

Political Engagement of Korean Women Artists on Body Politics

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Abstract

The body politic is a medieval concept which regarded a society or a state as a biological body. For example, a king's body was often equivalent to a nation; or Christ's body to the Church. The body politics, stemming from the body politic, is a strategy or a policy by which society controls the human body in both individual and social realms. Both concepts are applied to discuss a heated debate on women's body as an apparatus in contemporary art. In Korea, 1970s were the oppressive times in political activism while industrial development progressed rapidly. In Europe and North America, feminists and feminist artists applied body politics to advocate for women's reproductive rights determined by women, to fight against violence on women and objectification of the female body in consumer culture. Unlike feminists in Europe and North America, women in South Korea suffered from various forms of control: miniskirt controversy, school uniforms, hair regulations, family planning, military training, unregulated long work hours. Nonetheless, a group of avant-garde artists provoked the authority with "scandalous" performances. This paper showcases four periods: Kang-ja Jung's performances from 1969 to 1970; Bul Lee's *Cravings* from 1989 to 1990; Nikki Lee's *Projects* from 1997 to 2001; Debbie Han's *Goddesses* from 2013 to 2016. Their works are interpreted in the context of popular journalism, patriarchy-defending justice system, beauty and wellness as symbolic capital, and increasingly transnational status of artists.

“몸의 정치” 혹은 “육체 정치” 등으로 번역되는 body politic은 원래 사회 또는 국가를 생물학적 신체로 간주하는 중세 개념이다. 중세에는 국가체제를 국왕의 신체 부분에 해당하는 은유법으로 표현하곤 했다. 따라서 왕의 신체는 곧 국가와 동일한 것으로 인식하거나 예수 그리스도의 몸을 교회 체제에 비유하여 교회 정치의 신성함을 주장하였다. 이어서 실존주의 철학자들과 사회학자들이 사용하는 “몸의 정치”는 사회가 개인 및 사회적 영역에서 인체를 통제하는 전략 또는 정책을 주로 다루었다. 두 개념 모두 현대 미술의 에이전시로서 유용하게 적용된다. 여성의 몸에 대한 열띤 논쟁에는 이러한 역사적인 개념의 전개가 적용되었다. 산업 발전이 빠르게 진행되던 한국의 1970년대는 정치 활동이 억압된 시기였다. 동시대 유럽과 북미에서 페미니스트와 페미니스트 예술가들은 여성이 결정할 여성의 생식권을 옹호하고 여성에 대한 폭력과 소비자 문화에서 여성의 신체를 객관화하기 위해 “몸의 정치”란 개념을 적용했다. 유럽과 북미의 페미니스트들과 달리 한국의 여

성들은 미니스커트 논란, 교복, 헤어 규제, 가족계획, 군사 훈련, 규제되지 않은 장시간 노동과 같은 다양한 형태의 몸에 관한 통제에 시달렸다. 그러한 통제에도 불구하고 아방가르드 예술가들은 그들 활동을 통해 검열을 극복하고 “스캔들” 같은 공연으로 군사정권의 권위를 자극했다. 이 논문은 다음의 네 시기를 보여준다. 정강자의 1969년부터 1970년까지의 공연; 이불의 <갈망>을 중심으로 한 1989년부터 1990년까지; 1997년부터 2001년까지 활동했던 니키 리(Nikki Lee)의 개념 미술 프로젝트들; 그리고 2013년부터 2016년까지 데비 한(Debbie Han)의 <여신 시리즈>가 선택적인 네 시기이다. 위의 작가 및 작품들을 중심으로 각 시대별 여성의 몸에 대한 국가적 통제와 정책의 맥락 속에서 작품의 의미를 살펴본다. 대중적 저널리즘, 가부장제를 옹호하는 사법 체계, 문화적, 상징적 자본으로서의 아름다움과 웰빙, 또한 점점 더 다국화 되어가는 예술가의 활동 범위 및 사회적 지위 등도 작품의 해석에 고려하였다.

Key words

body politic, political engagement, activism, body, feminism, dictatorship, patriarchy

Introduction

The body politic is a medieval concept which regarded a society or a state as a biological body. For example, a king's body was often seen as equivalent to the nation, or Christ's body to the Church. Body politics, stemming from the body politic, is a strategy or a policy by which society controls the human body in both the individual and social realms. Both concepts are applied to discuss a heated debate on women's bodies as an apparatus in contemporary art. In Korea, the 1970s were oppressive times in terms of political activism while industrial development progressed rapidly. In Europe and North America, feminists and feminist artists applied body politics to advocate for women's reproductive rights determined by women, to fight violence against women and objectification of the female body in consumer culture (Pyun 1999).

