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Beyond Identity: Activism in Korean Adoptee Art

Abstract

Since 1953 it has been estimated that 150,000 to 200,000 children from South Korea have been adopted to families living in western countries. Today, South Korea is the 10th largest economy in the world with one of the lowest birth rates in the world, and yet the practice of intercountry adoption continues to be used as a means of supplementing the nation's lack of services and funding in the social welfare sector. During the 1990s Korean adoptees, as adults, began returning to their homeland in increasing numbers. Among these adoptees are artist-activists who through their art, have been making social and political commentary on the socio-economic, racial, political, gendered, and religious underpinnings surrounding international adoption out of Korea today. Beginning with a brief historical overview of Korean adoption followed by a contextual summary of the state of intercountry adoption today, I will put into perspective the circumstances in which these "activists" are creating provocative, personal, and in particular – political artwork. Artist-activists such as Belgian-raised Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine, American-raised Kate Hers, (founders of the Overseas Korean Artists Yearbook) and the newly Scandinavian-founded UFOlab based in Denmark, are three of the most active artists / art networks in the Korean adoptee community today. These artists, who all happen to be women, also tellingly represent three decades of international adoption: the 60s, the 70s, and the 80s. In addition, this paper will be the first of its kind to discuss the global networking that is currently expanding amongst artists and activists with the shared yet unique background of having been raised in the "west" and born in the "east."

Introduction

To mark the 50th year of "official" international adoption out of Korea, over 400 Korean adoptees converged in Seoul in August 2004 for what is known in the adoptee community as the Adoptee Gathering 2004. To commemorate this event, the organizers also published an "Artists Program Book" featuring the artworks of 15 adoptees all of whom either presented or exhibited works during the Gathering. In addition, to coincide with the Gathering that summer, two concurrent exhibitions of adoptee art were held at independent galleries along with an artists' symposium at Kyung-hee University. The Gathering itself was an unprecedented event for the Korean adopted community, of which there are an estimated 200,000 individuals living in some 14 countries throughout the

world.¹ This was also a catalyst for networking amongst adoptees that are involved in the arts, specifically the visual arts. Along with the Overseas Korean Artists Yearbook (O.K.A.Y. Book), first published in 2001 and subsequently published annually, the *artist* group KimLeePark Productions, and the recent establishment of the Scandinavian artist-activist group UFOlab, the exhibitions and the artists networking panel during the Gathering revealed the will of adopted artists to not only find solidarity beyond their identities as Korean adoptees but also examine the complexities behind transnational adoption through their art. As Korean adoptees have come of age and returned to Korea, more and more individuals are taking a closer, critical look at the socio-economical, gendered, racial, political, and religious dimensions that factor into the present-day continuation of adoption out of South Korea, which currently ranks 10th among OECD countries. Through the use of the visual, these artists are bringing to the forefront their personal experiences in order to make a broader commentary and critique upon adoption; more importantly, by doing so, they are advocates for change in the adoption practices of Korea. The works of visual artist-activists such as Belgian-raised, Korea-based Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine, American-raised kate hers² (both of KimLeePark Productions and O.K.A.Y. Book), and the members of UFOlab (Unidentified Foreign Object Laboratory) in Scandinavia are all actively contributing to the ongoing discourse about international adoption. In this paper I will look at the works of specific visual, video, and performance artists in the aforementioned publications / organizations who have been at the vanguard of the emerging activist orientation that goes beyond the personal or auto-ethnographical in adoptee art.

Overview of Korean International Adoption

As a direct consequence of the Korean War (1950-1953) international adoption out of South Korea first began as a humanitarian effort and was largely conducted under the auspices of religious-affiliated organizations including the Seventh Day Adventists and Catholic Relief Services. Initially, the children who were adopted abroad to western countries were war orphans, the majority of whom were of mixed parentage fathered by American servicemen. Since the 1980s, the vast majority of children adopted abroad have been born to single, unwed mothers. From 1953 until Korea's first modern adoption law was passed in 1961 (officially regulating and establishing the legal framework for international adoption), an estimated 3,537 Korean children were sent for adoption overseas (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2003). During this time Holt Children's Services, Inc. was founded by Harry Holt, an evangelical Christian from Oregon. He and his wife Bertha

¹ Receiving countries (in order of numbers of children adopted) include: the U.S., France, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Australia, Germany, Canada, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Italy, England) Ministry of Health and Welfare.

² kate hers officially changed her name from Kate Hershiser, including lowercase letters.

themselves adopted eight half-Korean children. Holt has since become synonymous with international adoption providing western couples children from 14 different nationalities – all of which (with the exception of Korea) are from so-called “underdeveloped countries.” Holt is one of four officially sanctioned adoption agencies in Korea, the other three are Social Welfare Society (SWS), Korea Social Services (KSS), and Eastern Child Welfare Society. In 1976, the adoption law was revised designating the aforementioned agencies as the only official means of adopting in Korea; the number of receiving countries was limited to eleven and by 2002 this number was restricted to eight. The current version of the adoption law was last revised in 1995. (Hübinette 24) From 1953 to 2002, 151,697 children were officially adopted out of Korea, the overwhelming majority going to families living in Western Europe, Australia, and North America. (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2003) Unofficial estimates surpass 200,000 persons.

