Goodyear Fund, 2003.  
(©Tony Oursler)

Oursler revisits the use of the disembodied eye in many of his other work, such as *Junk* (2003). In this piece, an oddly-shaped sculpture has a single eye projected onto each of the four corners and a mouth is projected in the center lobe. (Fig.14) The mouth speaks to the viewer whereas the eyes continue to look into space. Despite including another body part, the four eyes are still the most powerful element of the piece. The mouth projection is direct; the lips move to tell the viewer random fragments of conversation. The eye projections, however, are more subtle in what they reveal.

*Gaze* differs from Oursler's video sculptures because of its interactive qualities. Whereas the mouth in Oursler's *Junk* speaks at the viewer or the eyes move according to a pre-recorded arrangement, the eyes in *Gaze* respond according to the viewer. Many new media artists choose to include interaction within their work for a number of reasons. For one, the world itself is interactive and, by incorporating these qualities into a work, it both mimics and considers how the everyday operates. Also, new media work tends to question high art, such as painting and figurative sculpture. This questioning comes in many forms. For example, new media often uses new technologies, therefore, asking: Are there limitations to what medium art can exist as? Does art have to be tangible? Why is art so prevalently commodified as objects?

The use of technology like Internet and digital cameras attracts more active participation and exposure by the audience as opposed to the past when the still galleries were prevalent. New media by means of technology is also by changing the position the viewer holds in relationship to a piece. Traditional artwork exists as independent of the viewer; new media instead claims that the viewer's involvement completes the work. In fact, the viewer is actually no longer a 'viewer' anymore, just looking at artwork; with new media, the viewer becomes a 'participant,' actively engaging with the artwork and adding meaning to it. Viewers act upon interactive installations and immerse into the work relatively intensely.

In Jenny Holzer's *Bosnia World* (1996), the artist departs from her previous practice of posting aphorism-like messages onto billboards, posters, and benches to explore new media in the form of a virtual reality-based installation. The piece addresses the complex social structure associated with violence against women during the war in

Bosnia-Herzegovina. The viewer navigates seven villages, each with twenty huts. Every hut contains a character, be it victim, perpetrator, or observer. When the viewer enters the interior of the hut, she hears a voice talking about various experiences; when she exits, the world changes dramatically atmospherically.

When interviewed for *Wired*, Holzer discusses how she tries “to bring unusual content to a different audience—a non-art-world audience.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, she explains how the use of technology was essential to achieve the experiential qualities of *Bosnia World* because “the strategies used in Bosnia are all-too-common techniques of war, so I thought about how to translate this sort of content into a VR world, and it seemed it would be much more immediate [than having materials] printed out.” In the end, however, the virtual reality is fairly secondary to Holzer’s piece and the primary element that the viewer experiences is the pain associated with the events taking place in Bosnia. Intimidate through VR in a way that's accessible to almost everyone to viewer, thereby saying that technology is not the essential element of the work. One of her goals has been to narrow the gap between life and art and VR is a means to get closer to the viewers, and that is it. My works, *Gaze* and *Pointing at Me* also explains that technology is a means to get closer to the viewers.



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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/2.02/holzer.html>

Fig.15

Fig.16

Fig. 15~16. *Pointing at Me*, interactive kinetic sculpture installation, 2005, (© Hye Yeon Nam)

With my piece *Pointing at Me*, I try to keep with Holzer's use of technology to create an interactive and conceptually-rich experience for the viewer. The piece involves a rotating plaster hand atop a metal pedestal. (Fig.15) As the viewer approaches, the index finger begins to point directly at him as the other fingers fold down. (Fig.16) In any culture, pointing one's index finger is incredibly rude and an indication that that person is singling out and ostracizing another person. By being pointed at, the viewer becomes the protagonist in the piece; he suddenly becomes implicated. His first concern is not directed toward *how* the finger has moved from an open-handed position to a pointing position but rather what he feels at the present moment. (In this case, three motors and two sensors are connected to the plaster hand via the metal pedestal and they control the hand's movement.) Without the technology, however, the viewer is not presented with an experience rich in context. In my work, especially in *Gaze* and *Pointing at Me*, technology becomes a catalyst that immerses viewers into the works while helping to convey the situation of being constantly on display as I had experienced daily as an immigrant.