In the 1970s, American feminists discussed the liberation of women's sexuality and health. *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, published in 1973, educated women and increased women's knowledge of their own body. Feminists had a long debate on women's bodies as a battleground for artistic freedom and reproduction rights since the 1960s. Art historians Griselda Pollock and Anne Higonnet, for example, theorized the voyeuristic views on women's body in art and pornography as well as girls' body (Pollock 2002 ; Higonnet 1998). Anthropologist Bruno Latour extended the view on forbidden or abled bodies of women in the context of optimized bodies of cyborgs and avatars (Latour 2002). Film scholars have been more prolific writing about transgressive nature of women's bodies from the Cold War era to transnational feminism.

In South Korea there were enlightening campaigns on family planning from the late '60s to the '80s. The Ministry of Health and Welfare changed from advocating the regulation of female bodies.¹ The ethnonational country remained reticent over the rights and bodies of its female citizens from the colonial period and throughout the Korean War although sex industry and prostitution were flourishing amid economic development (Kim and Choi 1998; Cho 2008; Soh 2008). In the art scene, women's bodies emerged as a conduit of artistic expression in avant-garde circles of performance art in the 1970s in South Korea (Robertson and McDaniel 2005). Prolific images of female bodies emerged in the 1990, charged with provocative, political messages addressing the abused or misused corporeality of women in South Korea during the industrialization and during neoliberal geopolitical diplomacy along with the rise of postmodernism (Pyun 2018).

This paper showcases four periods from the 1970s to the 2010s: Kang-ja Jung's performances from 1969 to 1970; Bul Lee's *Cravings* from 1989 to 1990; Nikki Lee's *Projects* from 1997 to 2001; and Debbie Han's *Goddesses* from 2013 to 2016. The reason four women artists are selected is to discuss artists' own perception of their bodies as both aesthetic and biological intermediaries. Instead of privileging bodies as art objects, these artists blurred boundaries between their own bodily identity and the represented body in their works. Kang-ja Jung, Bul Lee and Nikki Lee are performance artists in a sense that they used their lived experiences mitigated by their bodies. Debbie Han did not use her own body, but the composite nature of hybrid goddesses transcends a specific model to an ethnic identity encompassing the cosmopolitan identity of the artist herself. In this paper, these works are interpreted in the context of popular journalism, the patriarchal justice system, beauty and wellness as symbolic capital, and the increasingly transnational status of artists (Pyun 2017 ; Pyun 2018). They are presented as a metonymy of issues facing women in South Korea, where women's bodies and social aspirations suffer from various forms of control including the miniskirt controversy, school uniforms, hair regulations, family planning, military training, and unregulated long work hours.

Kang-Ja Jung's *To Repress* (1969) and Politics of Family Planning

Kang-Ja Jung was part of the avant-garde group of performance artists from the late 1960s. The Fourth Group (Je-sa jip-dan) was composed of multidisciplinary artists including a fashion designer (Il-gwang Sohn), actors (Yu-seong Jeon and Ho Go), musicians (Seok-hi Kang and Tak Young), and directors (Tae-soo Bang and Ik-tae Lee), and visual artists, most of whom were men: Chan-seong Chung, Ku-lim Kim, Kook-jin Kang, Boong-hyun Choi, and Kang-ja Jung (Choi 2020).

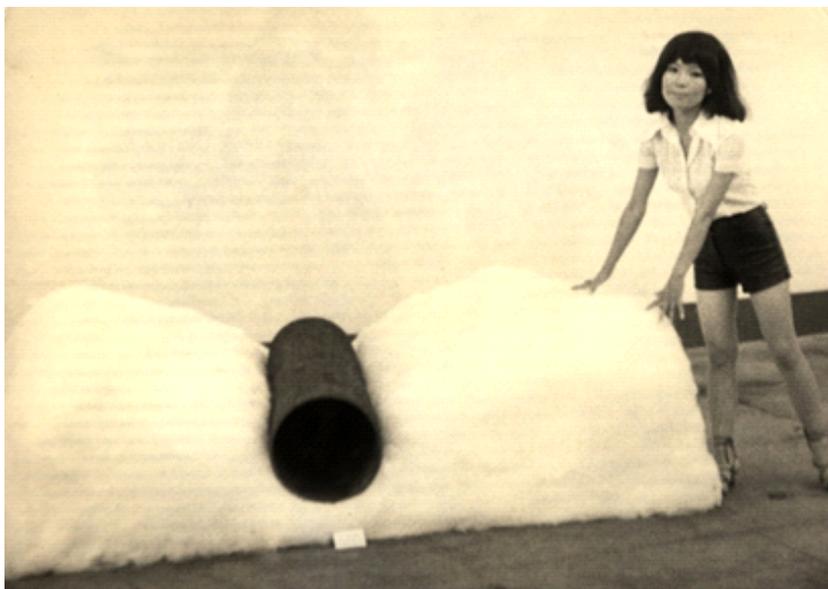


Figure 1. Kang-ja Jung, *To Repress*, 1968, cotton, steel pipe, 250 x 215 x 95 cm

The Fourth Group presented several provocative happenings. The Inauguration Ceremony held on June 20, 1970 is the most representative, replicating the absurdity of many assemblies held at schools, companies, or town halls. The fiasco-style happening was featured in the popular weekly magazine *Sunday Seoul*, established in 1968 to divert people's attention from politics to popular culture.