Over the years, amidst criticism from the international press, human rights organizations, and various individuals outside of South Korea, the South Korean government made attempts towards reducing the numbers of international adoptions with the eventual goal of ending it, yet each time, external circumstances rendered the government’s promises unfulfilled. What began as a humanitarian gesture in the aftermath of war escalated into a full-scale industry by the 1980s with the Korean government gradually becoming dependent on international adoption in lieu of more expensive long-term investment into the country’s social welfare system. International adoption was first scheduled to be phased out by 1981, yet during the 1980s Korean inter-country adoption was at its all time height with 66,511 children sent abroad. (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2003) In between the 1988 Olympic Games, where intense criticism from the international media and North Korea regarding Korea’s adoption practices resulted in a temporary suspension of international adoption, and the Asian IMF crisis (1997-99)³, the government had planned once again to phase out adoption, this time by 1996. Despite a decline in numbers of international adoptions during the 1990s, post-IMF adoption rates began increasing and then have been leveling off since 2000. According to the most recently available statistics, there were more international adoptions in 2002 (2,365) than there were a decade prior in 1992 (2,045). (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2003) Meanwhile Korea has established itself as the 10th largest economy in the world – hardly the profile of a country that cannot afford to or is unwilling to manage the social welfare needs of its own population, and indeed, spends less money on social welfare than any other OECD country. (Kim, 2004)

³ Commonly referred to in Korea as the “IMF crisis” this was the period from 1997-1999 when due to regional economic instability, the Korean economy collapsed resulting in a “bail-out” from the International Monetary Fund.

The Return of Adoptees to Korea

Beginning in the early to mid-1990s an increasing number of adoptees made the decision to return to the country where they were born; adoptee artists were no exception. It was during this time when many of the so-called second wave of adoptees (those born in the mid 1960s to mid 1970s)⁴ had become old enough and independent enough to finance their own means to return to Korea. Some artists chose short-term stays like Kate Hers, Maya Weimer, and Jane Jin Kaisen, while others like Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine have made Korea their home. Finding a community and fitting in to Korean society is usually no small task for an adoptee particularly because of the language and cultural differences, which, combined with a “Korean” face, poses considerable difficulties and challenges. As a response to the reactions she encountered after first returning to Korea, Kate Hers designed a “calling card” in the vein of African-American artist Adrian Piper’s identity work⁵, to address some of the misconceptions she encountered: “Yes, I am speaking English. Your comments prompt me to tell you that as you probably guessed I am a *kyopo* (overseas Korean). However, what you probably aren’t aware of is I was adopted from Korea when I was young. Consequently my language skills aren’t up to par.” (Hers ‘my calling card,’ 1998) [Fig. 1] Unlike “*kyopos*” or second-generation Koreans who also started coming to Korea in the early to mid-1990s, adoptees have no direct family ties, and more likely than not, have very little prior exposure to Asian or Korean culture or people. While it is true that many adoptees feel a sense of kinship and belonging within the largely homogenous Korean population at large, their experiences as Korean-looking non-Koreans often leads to feelings of alienation, which combined with internalized racism as a consequence of having grown up without positive Asian and/or Korean role models in Caucasian families, results in the adoptee becoming an “exile” in their homeland.

For many adoptees, visiting Korea for the first time as an adult was a direct affront to their sense of identity leaving them feeling even more isolated and separate from the rest of society in their cultural whiteness. Having been raised by Caucasian parents in white-majority rural or suburban communities in countries like France, Belgium, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and the U.S., they were unprepared for the negative reactions to their presence by Koreans, in particular to the fact of them having been adopted abroad. More often than not, it was their direct experiences in Korea that influenced and developed their critical responses towards Korean society and how the adoption system in Korea operates. After living in Korea for ten years, Lemoine’s art became increasingly politicized, “...Koreans don’t get the fact that international adoption is an irresponsible [sic] way to

⁴ The first wave (1953-1967) 6,926; second wave (1968-1975) 25,353; third wave (1976-1981) 31,593; fourth wave (1981-1989) 57,739.

⁵ During the 1980s Piper, a light-skinned African American woman, made a series of “calling cards” to give to people whenever she was in situations where comments about race or gender were inappropriate.

not take their responsibilities and blaming only the unwed mothers.” (Lemoine, 2005)

Because the notion of “search” – that is looking for one’s birth family, was also often a priority for returning adoptees, their experiences trying to access information about their pasts from their adoption agencies proved more often than not an exercise in frustration, futility, disappointment, and disillusionment. Lemoine, who has been living in Seoul since 1993, is perhaps the single most knowledgeable individual with regards to knowing how to do “search.” Her near-obsession with the documents, paperwork, photographs, and procedure surrounding international adoption has been a source of material for her own identity-based art as well as her most recent activist-based work. “Even though I involved art into my activism from the very beginning, it was only later that I came to input activism into my art.” (Lemoine, Tokyo) Hers’ most recent “action” – a missing person’s project – directly confronts Korean society and her own personal as-of-yet unsuccessful quest to find her birth parents. Kaisen, one of the founders of UFOlab, on the other hand, met her birth family during her first visit to Korea in 2001. It was after that initial visit that she said her approach to her art became much more personalized and by default, politicized. (Kaisen, 2004)