#### **INSTALLATION 4. *In-Between***

My stay in America gave me a chance to introspect myself as per objectives of immigration, my existence, and my home country. This thought as influential in creating *In Between*. My reminiscence of Korea, my status in America is main thematic driving forces in *In-Between*. The artwork of Korean artist Do-Ho Suh is primarily inspired by

his life experiences. His identity is formulated by his personal history: in Korea, he studied Oriental Painting at Seoul National University, which was a highly traditional and classical program, and he also served in the army, which was mandatory. He then moved to the United States and completed for a second time undergraduate and graduate programs at the Rhode Island School of Design and Yale University, both of which take a much more liberal and conceptual approach to contemporary art than what he undertook in Korea.

This fissure between the highly-structured, pre-ordained life course he had in Korea and the disorienting freedom that he found in America drives Do-Ho Suh's art. In some of his work, he meticulously replicates in sheer fabrics the house he lived in as a child in Korea (*Seoul Home*) and his current apartment in New York (*384 West 22nd St., Apt A, New York, NY 10011*). Every detail exists: the architectural sculptures are precisely the same size as the original spaces and they contain staircases, bookshelves, sinks, door knobs, and light sockets that have been fabricated by expert sewers.

The viewer enters the sculptures and sees each detail. The specificity of these details is highly important as they fulfill Suh's goal of reproducing spaces that are nostalgic to him; he claims: "I don't really get homesick, but I've noticed that I have a longing for this particular space and I want to recreate that space or bring that space wherever I go."<sup>7</sup> The viewer, however, has no sentimental attachment with the spaces of Suh's past and present yet he still experiences the wistfulness that Suh feels. People all experience longing and people all have spaces we associate with strongly, even if people did not immigrate to the other side of the world as Suh did. The strength of Suh's sculptures lies in their detail and specificity; without their presence, the sculptures would

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/David\\_Winton\\_Bell\\_Gallery/suh.html](http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/David_Winton_Bell_Gallery/suh.html)

represent any building and their meaning would deflate in their anonymity. In the end, Suh's use of his personal history translates into a universal experience.



Fig.17. *In-Between*, rice paper, 130x80. 2005. (©Hye Yeon Nam)

Like Suh, I bring my own memories into my installation *In-Between*. In the piece, I use incense to burn parts of large pieces of rice paper. (Fig.17) The rice paper is then installed into a window pane and depicts the image of a traditional Korean home and its accompanying gate. Each of the elements I have chosen for *In-Between* link me back to my homeland. The use of rice paper, for example, has a rich history in Korea; in the past and in some traditional households, rice paper is utilized to cover the grids of wooden doors. Despite being a fairly weak material, overlapping rice paper into multiple layers enhances its strength. Furthermore, rice paper's translucency makes it a particularly attractive alternative to glass. Human's memory overlap with layers and weathers away over time. It goes same with nostalgia. My reminiscence and memory



about Korea leaves farther away as the rice paper becomes opaque as attached to the glass window and becomes less clear and the longing deepens as the paper's color overlaps against each other. Also, rice paper is easily torn and ethereal. This is the reason for using rice paper in In-Between since reminiscence and memory resemble the character of the fabric.

My choice to use incense is also significant; burning paper is a common practice in Korea. Incense is used for religious ceremonies and for meditation purposes. Using incense to 'draw' onto the rice paper is incredibly time-consuming, much more so than if I had used pen or pencil or cut out with scissors or a razor. The process, however, is important to me; it is a contemplative one that allows me to consider my life and my surroundings. The incense also burns the rice paper, leaving charred edges around every shape; the effect is haunting and the charring provides a contrast between the translucence of the rice paper and the transparency of the glass window pane.



Fig.18

Fig.18. *In-Between*, rice paper, 130x80. Rhode Island, 2005. (©Hye Yeon Nam)



Fig.19

Fig.19. *In-Between*, rice paper, 90x135. New York, 2005. (©Hye Yeon Nam)

*In-Between* has been installed in two locations: the first time, in the fourth floor window of an academic building at the Rhode Island School of Design (Fig.18); and the second time, in a street-level window in downtown Manhattan (Fig.19). By using the image of a traditional Korean abode, which I overlay atop the background of urban spaces I have inhabited since moving to the United States, I create a new space, one that is stretched between two nations. In many ways, *In-Between* does not actually occupy *physical space*, which is reflected in the materials I have chosen. Windows are meant to be as intangible as possible; they are built so that one can see through from the inside to the outside and vice versa. The rice paper is more opaque than the glass of the window,

but it is still fairly transparent, especially when light shines through it. The combination of two materials creates a diaphanous situation; I may have created a new space, but it is much more of a suspended and metaphorical space, much like memory.