Jung's previous performances such as *Transparent Balloons and Nude* (Tumyeong-poongseon-gwa-nudeu) in 1968 resurfaced as a precursor to the ceremony in 1970. Kang-ja Jung, Chan-seung Chung, and Kuk-jin Kang planned and presented the balloon performance and the staged murder at the Han River in 1968. The way they portrayed women's bodies in the performances was parallel to the rhetoric of news articles in *Sunday Seoul* and other popular journals.

Jung's bold attempt to show "nudes" holding transparent balloons carried a condescending tone of ridicule and licentiousness. The same sentiment was expressed in criminal cases involving women—usually bar workers or soldiers' companions. Jung's 1968 work *To Repress* (Eongnureuda) does not show any nudity but suggests structural pressure on women's bodies in collectivity (Figure 1). What is also interesting is the artist shown next to it as a fashionable young woman, with shoulder-length hair and shorts.² The miniskirt frenzy in the 1960s swept young women across the world. In 1967 singer Bokhee Yoon (born 1946) appeared in miniskirts in a ten-page photo spread in *Arirang* magazine. Designer Nora Noh dressed many popular actors and signers of the era in her eponymous miniskirt suits. In an article dated May 25, 1968 in *Joong-Ang*

Ilbo, a daily newspaper Lolita R. Carrigan (24 years old) was featured arriving at Gimpo Airport via Northwest Airlines wearing a fashionable miniskirt. The newspaper noted its “shocking length of thirty centimeter above the knee” (Pyun 2021a).

The outcry over women’s indecent clothes in the popular media strengthened public sentiment over regulated bodies, as seen in the mini-skirt regulation or restriction of long hair for men in the penal code in the 1970s (Pyun 2021d). Men and women working at manufacturing facilities, health centers or in retail stores wore uniforms, while both male and female students wore school uniforms or military training suits (Pyun 2020b). In fact, the youthful appearance of Jung in shorts is a superficial image of the modernized middle class as promoted in consumer magazines for women (Pyun 2021d).

The collective body of women was just like the soft cotton suppressed by a heavy iron pipe in Jung’s work *To Repress*. Jung’s fairy-like figure next to the installation work is the liberated body of a bourgeois woman not yet married. This freedom comes from her socio-economic status as a college-educated woman with a middle-class background. Nonetheless, women’s magazines constantly harangued women to fulfill the role of dutiful wife, wise mother, and virtuous consumer (Park and Thanommongkol 2020).

The media portrayed Jung’s nude performance as dangerous or alarming to the public. Due to their “inappropriateness,” her avant-garde works were featured in popular journals like the *Sunday Seoul* rather than in art magazines, and the art establishment denied or ignored sensational and scandalous performances involving women’s bodies. Women’s bodies were in fact national assets and resources which would bring wealth, prosperity, and stability. National security relied on women’s productivity. During the rapid industrialization campaigns of the Park Chung-hee regime, women’s health was also tightly controlled. Thus, Jung’s provocative use of her own body was censored and classified as an outlandish act which deserved public ridicule and casual voyeurism in popular magazines.

The rhetoric of women’s bodies as a national resource had existed in the early twentieth century. In China, Japan, and Korea, women were educated to become “good wives and wise mothers” because they produced children for the nation. Subsequently, control over women’s bodies was transformed into the family planning strategy for national prosperity. The Korean Family Planning Association (Daehan-gajok-gyehwoek-hyopoe) was established in 1961 and remained influential throughout the 1970s, supported by the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Like the Chinese one-child policy in the 1980s, the government in South Korea wanted to restrict the number of children for population control and maternal welfare. The first phase was in 1962~1966; during the second phase in 1967~1971 the recommendation was three children per family; and during the third, in 1972~1976, two children.



Figure 2. Family Planning Poster by the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Korean Family Planning Association, 1968, print on paper, 54 x 38 cm, National Folk Museum of Korea

Figure 3. Family Planning Poster, by the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Korean Family Planning Association, 1960s, print on paper, 52.5 x 39 cm, National Folk Museum of Korea

Contraception for married women was encouraged in the form of the pill and surgical sterilization. Although men could receive surgical sterilization at public health clinics, it was usually women who bore the responsibility for contraception.