Certainly not all adoptees choose to make their “second” lives by living in Korea for an extended period of time as Lemoine has done; however short or long, the experiences and encounters in Korea have been absolutely integral in shaping how they create their art at this stage in their careers. Having grown up Asian in “white” societies, adoptees more often than not feel a sense of loss of identity or even an incomplete or distorted formation of their sense of self. As a result, the desire to conform to their respective societies’ expectations and the inability to do so manifests itself internally – as either internalized racism or denial of one’s identity as “other” or both. For the adopted artist in particular, the outlet for such inward conflicts is expressed through their work. “Life in three different orphanages and very little memory of Korea contributed to the development of my imagination, and maybe even my creativity.” (Lemoine, Tokyo) The step of returning to the homeland, as it were, is an important part of the adopted artist’s journey of creativity that instead of releasing them from their internalized exile, takes them further in. In hers’ performance piece “American Milk,” one of the first she performed after living in Korea, she says: “I never suckled your breast, never drank the milk of my consciousness. Is this why I was so sick? Sick from drinking American milk? Years passed, and I had forgotten.” (hers, American Milk, 1997)

Artivism: Adoptees’ Activist Art

Artivism by definition is activism by means of cultural production; more specifically, as with activist art and political art, it is a tool for social commentary and change. Yet artivism itself takes these notions a step further by its essential quality of public “roguishness” – meaning that the act of the art itself, its existence and its presentation,

mischievously confronts and subverts expectations of the intended audience. More often than not, adoptee artists display and present their work to a specific public, a public that may include fellow adoptees, adoptive parents, and Koreans in Korea or those living abroad. Because such artwork finds itself with a kind of ready-made audience settled within the “adoptee ghetto” itself, the artists can be assured that a certain level of understanding is comprehended. In short, the audience will be familiar with the experiences and visual and contextual references of the adoptee artists that are conveyed in their performances, actions, or exhibitions. The idea of a shared adoptee experience or sense of “‘discursive consciousness’ revolving around shared historical origins and common experiences with assimilation, racism, identity, and dual kinship” (Kim 45) is one that adopted artists can effectively use to ensure that their work has an emotional impact, and ideally, a political impact as well.

There is a certain “tradition” of adoptee art that uses the auto-ethnographic element of referencing the self through artworks, particularly in regards to one’s lost past and identity. Although Lemoine was one of the first adopted artists to transcend the personal into the political her earlier works fit into this category. Primarily a painter and mixed-media artist, she began politicizing her art beyond her own self-referential earlier works during the late 1990s. Like most adopted artists during that time, many of whom returned to Korea for the first time as adults, their art dealt with the original photographs of themselves as children or infants upon being placed for international adoption. Childhood, or rather a lost and fragmented memory of childhood, is highly prevalent as a theme in the works of artists such as Lemoine, American-raised artists Susan Sponsler, Maya Weimer, Amanda Lovell, textile artist Andrea Rosenberger, and Dutch-raised Soon Ja Terwee, who use images of themselves and other adoptees to reconstruct their own personal histories in an attempt to understand where they came from and who they have become. There is, however, no overriding political message with these works although they are intended to provoke dialogue and discussion.

As Maya Weimer describes her most recent photo series “Four Families” where she has positioned herself in snapshots as a family member of random non-Asian people: “the intellectual / political usually dovetails with [necessity, feeling, and emotion] at some point, but it isn’t always the point of departure.” (Weimer 2005) By inserting herself as a legitimate family member into the lives of strangers approached on the streets of New York City, Weimer’s snapshots and accompanying narrative texts elucidate what she calls the impact of randomness and chance in an adoptee’s life. Most immediately, what Weimer’s family photographs reveal, is the “disconnect” between what the normative assumptions of what a family looks like and what the photographs and descriptions show. [Fig. 2] Weimer has exhibited variations of her “Four Families” theme in three adoptee-focused exhibitions: the Korean American Adoptive Family Network (KAAN) conference in Washington DC, July 2002, and at the Korean Adoptee Gathering and “Our Adoptee, Our Alien,”

Dongsanbang Gallery in August 2004.

Artist Vanguard: Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine

Whenever the subject of Korean adoptee artists or adoptees who are living in Korea comes up, it is inevitable that the name Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine (aka Cho Mihee) will enter into the discussion. Arguably the highest-profile person within the Korean adoptee community, she has been living in Korea for the past 12 years. In addition to her numerous television appearances in Korea, her artwork and her activism have also garnered her much attention. She is the co-founder of the “Euro-Korean League” (formerly EKL, now KOBEL) in Belgium, and the Global Overseas Adoptees Link (GOA’L) and *Adoptees Vivant en Corée* (A.V.E.C.) in Korea. Over the years she has helped more than 600 adoptees search for their birth parents and just over 200 locate them.⁶ Always operating independently – that is, not working with any adoption agency or post-adoption service – she has learned through first-hand experience about the complexities and underlying deceptions surrounding Korea’s adoption and post-adoption history. The circumstances of her own background are littered with deceit, ignorance, and plain error.⁷ It is through her personal life that she has developed a critical and political conscience towards inter-country adoption. “At first I was really against interracial adoption...thinking that I serve the western ‘rich’ country. But in the other end the serving country is also providing abundantly [and] doesn’t take any responsibilities about its citizens.” (Lemoine, Seoul)

In the 12 years that Lemoine has lived in Seoul, she has held 12 solo exhibitions, one for each year, respectively, in addition to numerous group exhibitions in Korea and abroad. A political sensibility was evident in her early works such as “visa,” “expiration card,” and “alien card” (1999) [Fig. 3] “adoptee info” (1994) where she used her personal documents as the basis for creating full-scale mixed-media images. As is characteristic of her work, she combines color with reproduced and manipulated images and text. The exploration of identity as an adoptee and the artist’s status in relation to being a foreigner in the country of one’s origin are the overriding themes, which can be viewed in relation to her later works as the beginnings of the development of her activist sensibility. The use of actual documentation: passport, visa, alien registration, and adoption papers from her own personal history are means by which she instigates a discussion on what it means to be

⁶ In addition to the numerous requests from both adoptees and birth families over the years as well as frustration with the adoption system and fellow adoptees, has led Lemoine to periodically stop doing search. The time required for the exhaustive search process is possible because of Lemoine’s status as an independent full-time artist. She neither receives nor requests remuneration for her services.