Fig.20



Fig.21

Fig.19. *Seoul Home*, translucent nylon, 149x240x240inch, 1999. (©Do-Ho Suh)

Fig.20. *384 West 22<sup>nd</sup> St., Apt A, New York, NY 10011*, translucent nylon, 169x690x96 1/2inch. Rhode Island, 2001. (©Do-Ho Suh)

Transparency and the overlapping of multiple sheer materials are common practices artists employ to suggest dreams, the past, and the imaginary. In Suh's *Seoul Home* and *384 West 22<sup>nd</sup> St., Apt A, New York, NY 10011*, he uses different types of gauzy fabrics. With *Seoul Home*, he chooses a bright green organza (Fig.20.); with *384 West 22<sup>nd</sup> St., Apt A, New York, NY 10011*, he instead opts for a pale red-colored nylon. (Fig.21.) With the former, the choice for the brighter color and the richer fabric reflects the colorful memories of his childhood; with the latter, the neutral choices indicate that his New York apartment is closer to him in memory and is also less embellished both literally in its physical presence and in his imagination.



Fig.22, *Place des peaux*, 34 2-sided suspended wood frames with gels, illumination on walls, 34 elements, 72 x 149 x 1.5 cm each, 1998. (© Michael Snow)

In Michael Snow's *Place des peaux* (1998), he hangs thirty-four wood frames fit with various panels of brightly-colored gelatin within a room and lights it to maximize the effect of the colors and the shadows. (Fig.22) At every moment, the projected light is always varying; so while the diaphaneity of Snow's materials may reference memory, the work itself also extends into the future. It suggests a continuity of never-ending experience. With *In-Between*, the overlap of the rice paper and the window reinforce the reference to my personal history; people walking on the street and inside the building layer even more meaning into the installation. They demonstrate how the piece is never the same and always in flux, just like my life.

The presence of people, cars, and other external sources therefore enhance the experience of *In-Between*. Where it is situated is vital to its content. With *Seoul Home*

and 384 West 22nd St., Apt A, New York, NY 10011, Suh aims to create a homeless home, meaning that the sculptures represent his bringing his childhood home and current apartment to wherever he travels. They literally pack into a suitcase and have as much meaning in a gallery in New York as they do in Italy, China, or South Africa. *In-Between* is different because it is site-specific; the incense-burnt rice paper would not be the same in just any window, anywhere. With site-specific work, the meaning of the piece is entirely contingent on the place where it is located. Site-specificity arose in the late sixties and early seventies as a reaction to high modernism; site-specific artists questioned how the ideas behind a work could be independent of where the work was situated. Robert Smithson, Walter de Maria, and Nancy Holt, for example, wanted to explore themes of entropy and natural processes and, as a result, placed their pieces in the landscape of Utah and New Mexico. For me, *In-Between* represents the two locales: Korea and the East Coast of the United States. Providence, Rhode Island -- where I have lived for the past three years -- and New York City -- the center of art -- are where I had the most inscriptive experience as an artist. These two places overlap extensively with Korea where I spent my former 25 years. *In-Between* shows my foot trails in terms of space and time.

## INSTALLATION 5. *Self-Portrait*

*I am in America.*

*My body is in America.*

*I moved to America from Korea.*

*My body experienced my moving to America from Korea.*

*My body holds all my memories.*

*And, thus, my body, carries all my memories of immigration.*

*I use my body to show my memories and my experiences.*

Space takes on multiple definitions. For me, I understand space as the sum of cultural and social forces that act upon me. In this way, space is highly personal and, therefore, directly impacts me on a bodily level. One's body feels changes instantly and intimately. When I moved from Korea to the United States, my body became a gauge that intensely felt my displacement and recognized not only the conformity and the standards inflicted upon me in America but also allowed me to deconstruct the rituals from my homeland that I had taken for granted as "normal."

My previous habits and my customs—ones that I rarely noticed when I was living in Korea—ensured that I was constantly out-of-place in my new environment. For example, one day my neighbor complained to my landlord of the smell of *kimchi* emanating from my apartment. *Kimchi*, which is fermented cabbage, is informally Korea's national food and is eaten at almost every meal with most foods. Koreans find its pungent, spicy taste and smell to be pleasant and, for me, being ostracized by my neighbor for consuming it was surprising and unsettling. In another example, my friend's daughter was instructed by her elementary school teacher not to open her lunch box in front of her fellow classmates because they called her lunch "goat poop." In fact, she was eating *kimbob*, a rice-and-vegetable dish covered in black seaweed.