The 1968 calendar by the Korean Family Planning Association shows a mother raising a girl and a boy (Figure 2). Both the calendar and the poster put much emphasis on the IUD (intrauterine device), commonly known as the loop procedure for birth control (Figure 3). An intrauterine device is placed inside the uterus via a small tube or loop at a clinic. The booklet shows both men and women's reproductive organs (Figure 4). However, it gives more options for women's procedures. As the government controlled the news media, the broadcast stations, and the national art exhibitions, disciplinary inspection of appearance within schools, and government-imposed surgical sterilization for family planning, the regulations on women's skirt lengths were accepted without visible resistance.

It is in this context that Jung's provocative performance using her own body or sexually-charged installations works were received by the public. Her 1968 work, *To Repress*, was not on public view for long. The photograph of Jung standing next to a cotton mountain and an iron pipe remained in magazines. Women's nude bodies were strategically

placed on magazine covers to suppress the general public's demand for equality, justice, and democracy.³ For viewers accustomed to this print culture Jung's body was not a threat or an anti-establishment message, but a consumer object for public viewing.⁴



Figure 4. 1970s, Family Planning Booklet (6 sides in total; front and back), Youngdong-gun Health Center in Chungcheong Province, Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Korean Family Planning Association, print on paper, National Folk Museum of Korea



Figure 5. Cover image of *Sunday Seoul*, issue no. 970 (August 23) in 1987

Figure 6. A Special Appendix Volume “Sunday Punch” of *Sunday Seoul* to celebrate its thousandth issue in 1988

The Park Chung-hee regime ended in 1979. *Sunday Seoul* remained popular throughout the 1980s and ended in 1991. As shown in the examples in 1987 and 1988, the magazine featured semi-nude female bodies with eye-catching headlines (Figure 5 and 6). An erotic undertone of yellow journalism promoting sensationalism, however, did not touch the most humiliating business of yang-gongju (prostitutes serving foreigners) and Giji-chon/Camptown (pleasure quarters outside U.S. military camps) serving soldiers stationed in South Korea (Moon 1997). Called wi-an-bu, sex workers servicing U.S. soldiers were controlled by the South Korean government from the late ‘50s to the late ‘80s (Cheng 2010 ; Lee 2010).⁵

Visual artist Jane Jin Kaisen’s *Strange Meetings* (2017), a multimedia installation and video, addresses this clandestine narrative of the governmental control over women’s bodies.⁶ In the video, a woman draws a floor plan of an STI treatment facility in Dongducheon Giji-chon. In the 1970s, with a high rate of STIs among U.S. soldiers and their partners, the government implemented mandatory isolation of sex workers suffering from STIs in a facility. The particular facility in Kaisen’s work was called the Monkey House because caged women screamed or cried out for help from behind its bars. In Kaisen’s video, cross-dressed performers called Halmae and Mishin perform fire shows or burlesque or vulgar dance gestures in vivid-colored floral skirts and tank tops. In the tradition of *yeot-jangsu* or *gakseori*, vagrant sellers of toffee (yeot), the performers present the embodiment of the tormented experience of these sex workers. The hard-pressed cotton puffs in Jung’s installation

are the bodies of young women on the floors of factories, in Giji-chon bars, middle-class households, or family planning clinics (Yuh 2002). The wretched bodies of women were camouflaged in the youthfulness of Jung in shorts or puffy cotton. If patriarchal society under the military dictatorship condoned the incarceration of infected bodies, it also legitimized housewives' semi-forceful or publicly-sponsored sterilization while Jung's performances were ridiculed in the genre of yellow journalism.

Bul Lee's *Cravings* from 1989 to 1990 and Postmodern Consumerism

The Seoul Olympic Games in 1988 brought many changes to Korean society. As shown on the cover of *Sunday Seoul* in 1987 and 1988, the entertainment of sexuality was explicit in gendered labor women served and men enjoyed. In the 1970s, women made significant leaps in employment and education (Park and Thanommongkol 2020). Preference for boys persisted but women in middle-class households had social aspirations and accomplished socially rewarding outcomes. However, gendered labor practices persisted in the public and private spheres.