⁷ Born in 1968 and adopted to Belgium in 1969, Lemoine’s adoptive parents were under the gross misconception that she was born in 1965 – making her three years older than she really was.

Korean and more critically, what it means to be an adopted Korean. Such documents are at once personal and public; they are official yet private, putting on display one's identity – as officially defined – in a kind of full exposure revealing the complexities surrounding how, as a child, she was sent away from Korea, and how as an adult she faced difficulties in remaining.

Lemoine continued exploring similar themes in her “Why Buddy Lemon Left to the East” series in 2001. In a series of ten “manipulated images” she documented her journey in the summer of 2000 from Korea “east” to America dressed as a Korean monk replete with a shaved head. The title as well as the project itself is a kind of play on words and concepts including the use of global maps to depict international adoption and photographs taken upon her arrival as a child to Belgium. Taken from the Korean film “Why Bodhi Dharma Left for the East,”⁸ she used “Buddy Lemon” to refer to herself as a kind of lemon (with emphasis on being “yellow”) and her Belgian surname, Lemoine, meaning “monk” in French, hence having shaved her head and traveling as monk. In particular the pieces “Adoptable – oops Adaptable?” “The Day I Became a Smurf,” and “The Day I Became an Alien – Turning My Back to the Past?” are indicative of Lemoine's conflicted attitude towards her own adoption. In “Adoptable – oops Adaptable?” she has used her original passport photograph as a baby and juxtaposed a circle bearing text over her face. [Fig. 4] The text used is from her adoption agency describing her condition; in it she has changed the word “adoptable” to “adaptable” playing with the notion that Asian children are easily assimilated into western families and societies. In “The Day I Became a Smurf”⁹ a photograph of her arrival as a child in Brussels is juxtaposed with text from the King James version of the Bible quoting Isaiah 43:5-7 translated in both Korean and English:

“Fear not: for I [am] with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; [Even] every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him.”

This is the same quote from the Bible that Henry Holt, founder of Holt Children's Services, Inc. used as a calling for his mission in life to bring orphaned children in Korea to western countries. Overall the Buddy Lemon series became an “action” for Lemoine as she made her journey, this time by choice, as an adult traveling from Korea eastward to America, whereas as a child she was sent without a choice, to the “west.”

⁸ “Why Bodhi Dharma Left for the East” is the title of a 1989 Korean film by Bae Yong-kyun about a monk and his disciples.

⁹ The Smurfs (*Les Schtroumpfs* in French) are small, imaginary blue-colored creatures created by the Belgian artist Peyo.

Yet it is her work within the past three years that has had the most critical and political bent. After years of making herself available to adoptees searching for their birth parents and birth parents searching for their lost children, Lemoine took a break in 2002 and focused more on her artwork. Perhaps it was at this point in time that she redirected the focus of her art to reach beyond the more personalized aspects of her own adoption to comment on the far-reaching effects of international adoption on adoptees and upon Korea itself. During this time, Lemoine was also setting her sights on the year 2003, a year which would be significant for her both personally and symbolically marking her tenth year living in Korea as well as being the 50 year “anniversary” of intercountry adoption out of Korea.

As a departure from her traditional painting, collage, and calligraphic work, Lemoine found new artistic inspiration in the realm of digital “image manipulation.” The landmark year of 2003 was an important shift in the focus of her artwork. In order to prepare for her tenth solo exhibition, “Oui Mais Non,” (Yes But No) held at Artinus Gallery in Seoul, Lemoine created ten 1x1 meter digital works summarizing her personal growth the past ten years as well as the 50-year history of international adoption. Equally divided in half, with five of the works focusing on her more personal journey and the other five critically commenting on international adoption, the “Oui Mais Non” series stands out as some of the most provocative, powerful, and symbolically representative artwork on Korean adoption today. Each piece is a digitally created quilt-like construction of text and images with some material scanned from personal photographs and other material taken from newspaper clippings. In addition to the initial gallery presentation of this series, the series was exhibited at the annual Global Overseas Adoptee Link (GOA’L) conference held that July at the National Assembly in Seoul, and several of the works are on permanent display at KoRoot Guesthouse, a low-cost hostel located in a residential home in Seoul that is for the exclusive use of visiting Korean adoptees.¹⁰

In marking the 50th year anniversary of adoption out of Korea, the critical lens with which Lemoine created her artworks became more intensified in her approach to both the circumstances of individuals and the overall effects of international adoption on Korea as a whole as is evident by the “Oui Mais Non” series. By using the official photographs of adoptees that were taken by adoption agencies as documentation, Lemoine puts faces behind the large numbers of adoptees that have been sent abroad since 1953. In order to prepare for her project called “Baek-In (100 White Koreans)” [Fig. 5] she put out a request for individuals to send her their adoption photographs. “Baek-In,” the work which according to Lemoine, is her most politically representative work, has a double meaning. In parlance