The question all immigrants face is: Which is better, to assimilate to the cultural

customs of their new society or to follow the traditions of their homelands and teach their children similarly? With the *kimchi* example, I found myself in a situation of having to choose whether I should proudly continue eating *kimchi* until more decisive action was taken by my landlord or stop consuming it to appease my neighbor, considering he found its smell to be foreign and unpleasant. With my friend, the question became should she continue packing her daughter's lunch with *kimbob* or should she start providing her with more 'American' foods? With almost all immigrants, the response to decisions concerning assimilation is not so cut-and-dry and, in the end, most take on some of the cultural practices of their new countries and retain some traditions of their homeland.

In many cases, the basic customs of my homeland lead me to situations that are not even as complicated as decisions related to assimilation, but seem to test my basic knowledge or my ability to function as a twenty-six-year-old adult. For example, I am sometimes asked how tall I am and how much I weigh. In Korea, the metric system is used and I know these measurements in meters and kilograms. However, using the American system, I am unsure how my measurements translate. By not being able to respond to such questions I suddenly appear uneducated. However, the whole incident is, in fact, merely a form of cultural mistranslation.



Fig.23



Fig.24



Fig.25



Fig.26

Fig.23-26, *Self-Portrait*, Video, 2006. (© Hye Yeon Nam)

I explore these situations of feeling out-of-place in my installation *Self-Portrait*, which consists of four video projections sited in each side of a white column. In each projection I perform simple, everyday tasks, such as eating, drinking, and walking; however, in each situation, I have difficulty completing these tasks. With the first video, the spoon I use to eat a tomato is oddly-shaped and ineffective. (Fig.23) With the second, my shoes are too long and prevent me from walking ‘correctly.’ (Fig.24) And in the third, a hole at the bottom of my cup prevents me from drinking all my orange juice without splashing it onto me. (Fig.25) In the last video sequence, I try to sit in a lopsided wooden



chair. (Fig.26) Also, the video on the four sides of the column shows circulation of life and it conveys frustration.

In the videos, I seek to portray the difficulty of living in this ‘room’ that is America. *Self-Portrait* is an attempt to literally represent my psychological and bodily displacement as a means of representing the experience of immigration to non-immigrants. Since moving two years ago, I now feel as if I live in a different skin. Many of the simple tasks that seemed inborn to me in Korea are now completely foreign. My body, as a result, feels different. I feel like it occupies both Korea and the United States and my arms and legs feel incredibly elongated, as if I cannot see the end of my body. This space of being neither here in America nor there in Korea is precisely what I try to convey in *Self-Portrait*. In the video performances, I attempt to show what displacement feels like. Because the displacement one feels from immigrating is difficult and complex to communicate, I decide to demonstrate how one’s daily, commonplace behaviors suddenly became unfamiliar. By performing these simple tasks gone awry and recording them on video, I escape from the hardship I have felt in the last couple years and I mentally escape from my struggle.