Jung's *To Repress* was a precursor to Bul Lee's *Cravings* and *Abortion*, both from 1989. Lee's aim was to show the painful process of abortion as the artist performed torturous gestures using a rope. In the recent survey of Lee's performances from the last two decades of the twentieth century, a video recording was shown on a large screen.⁷ Hanging nude from a climbing rope, Lee recited a poem by Seung-ja Choi. A nude is not an object of voyeurism in Lee's performance. It is a reality with raw and visceral human conditions. Lee is more adamant in asserting the wrong done to women's bodies. First performing at the Dongsoong Art Center in Seoul, the artist was seen as a pro-life, anti-abortion activist in the media.⁸

To precede Bul Lee's generation, feminist art discourses emerged in the 1980s. Insoon Kim's painting *The Wise Mother and Obedient Wife* (1986) exhibited the subservient status of women with a naked man reading a newspaper on a chair and his wife, naked yet wearing a graduation hat, washing his feet like a slave (Koh 2020). In contrast to Kim's figurative style derived from her activism in the People's Art Association (Minmihyeop) and Women's Art Association (Yeoseong Yesulhoe), Lee took a radical form of live performances which challenged legal boundaries. Art professionals and the media noted Lee's unusual ambition as an international artist. Scholars like Shuqin Cui have noted that the pregnant body in Asian contemporary art has been a taboo while a female nude remained a controversial issue in women's art practice.⁹ Korean women artists were more pioneering and audacious than contemporaneous artists in China or Japan until the early 2000s.



Figure 7. Bul Lee, *Abortion*, 1989, installation views displayed at the Seoul Museum of Art in 2021

Abortion had long been illegal in South Korea. Medical professionals who assisted pregnant women to terminate pregnancies without medical reasons could be punished. However, abortion procedures were common and numerous from the 1960s to the 1990s. The government-sponsored family planning policy turned a blind eye to abortions for both married and unmarried women. Gender-selective abortions were also common. Lee's sensational performance of the abortion highlighted the moral degradation of Korean society.

Lee's performances in the guise of monstrous creatures attest the blurred boundaries of humane and inhumane or male and female (Figure 7). The logic of the oppressor and the oppressed is blurred in Lee's *Cravings*. Appetites for food, success, wealth, and sexual pleasure are genderless and boundless. The value of women's bodies in post-industrial, prosperous Korean society in the 1990s lay in their attractiveness, not their usefulness. Family planning is no longer promoted, as the population started to decline in the late 1990s. In postmodern society, the body politic of women is to satisfy fantasies and compensate for insatiable appetites for a better and younger self. This desire for bettered women's bodies in popular culture, entertainment, and media was culminated as material being in the *Cyborg* series in 1999. *Cyborg, W5*, for example, represents machine-made body parts assembled as a robot-like anthropomorphic figure (Figure 8). Well-polished surfaces in white seduce viewers to touch or to admire. Jung's puffiness of innocent yet abused



Figure 8. Bul Lee, *Cyborg*, W5, 1999, Fiberglass reinforced plastic(FRP) with polyurethane coating, 150 x 55 x 90 cm, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, © Bul Lee Studio

female bodies is replaced by cold, but glamorous female bodies optimized for any task.

Unlike the tired wife in Insoon Kim's painting, Lee's cyborg women can wash a million pairs of feet with effortless perfection. Simultaneously, these shiny bodies may exude endless desires for their own sexuality and materiality. What Lee did not fully address in her 1989 performance of the abortion was supplemented with other series such as *Majestic*

Splendor (Hwa-eom) composed of decorated dead fish. Both series demonstrate that sacred and profane, beautiful and abject, moral and immoral, and other dichotomous qualities are living together and simultaneously.¹⁰

Women's social status was enhanced as the feminist movement gained more recognition. *Patjis on Parade* organized by Hong-hee Kim in 1999 was a memorable exhibition featuring major themes of feminist art (Pyun 2019). Works in the show emphasized the need for public discourse on female bodies, femininity, gendered labor, and prejudices against women (Koh 2020). Jeong-hwa Choi's *Sunday Seoul* (1999) was another monumental occasion for younger artists to reflect on the subjectivity of sexuality, gender identity, and the consumerism of desire (Woo 2015; Woo and Pyun, 2021).

Monstrosity and hybridity were coined with changing beauty standards of women as shown in the covers of *Sunday Seoul* featuring articles on plastic surgery and beauty tips to enhance one's physicality. An optimized beauty in the late 1990s as manifest in Lee's *Cyborg, W5* may have idealized body parts but lacked in personality or individuality. This is related to the body politic of women in South Korea in the late twentieth century. Barbara Kruger, Marina Abramović, and Cindy Sherman represented women's roles or women's values in the overly commercialized consumer society (Pyun 2019). Abramović created body-centered performances involving physical pain and the concept of physical beauty. All these three artists constantly reminded audiences that women's mundane activities are in fact closely tied to consumption. Daily hygiene routines are also inseparable from consumer products (soap, shampoo, nail clippers). Korean women as competent and sophisticated consumers increased their purchasing power in popular culture associated with transnational consumption of masculine images across national borders in Asia (Jung 2010).