¹⁰ KoRoot Guesthouse, *Ppuri ui jib* in Korean, was established in 2003. Located in central Seoul near Kyôngbok Palace, it is a dorm-like residency where visiting adoptees may stay for a nominal fee and “post-adoption” services such as birth parent search assistance and language and cultural training are offered.

with her usual method of playing with the meanings of words in the three languages she speaks – French, English, and Korean – Lemoine used the dual meaning of the word “baek-in” in Korean for “white person” (meaning Caucasian) and the number 100 symbolizing the number of people represented in the work. This has to do with the notion that adoptees are token white people by the fact of their being raised by Caucasian parents in white-dominated societies. Accompanying the one hundred squares, half in red and half in blue,¹¹ with pictures of one hundred babies are words from each letter of the alphabet that Lemoine associates with being adopted:

“abandoned, adoptable, adaptable, blessed, clever, chosen, cheap, documented, filed, heritage, invisible, jaded, kimchified, left-overs, manipulated, nicely, orphaned, quiet, rules, surely, transcribed, up, vantage, (in) won, xeroxed, yin & yang, zen...”

This juxtaposition of images and words creates a powerful message that these children, who instead of being sent away for a “better life,” were merely objectified commodities that fulfilled the wants and expectations of entities beyond their control. Lemoine used the combination of words, images, and numbers to make her point in the piece titled, “date” [Fig. 6] which follows the square theme using baby pictures along with the numbers of children adopted abroad each year since 1953. The text with each word placed in a square at the top and bottom of the work reads: “post –war mixed –race orphans was the first reason but after poor full race Korean also...many more still leave.” And then by using clips and images from over the years relating to international adoption, Lemoine asks the question of where international and interracial adoption fit into Korean history.¹² [Figs. 7 & 8]

Following on the heels of the “Oui Mais Non” series, Lemoine continued to develop the political yet individualized focus of her work the following year. This was also the year of the “Adoptee Gathering 2004” held in Seoul. Declining to exhibit along with the other artists participating in the Gathering, Lemoine co-curated an independent exhibition organized with Lee Tae-ho of Seoul Art Camp titled, “Our Adoptee, Our Alien.” Two galleries, Dongsanbang Gallery and Keumsan Gallery were chosen to exhibit video art (Keumsan) and 2-D art (Dongsanbang) by 11 adopted Korean artists. Running concurrently with the Gathering in August, there was also a symposium titled, “Identity & Activism through Art,” held at Kyung-hee University’s Institute of International Education to coincide

¹¹ For the series “Oui Mais Non,” Lemoine chose the three primary colors: red, yellow, and blue. Red and blue symbolize the yin and yang at the center of the Korean flag (T’aegguki) and yellow symbolizes Koreans as being of the “yellow” race.

¹² An illustrated image of a crying baby being held by the legs upside-down serves as a backdrop. The image comes from one of the first critical investigative journalistic articles on Korean adoption, “Babies for sale: South Koreans make them, Americans buy them,” by Matthew Rothschild published in 1988.

with the exhibition.¹³ Artists Maya Weimer and Jane Jin Kaisen (UFOlab) were also participants. The piece Lemoine exhibited here was a controversial piece she had wanted to do for years but had not had the right timing to do. “I Wish You A Beautiful Life” was an installation, again working with text on individual squares, where Lemoine printed the names of five Korean adoptees that committed suicide along with comments (written in the original French) from people who had strong reactions upon hearing about the project.¹⁴ Strung up like a line of “dirty” laundry, the names made a powerful and ironic statement about the fate of some adoptees. Suicide rates among adoptees, according to Lemoine, are one of the most hidden and non-discussed issues of international adoption.¹⁵ “The tragedy of the adoptees that have committed suicide has haunted me especially during the first years of my activist involvement in the Korean adoptee community. “ (Lemoine, Our Adoptee, Our Alien) By “airing out” – putting in a public space – the unspoken and very private loss from suicide, she directly countered the widespread notion that relinquished, abandoned, or orphaned children will have a better life if they are adopted outside of Korea, “Sending children abroad for the benefit of their ‘well-being’ does not always result in their ‘success’ as adults.” (Lemoine, Our Adoptee, Our Alien)

As part of the one-year anniversary of the opening of KoRoot Guesthouse, Lemoine produced a few more new works in 2004, which were to be on display along with pieces from the “Oui Mais Non” and “Why Buddy Lemon Left to the East” series’. Using her characteristic humor (along with irony and sarcasm) she created a piece titled, “The United States of South - Korea” [Fig. 9] which played with the zeal surrounding South Korea’s hosting of the World Cup in 2002 and Korea’s traditional political alliance with / dependence on the United States. Fourteen circular “balls,” each representing the flags of the main countries adopting Korean children, were superimposed on the Korean T’aegukki flag with South Korea’s flag itself as the very center ball. In this vision of Lemoine’s, by sending its children abroad, Korea has its very own “little ambassadors” to western nations thus creating the “United States of South - Korea.” Lemoine used a new technique for the two other works she debuted at KoRoot: “Sek(2)Tong Europeans” [Fig. 10] with babies adopted to Europe and “Sek(2)Tong Americans” with babies adopted to the U.S. Each work was created from images of babies hand-traced in ink on the traditional textile pattern called *saekt’ong* that is a commonly found on the sleeves of a child’s *hanbok* (traditional Korean clothing). The titles are a play on words with the number ‘2’ pronounced in

¹³ The Adoptee Gathering 2004 was held from August 4-8 and the exhibition “Our Adoptee, Our Alien” ran from August 5-12, 2004.