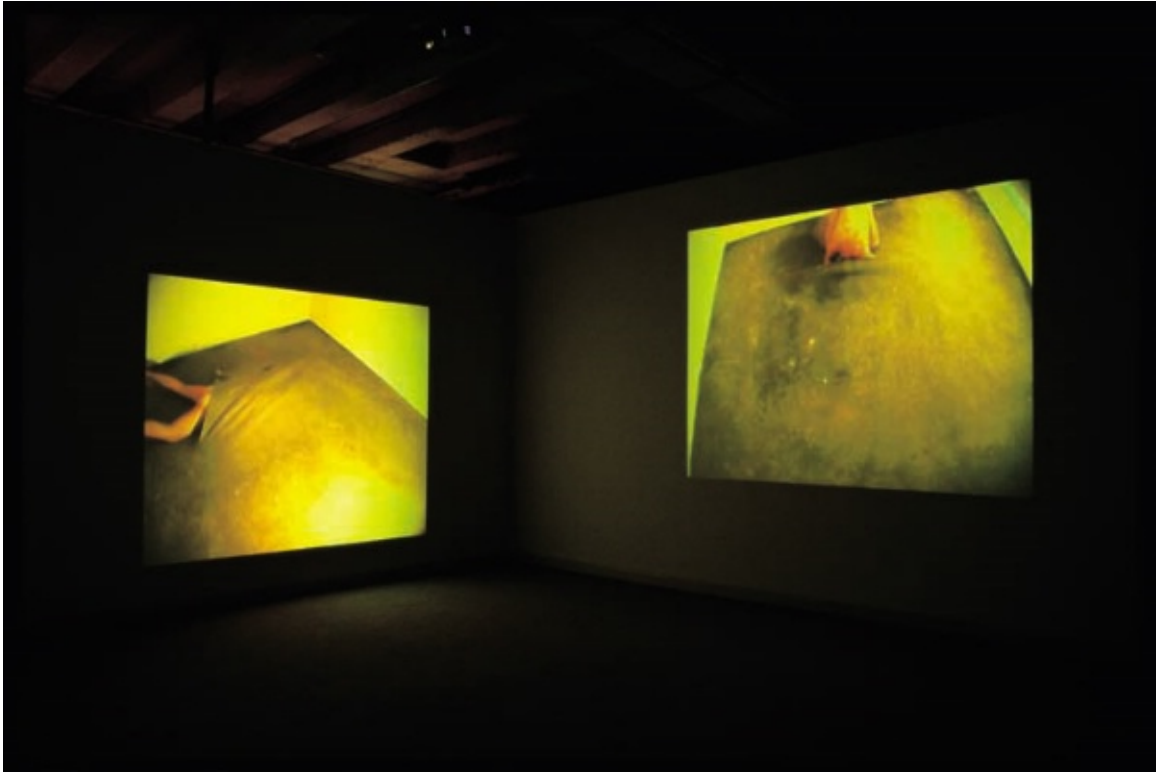


Fig.27, *Video #02*, DVD- video installation, dimensions variable, 2002 (© Amilcar Packer)

Many non-native artists also choose to use performance as both a vehicle to express their alienation and as a mechanism to escape their present situation. In Brazilian artist Amilcar Packer's *Video #02*, he crawls on the floor, tearing up a carpet, and forces himself into the space between it and the floor. (Fig.27) The audience witnesses his exertion and through much of the performance they cannot actually see him but they can hear sounds of him ripping, scratching, and breathing with difficulty from his efforts.



Fig.28, *Roadworks (Performance Still)*, performance, 1985-1995 (©Mona Hatoum)

In Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum's *Roadworks (Performance Still)*, she photographs herself walking on the streets of Brixton, a predominantly black, working-class neighborhood in London. She is barefoot with a pair of heavy boots tied around her ankles, the type of boots traditionally worn by the police or skinheads. (Fig.28) Although they are sturdy, her feet appear naked and vulnerable with the boots hanging from them.

Both artists not only choose to use performance but also choose to use their bodies to convey meaning. The power in performance has in the use of the artist's body causing the viewer to have a strong reaction through identification with the artist's physical pain or difficulty (or, in some cases, pleasure). In art prior to performance, one could look at a piece of art as an object. It may be considered beautiful, hideous, or shocking but the viewer does not relate to the object as intimately as they can do with the subject in performance. In Packer's piece, the viewer feels the suffocation and disruption incurred by his body pushing between the carpet and the floor. With Hatoum, the viewer empathizes with the artist difficulties in attempting to walk with boots tied around her ankles, which point further to issue of class struggle. I likewise incorporate

my body in *Self-Portrait* in my attempt to convey my displacement. But unlike Packer and Hatoum, instead of trying to having the viewer metaphorically extract what my body is going through, I literally incorporate the viewer's own body into my piece as well with the inclusion of my interactive sculptures.

## CONCLUSION

During my two-year of study at RISD, I had time to reflect and consider my past, present, and future through my artwork. This period posed a considerable challenge since I uncovered realizations about myself and then present them in a physical form, such as an installation, a sculpture, or a video.

In my work, I have two conditions I wish to fulfill: one is to be true to myself and the other is to accurately convey my messages to broad and various audiences. For the first condition, I find peace and escape from the hardship and difficulties I have encountered; and thus, internalized by using art as a therapeutic vehicle. Regarding the second condition, I try to convey my feelings and my experiences as a woman being raised in the confines of Confucian Korea and then being subsequently placed in an entirely new and foreign country, where the way of life is almost antithetical to the one in Korea. Although my viewers may not have had the same life I have had, my work attempts to provide a universally moving experience.

In each of my pieces and performances, I express ideas through the use of different mechanisms, such as agony, oppression, and liberation. To me, art is not merely meant to be decorative or beautiful; instead, art can be a question, an argument, a proposal, a resolution, and, ideally, a nirvana for the various problems that we encounter in our world. My work is not only meant to be aesthetic but also a discussion of philosophy. My mission is to be a socially-responsible artist that examines the arena of societal role, oppression by bigotry, mental emancipation, and immigrant situations. Through the body of work I have addressed in this thesis, I have learned a great deal

about myself and about social issues, and I think I have also matured and advanced as an artist. My greatest hope is my audience has also learned more about themselves and our society's issues.