Lee's *Cyborg, W5* is a manifestation of abled bodies of post-industrial Korean women—perfecting personal care skills in beauty and cosmetics and cultivating their sexual potential with well-being, balanced nutrition, or even artificially enhanced body parts. In fact, the machine-produced optimized body in the disguise of feminine limbs is ubiquitous beyond the national boundaries of South Korea. It is not surprising that Lee's works were well received by global audiences in biennials and art fairs.¹¹

A larger installation involving hybrid figures and fantastic creatures is ambitious and provocative. Simultaneously, the production quality of fabricated creatures equally impressed global audiences. Lee never studied or lived abroad for a prolonged period, but her insightful analysis of Korean women's body politics in a growing influence of Korean pop and entertainment culture transcended linguistic and cultural boundaries. Cyborg figures are nameless, ageless, colorless, and rootless. They can survive in almost any conditions.

Nikki Lee's *Projects* and Transnational Body Politics

Nikki Seung-hee Lee is a transnational artist. As part of Generation X, Lee embraced globalism and sought exposure to contemporary art in New York. She first attended the Fashion Institute of Technology to study commercial photography and then received an M.F.A. in photography at New York University. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Lee became the abled body as epitomized in Bul Lee's *Cyborg*. Unlike the secretive, reserved practice of Cindy Sherman who disguised herself in various costumes in the studio, the participatory practice of Nikki Lee brought her to various communities.¹² Like a superhero character in adventure stories, she lived with many communities and created documentary photographs by inventing a new identity fitting into the chosen community of American subcultures. The quest to "fit in" was an agency essential for many transnational artists in the late twentieth century (Pyun 2018). There were mainstream groups such as senior citizens, young urban professionals (Yuppies), Latinex, or Korean school girls. But there were also marginal groups such as lesbians, hip-hop musicians, or swing dancers. In the *Exotic Dancer Project* in 2000, Nikki Lee portrayed herself bare chested while she took a break between dance sessions (Figure 9). Just like any other photos in this series, someone else took a photo with the date marked on the print. She worked at the Gold Club (now Mynx Cabaret) in Hartford Connecticut for several months. Her preparatory work involved working out with a personal trainer to maintain a desirable body type of exotic dancers for American audiences.



Figure 9. Nikki Lee, *The Exotic Dancer Project* (23), 2000, Fujiflex print, 30 x 40 inches, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, © Nikki S. Lee.

Representing herself lightly tanned and brown-haired, Nikki Lee reinvented herself as an “exotic” -looking dancer in the middle of Connecticut.

The machine-made hybridity of artificial bodies of *Cyborg* was replaced by lived experiences of hybrid and artificial identity of an individual and of a group. Hybridity is something that Korean citizens in the late 1990s had to endure in their families or work-places. Due to the rigorous family planning policy of limiting to two children per household, more boys were born than girls. By 1990, 116 boys were born for every 100 girls (Park 2011). Sex-selective abortions persisted throughout the 1990s. The marriage squeeze in the late 1990s, with more men and less women at marriageable ages, forced rural men with less education to find brides in foreign countries—predominantly in Southeast Asia. Interracial marriages and subsequently multicultural families became common in rural villages. Highly educated women who traditionally had to suffer from patriarchal abuses in distribution of wealth, social mobility, and opportunities liberated themselves by choosing a group identity that they want to adopt. Just like Nikki Lee demonstrated the fluidity of identity, Korean women in abled corporeality and cultured cultural capital chose not to get married or not to return to their families (Pascoe 1991).

Children of interracial marriages were not recognized as Korean citizens on the Korean mothers’ family registry until 1997. This is part of a long-lasting patriarchal prejudice against independent women. Rural fathers married to foreign brides were able to put their children on the family registry. However, Korean women married to foreign citizens could not do the same, as they were not recognized as the head of the household. The family head system with a patriarchal lineage was finally abolished in 2005. Korean citizens and lawmakers were reluctant to admit the gendered hierarchy of privileging the male lineage innate in the Korean legal system in addition to giving up the idea of “blood purity” (Lee 2008).

Nikki Lee’s transnational portrayal of herself visualized the undercurrent worries of conservative thinkers defending prerogatives of men. As the Korean state is visualized as a biological body seen in Nikki Lee’s projects, the optimized physique as a swing dancer, a senior citizen, or a hip-hop musician with versatile manners and various skin tones, all in the dimension of Nikki Lee’s body, symbolized the versatility of Korean products attracting consumers around the world. In addition, the soft culture represented by K-Pop or K-Wave captivated viewers and followers in foreign nations. As much as Nikki Lee worked to fit in with the groups she chose, the globalized nation of South Korea reshaped its financial regulations to be equal to or compatible with economic partners.