¹⁴ The title “I Wish You a Beautiful Life” comes from the book of the same title with letters from birthmothers to their children published by Young & Young.

¹⁵ That same August, a male American adoptee committed suicide in Seoul. His memorial service was held at KoRoot Guesthouse.

Korean as ‘e’ or “saekki t’ong” – which is a kind of slang meaning “baby shit.” The conventionally appealing and colorful work is belied by the sarcastic title, which is a kind of inside joke for Lemoine. Several of Lemoine’s works remain on display at Koroot having become permanent fixtures of a sort with the powerful messages that they convey readily available to an audience of adoptees, whom for a myriad of reasons, find themselves returning to their country of birth.

Artist: kate hers

Along with Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine, visual and performance artist kate hers (aka Kate Hershiser) has been one of the most active and vocal Korean adoptees. Born in Seoul in 1976, hers started her activism while she was studying for her B.F.A. at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She first returned to Korea on an invite from Han Diaspora in the fall of 1997 where she performed “American Milk” a multimedia performance using light, sound, and movement. She visited Korea again on a music and dance scholarship for a year from the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts. In addition to her “calling card,” hers’ earlier works were a direct response to her questioning her identity and finding out about her Korean roots: “In finding out about my own Korean ‘roots,’ I have started to make a place for myself...During the times of my intense search for identity, performance and performance documentation have been the ideal mediums in which I address my experiences in returning to the motherland.” (hers, American Milk) Ever since her return to Korea in the late 1990s she has been able to return periodically to Korea on funding first as a Fulbright Commission Junior Researcher (2000) and then as a Blakemore Foundation award recipient (2001).

During hers’ sojourns in Korea she has been active in both artist groups and creating her own socially and politically charged work. “The majority of my work is art for social change.” (hers, San Francisco) Along with Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine, she also participated in one of the first overseas Koreans’ artists’ groups called “Han Diaspora”¹⁶ as well as KimLeePark Productions and O.K.A.Y. Book. The creation of one of her most provocative works, “Sex Education for Finding Face in the 21st Century” (Seoul, 2002) ended up landing her in jail. The performance video installation is a combination of two sets of video footage: one of a close-up of hers’ mouth upside-down repeating the words over and over “I had an abortion when I was 18” and footage shot when she staged a performance in Myongdong, a popular shopping district in downtown Seoul, dressed in a high school girl’s uniform with a pillow stuffed under her shirt in order to make it appear as if she was pregnant. During the brief street performance she laughed hysterically

¹⁶ Han Diaspora was founded in 1997 by Son Hijoo and Cho Mihee (Lemoine) with the initiative to unite artists from the Korean Diaspora.

without saying any words while a crowd of onlookers gathered to watch and speculate whether or not she was crazy or if she was performing some kind of joke. Police officers interrupted the performance and took her away after just a few minutes into an hour-long scheduled performance. According to hers, “drawing and painting can’t impact an audience on the same level as performance.” (hers, San Francisco) The social commentary that hers was trying to make had to do with her view of Korean society being focused on conformity without any room for individuality. (hers, Artist Program Book) Unwed motherhood is a taboo subject in Korean society and, not so incidental, is the fact that the majority of children who are sent abroad for adoption are those born to unwed mothers. (Hübinette, 2004; Kim, 2004) In posing as a pregnant teenage schoolgirl, hers, as an adoptee returning to her homeland to reclaim her identity, had performed a provocative and multi-layered commentary on society.

Since entering graduate school hers has continued to create performance pieces and visual art dealing with where the social and political intersect with the personal. Using her artwork as a self-described “agent for social change,” hers has made inroads and raised awareness in Korea of the complexities of being a transnational adoptee fitting into neither of the usual categories of being “successful” or being “pitiful.” As with ‘my calling card’ modeled after Adrian Piper, hers used the Guerrilla Girls¹⁷ for inspiration in “The Advantages of Being Transracially Adopted From Korea.” [Fig. 11] As with the Guerrilla Girls, the message is one of humor and sarcasm tinged with bitter irony. Laced with a tone of defensive sarcasm, the 13 sentences, or “advantages” of being adopted are mostly posited from a position of a person much like hers herself – that is, as an adoptee familiar with Korean society who has returned to Korea and experienced the challenges of being a “non-Korean Korean.” Lines such as “Not having to marry a Korean person” and “Not having pressure to get into Seoul National University” make more of an impression to someone who has struggled with trying to fit into Korean society and yet ended up finding her/himself fortunate to not have to as a so-called “honorary white person.” (hers, The Advantages...)

Hers’ latest activist action was a clandestine “Missing Persons Project” staged April 3, (her birthday) 2005 in the Seoul neighborhood where she was born. Working yet again from an inspired source, this time public missing child posters, (*sarameul ch’atumnida*) hers put herself at the center of a missing child poster, with herself pictured as a three month-old infant and also pictured as she looks today as a 30-year-old. Produced for a Korean public, hers and a crew of five people (to film, photograph, and document the action)

¹⁷ Founded in 1985, the Guerrilla Girls is an activist feminist group of anonymous female artists representing the so-called “conscience of the art world.” By using humor to convey information, provide facts, and provoke discussion, the group aims to expose sexism and racism in politics, art, and culture at large. “The Advantages Of Being A Woman Artist” (1989) was one of their best-known posters.

armed with paste, posters, and box cutters, spent the early morning hours on hers' birthday illegally putting up posters around the neighborhood of the hospital where she was born. With very little information on her birth family, and futile attempts to locate them in the past, hers was hoping to find some information about her lost family, saying on the poster that she was looking for her family, *kajokeul ch'atko issumnida*. [Fig. 12] The following day after the action she planned on returning to the site to hand out postcards to passersby. Although unsuccessful in that she did not receive any additional information about her family, hers' public action precisely fits the definition of an activist. By bringing her missing persons poster into a specified location, a small neighborhood in the middle of Seoul, hers subverted the usual acceptable methods of an adoptee searching for her roots. Positioning herself as being "missing," with the intention of finding her lost self, she is making a commentary on losing a self that might have been. Combined with the performance "Sex Education For Finding Face in the 21st Century," hers has shown herself to be the most rogueish of adoptee artists. With her calculated academic training and intuitive exhibitionist desire for attention, hers has taken explorations into personal identity a step further into a public domain.

Networking and Political Actions

KimLeePark Productions

Both kate hers and Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine whom I identify as activists, go beyond the mere issues of identity politics and personal documentation in their work. One of the first "events" as it were, that kick-started the artist-activist movement among Korean adoptees was the "Alien Awareness Project" organized by KimLeePark Productions in 1998. In response to feeling disempowered and alienated while living in Korea, Lemoine and hers, along with another anonymous adoptee from the U.S. initiated this political activist group. Integral to the group's intentions and purpose, they chose a satirical, tongue-in-cheek approach to getting their message across. Using the names "Kim," "Lee," and "Park," the three most common Korean surnames with approximately 45 percent of the population having one of these last names, for their group, they were able to convey a sense of anonymity that they felt was necessary for their artistic and political freedom. Their gimmick was to use a kind of play on words with the Korean title of their street campaign, *Uri ibyangin, uri ibangin*, meaning "Our adoptee, our alien."¹⁸ In order to manifest this meaning literally the three dressed up wearing various traditional Korean clothing to represent their adoptee-ness and wore yellow hoods with black sunglasses and white masks in order to look like space aliens, hence the adoptee as a literal alien rather than just as a foreigner. The sticker campaign accompanying their street action shows the same hooded

¹⁸ The title of KimLeePark Productions' campaign is unrelated to the Seoul Art Camp exhibition in 2005 of the same title.

image as a backdrop to the black and yellow sticker design. [Fig. 13]

The first action of KimLeePark Productions was to “demonstrate” in Daehangno, Seoul on Children’s Day (May 5) 1998, a part of a larger campaign to lobby for adoptees’ rights. Their goal was to ensure that overseas adoptees would be included in the implementation of the newly created F-4 visa.¹⁹ Using Children’s Day as a timely moment to raise awareness, the group sponsored a visa signature campaign in order to push for the rights of adoptees, despite holding other countries’ citizenships and not having Korean families, to be eligible for F-4 visa status. Next, KimLeePark Productions brought their street campaign to Chicago during its annual Korean Festival in July 1998 followed by a demonstration outside the National Assembly in Seoul during the Symposium for the Rights of Overseas Korean Adoptees later that same summer. As a part of their campaign, they collected over 1,000 signatures. According to Lemoine, however, their participation in the Chicago Korean Festival was ill-received by the Korean community who normally expected “traditional” representations / celebrations of Korean culture, not a subversive, politicized action. Although KimLeePark Productions’ street action and signature campaign likely had no influence on deciding whether or not overseas adoptees were to be eligible for the F-4 visa, (which they are) they made their presence known and established themselves as a forerunning activist group of adoptees.

Overseas Korean Artists Yearbook (O.K.A.Y. Book)

Perhaps the most ambitious and yet practical aspiration for Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine and kate hers has been the creation of the Overseas Korean Artists Yearbook or O.K.A.Y. Book, an annual anthology of overseas Korean artists, including writers, designers, and choreographers. Ever since Lemoine moved to Seoul in 1993 she has been active in the small artist community of Koreans, adoptees, Korean-Europeans, and Korean-Americans so it made sense that she would be familiar with the so-called Korean diaspora of artists. Yet it was after hers was allegedly purposefully not chosen for the KOREAMERICA exhibition held at Art Sonje, Seoul in 2000 that she and Lemoine decided to create their own annual guidebook of overseas artists. The Art Sonje exhibition was showcasing second-generation Korean-American artists and Koreans who had studied overseas. Adoptees were not chosen as participants under the pretext that they did not share the Korean immigrant experience. Lemoine and hers saw Art Sonje’s perspective to be a political one, and so in response, they embarked on their own ambitious, independently funded O.K.A.Y. Book.

Modeled after “The Art Book” published by the editors of Phaidon Press, and “Le Dictionnaire International Des Arts” published by *Focus Bordas*, the Overseas Korean Artists

¹⁹ The F-4 visa, implemented in December 1999, allows persons of Korean descent residing overseas who immigrated after 1948 to obtain de facto Korean citizenship including employment, property ownership, and the right to reside in Korea indefinitely.