Nikki Lee’s portrayal of her own body is blended with her surroundings or her peers in the group. Lee is like a camouflaging creature in endless possibilities. The shiny white parts of Lee’s *Cyborg*

could be omnipresent and adaptable like Nikki Lee's agile figure, as a singer, dancer, or company executive. As women's body politic became empowered and versatile, Korean women themselves wanted to consume male bodies. The year 2003 was often seen as the beginning of K-Pop idols. Women's bodies consumed by readers of *Sunday Seoul* were replaced by male entertainers with "chocolate [bar] abs," carefully nurtured and marketed by talent management companies for a global audience.

As women's purchasing power as consumers increased in the late 1990s due to education and employment opportunities, their high expectations brought forth quality entertainment products and male characters—materializing fantasies.

Debbie Han's *Goddesses* and Racial Politics

Debbie Han is a Korean-American artist who rediscovered her homeland in the early 2000s. While Nikki Lee went to the United States to experience contemporary art, American citizen Debbie Han visited South Korea to enhance her artistic practice and to strengthen her cultural identity (Rhee 2009). Han was puzzled by the Westernized beauty standards of Korean people and the Westernized education of art programs in Korean universities. Combining Japanese colonial-era art education with the French beaux-art style technical training, Korean art programs required numerous pencil drawings of the bust of Roman general (Marcus Vipsanius) Agrippa in the Louvre or that of Giuliano de' Medici by Michelangelo in San Lorenzo's Sacristy in Florence (Pyun 2019).

Han's works involving women's bodies are categorized in two themes: bodies that challenge beauty standards and bodies that transcend ethnic identity. Her works invite numerous possibilities and open-minded conversations. Koh analyzed *Mad Women Project* by Youngsook Park (b. 1941), the *Standing up Peeing* series by Jia Chang (b. 1973), and the *Menopause* series by Hyunsook Hong (b. 1958) (Koh 2020). Koh's emphasis on gendered subjectivity in the interpretation of these works is insightful, as women's bodies are transformative over decades. Confrontational messages of a woman standing up to urinate are evocative of the first-generation feminist activists who advocated for equality at work and at home.

While male bodies were scrutinized and overly sexualized for the taste of female audiences in and beyond South Korean popular culture (Iwabuchi 2017). Simultaneously aging women's bodies deserve artistic attention as the Generation X women born in the 1970s or the so-called



Figure 10. Debbie Han, *Seasons of Being IV*, 2013, inkjet print, 150 x 209 cm, courtesy of the artist © Debbie Han.

386 generation born in the 1960s are getting old (Laceulle 2018). Readers of the *Sunday Seoul* who consumed beauty tips and entertainment scandals are envisioning themselves as sophisticated consumers of global luxury products. Female nudes as idealized symbols of beauty are often associated with youth or productivity. Aged bodies are often condemned or shunned in the narrative of modern art. Another taboo in Western art is multi-racial bodies of various skin colors. Other than biblical scenes showing various tribes of the world, portraiture or narrative paintings usually showed homogeneous groups.¹³

In Han's *Seasons of Being IV*, three women stand supporting one another in the state of agony or suffering (Figure 10). Their skin colors are distinctively different as three figures painted in artificial skin colors reminiscent of ebony, latte, and chocolate. A further attempt to differentiate their ethnic identities based on physical characteristics other than skin colors is difficult. A height, a weight, skin pores, or physiognomic features remained ambivalent. Their goddess-like head and well-proportioned physique enhance the sense of harmony and deity. However, these bodies are not idealized although any shortcomings or imperfections are hidden. Because the work is a digitally retouched photograph, their faces are synthesized with the heads of the Three Graces of classical art and their skin is devoid of the actual textures of body hair or pores. Their skin colors are also influenced by artistic expressions of shadows and highlights. They are far from real flesh tones:

almost like candies in vanilla, caramel, and chocolate. Perhaps that is why these colors on the female bodies are inviting, innocent, and harmonious.

The conversation on multiracialism is not easy. Ethnic and cultural differences are easier to accept. Even those living in multicultural or multiethnic communities do not experience multiracialism as they often inhabit segregated neighborhoods. In spite of celebrating cosmopolitanism, people often show fear or reluctance toward those who look different from themselves. Han's multiracial bodies challenge people's primeval fears and solicit an open conversation. These are women's bodies. They are supportive of each other. With their arms across one another, they show solidarity in a time of distress.

Hybridity in Han's *Seasons of Being IV* crosses gender and nationality. It transcends time and the place as these women are shown only in their candid bodies without any other cultural symbols. The work itself was not meant to portray any political alliance. Nonetheless, it clearly evokes the virtue of cosmopolitanism. In Korean popular culture in the early 2000s, Korean citizens expressed a range of cosmopolitan tastes for food, hobbies, travel, music, and fashion. Korean entertainment shows also embraced non-Korean residents fluent in Korean and well-versed in Korean customs. What is missing in this narrative is Korea's interracial or multiracial citizens.

During the same period, the media covered the suffering of Korean adoptees to the United States, some of whom were not recognized as citizens under post-9/11 homeland security laws. Kopinos (slang for mixed-race children of Korean and Filipino descent), Ameriasians (a person born in Asia to an Asian mother and American military personnel) or other interracial Korean-Asian children were never recognized or compensated. Numerous Korean-Vietnamese children during the Vietnam War were not properly counted. Multiethnic families with Korean fathers and Vietnamese mothers in rural areas were also absent in this narrative of flourishing cosmopolitanism.

Trans-racial Korean adoptees and overseas Koreans have multiethnic and multicultural families and social networks. Han's *Seasons of Being IV* is not politically explicit in promoting this hybrid community. Nonetheless, the beautifully rendered skin colors and physiognomic types in this work prompt viewers to ponder supportive relationships among people from different ethnic groups. The 2020 election in the United States brought forth the unspoken reality of Asian voters being instrumental in the outcome of elections in California or Georgia. The work also stirred emotions among viewers amidst the Black Lives Matter Movement and the escalating violence against Asian Americans in post-pandemic politics.

Among the younger generations of Korean artists, racial politics will remain a crucial area to test their activism and political engagement. As of now, Korea sticks to the myth of ethnonational identity: Korean people as a homogeneous entity. Human rights for LGBTQ people have

been improved due to feminist groups, gay rights activists, and advocates for gender non-conforming people. But racial differences are harder to address and remain invisible in the public space. Han's *Seasons of Being IV* is strategically impactful in insinuating a fictional identity of Korean citizens as one nation sharing a common founder and in articulating the global scale of multiracial, multiethnic Korean citizens, both at home and overseas.

Conclusion

The Republic of Korea is no longer a nation of one race and one ethnicity—in reality it never was. In an increasingly diasporic community of artists, writers, musicians, and dancers, which element is most important in the determination of one's heritage and ethnicity? Is it still a DNA shared by a majority of citizens in South Korea? Or is someone's commitment to "Koreanness" more relevant no matter how mythological the concept might be? In the age of global migration and trans-nationalism, I tackle the question of nationality, citizenship, ethnicity, and recognition of artistic merits. Courageous women artists have utilized their bodies as battle grounds. Beyond the suffrage and abortion rights movements, Korean women artists question the myth of the Korean peninsula's body politics. Is this fertile land a home for one nation? It is not. It has been two countries in one homeland: North and South Korea. As much as one recognizes political regimes and their differences, one should also recognize that women's bodies have become nexus to global citizenship.

Notes

1. The ministry of health and welfare changed its name several times under different administrations and gave some divisions for women and children to a new ministry of women and families.

2. The photograph was included in the press release of Jung's retrospective held at the Arario Gallery in 2018. The 1968 installation *To Repress* was reproduced in this exhibition.

3. Beyond the popular journalism, scholars have studied the impact of a post-colonial strategy of addressing authoritarianism, democracy, and modernity in other cultural genres. See Hughes 2014 for Korean film and literature and Klein 2020 for cinematic cosmopolitanism during the Cold War.

4. One should see the regime's embarrassment during the Korea Gate in the context of controlling young women's behavior. See Shelley Sang-Hee Lee's paper on the Koreagate scandal in 1976.

5. One should note that Korean women mobilized their activism to fight against military prostitution. See Lee 2011.

6. <http://janejinkaisen.com/strange-meetings-2017>. Accessed March 1, 2021.

7. "Lee Bul: Beginning" exhibition at Seoul Museum of Art from March 2 to May 16, 2021.

8. See *Dong-Ah Ilbo*, June 7, 1999. <https://www.donga.com/news/People/article/all/19990607/7445767/1>. Accessed March 1, 2021.

9. For example, see Shuqin Cui, "The Pregnant Nude and Photographic Representation," a chapter in *Gendered Bodies: Toward a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 49-66.

10. Cui's another chapter entitled "Ephemeral Bodies: Object Choice and Material Practice" is relevant to the discussion of odorous, decaying flesh in Lee's work. See *Gendered Bodies*, 128-46.

11. For other artists who used the theme of cyborgs, see Cui, "Cyborg Bodies: Transgression across the Real and the Virtual" in *Gendered Bodies*, 170-90 or Latour 2002.

12. Women photographers have a long lineage of being involved with local or international conflicts such as Dorothea Lange, Margaret Burke White, Ming Smith, and Donna Ferrato. See Rosenblum 1994 for more on these women working as activities, investigative journalists and photographers.

13. An exception would be public art in multiethnic, multiracial nations like the United States. In the U.S. Capitol, there are many mural paintings of showing various ethnic groups.

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