Yearbook, Volume 1 was first published by Jinsol Books (now defunct) in 2001 with 28 participating artists. Under the working name star~kim and onegook PROJECT (Lemoine and hers, respectively), the two aimed to create a comprehensive guide to young artists of Korean ethnicity, in addition to being a resource book for networking among artists. Lemoine and hers chose to limit their participants to artists under the age of 40, many of whom were either right out of school or had never been published before. While there were several adoptees who participated, most of the other artists were Korean-Americans.

The format for O.K.A.Y. Book, which would be the same for each of the first four volumes published include a statement from star~kim (onegook wrote the introduction for the first volume) as well as a contextual preface by a guest author and a geographical focus on artists. Each artist provides an artist's statement as well as a brief description of her/his work along with a photograph and short bio. In addition to the works each artists' contact information is listed at the end of each volume. Most of the artists appearing in the first volume were either adoptees or acquaintances / friends of hers and Lemoine. After the first volume was published, Lemoine took over the editorial and content control of the series. She contacted the Areum Network, a group of *zainichi*²⁰ or Korean-Japanese artists based in Osaka for Volume 2 (2002). The third volume also had a large number of adoptees, as the Korean-European diaspora largely consists of adoptees more than immigrants or second generation Koreans. And in the most recent volume, number four, Lemoine made the effort to find artists representing the Brazilian and Australian diaspora.

What is remarkable about the O.K.A.Y. Book series is not necessarily the quality of the works contained within the pages of each volume, or the notability of the artists, rather it is the fact of its very existence at all that is the most remarkable. Funded independently, each issue is a labor of love for Lemoine, who as a full-time artist, receives neither payment nor salary for producing each book – a considerable task for one individual. By including Korean adoptees from all over the western world as a legitimate part of the Korean diaspora, star~kim (and onegook) PRODUCTIONS have made an important contribution to the overseas Korean community not to mention the Asian-American/European communities at large. As a resource, there has been no other publication with a comprehensive list of upcoming visual artists and writers as well as exhibitions, publications, and art events that are pertinent to the Korean diasporic community.

UFOlab

Based out of Denmark, the Unidentified Foreign Object Laboratory (UFOlab) is the latest organization of adoptee artists to emerge. Co-founded by five Scandinavian female Korean adoptee artists, Jane Jin Kaisen, Charlotte Kim Boed, Anna Jin Hwa Borstam, Jette

²⁰ *Zainichi* are second and third-generation Koreans living in Japan who have ideological ties with North Korea.

Hye Jin Mortensen, and Trine Glerup, the group represents the “younger” generation who were adopted in the 1980s.²¹ [Fig. 14] Although they were recently founded in 2004, I have included them because of their activist-artist-focused agenda and their aims to create a network of Korean adopted artists. They are also the only European-based adoptee artist group. This “third generation” of Korean adoptees has grown up with a stronger sense of political awareness than the first two generations of adoptees who were sent overseas in the 1960s and 70s. As artists, the members of UFOlab all have a conscious awareness of identity and their positions as “others” in Scandinavian society.

The Adoptee Gathering 2004 was the first time that UFOlab made its presence known outside of its base in Denmark. As co-organizer of the Gathering’s artist exhibition (along with Hyo Sung Bidol) Jane Jin Kaisen also organized a special “panel” for artists during the Gathering. Rather than being a formal discussion, several artists were invited to participate in performing their works including impromptu dance, spoken word, and performance. By introducing UFOlab to the other participants in the Gathering, the members plan to organize exhibitions and collaborative projects with other adoptees in the future. (Kaisen, Seoul) Already, in January 2005 UFOlab organized an exhibition with participating Scandinavian artists and Korean adoptees in addition to sponsoring talks, lectures, and city “interventions.” The next project of UFOlab is to sponsor a book publication on the myriad of issue pertaining to diaspora art, activism, cultural identity, and adoptee artist groups.

Conclusion

In every group of people there are sub-groups and categories; within the group that we call “Koreans” there are Koreans living in Korea and ethnic Koreans living abroad, and within that group is another sub-group, that of Korean adoptees. International adoption is a unique phenomenon particular to the 20th century, a century marked by mass immigration and an unprecedented mobility of the masses. Sent abroad to be raised for a “better life” by Caucasian parents in societies where whites are the majority, tens of thousands of Korean children grew up with little sense of their heritage and background, instead identifying themselves as simply “American” or “Danish” or “French” or “Dutch.” Yet as these adoptees have come of age, they have gained an awareness and curiosity about their place of origin, indeed, *a right*, to know where they came from and how they came to be who they are. Among any group there will be artists, creative people who challenge others to think and see the world around them a little differently. No longer willing to accept the token explanations from figures of authority – parents, adoption agencies, the Korean government – adoptees are looking at international adoption from a critical perspective.

²¹ With the exception of Boed who was adopted to Denmark in 1970.

Adoptee artists are finding that through the art they create, they can explore, educate, and provoke discussions of identity, of politics, and of advocating social change. By documenting their journey, adoptee artists are sharing their experiences and discoveries and contributing to not only the history of the Korean diaspora but also to the history of Korea itself and of other transracial and transnational adoptees throughout the world.

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