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Abstract

This thesis is a narration of historical events translated through my own subjective filter; it represents my view of myself as a Korean woman and as an immigrant. It is also the summation of my personal experience of womanhood, which I reflect upon and understand through my artwork. The experience of my youth in the aspiring atmosphere of the rapidly developing Korean society of the 1990s is also an important element in my work.

This thesis questions how I, as a female Korean artist, can transform the image of nationality, gender, and the immigration, narratives by which I have been defined by questioning such categories from historical, sociological, and psychological perspectives, within the context of my artistic practice.

In my artistic practice I make videos, sculptures, photography, performances, films, installations, and create small objects that question our illusions and preconceptions. By playing with my physical, socio-political constraints and constructions, I reveal the realities that exist behind an image. I do so by questioning invisible forces behind the construction of images that present the individual experience and mass phenomena of contemporary life. I want to shatter these images, call attention to them, and cast a light on the complexities of the human experience. Through my practice I give form to my feelings that hide behind the smile that I argue often represents false feelings. My thesis project functions as a map of my journey, from Korea to America, Los Angeles to Cambridge, past to future, fact to feeling, and memory to form; at the same time, my intention is to evoke a sense of emotional absence, danger and the struggle of identity in others.
an image of a daughter leaving home with a suitcase.
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감사합니다

To my committees, teachers, friends, and family,
Heartfelt thank you.
miss (mɪs) <v.t.> 1. to fail to hit or strike. 2. to fail to encounter, catch, etc.: to miss a train. 3. to fail to take advantage of: to miss a chance. 4. to fail to be present at or for: to miss a day of school.
5. to notice the absence or loss of: When did you first miss your wallet? 6. to regret the absence or loss of: I miss you all dreadfully. 7. to escape or avoid: He just missed being caught. 8. to fail to perceive or understand: to miss the point of a remark. 9. to omit: leave out.
10. to fail to hit something.
11. to fail; be unsuccessful.
12. to miss.
13. miss out, to fail to experience or take advantage of something.
14. a failure to hit something.
15. a failure of any kind.
16. misfire.

miss (mɪs) <n.> pl. misses.
1. (cap.) a title of respect prefixed to the name of an unmarried woman
2. (used by itself as a term of address to a young woman): Miss, please bring me some ketchup.
3. (cap.) a title prefixed to the name of something that a young woman has been selected to represent: Miss Sweden.
4. (cap.) a title prefixed to a mock surname that is used to represent possession of a particular attribute, identity, etc.: Miss Congeniality.
5. a young unmarried woman; girl.
6. misses.
   a. a range of sizes, chiefly from 6 to 20, for garments that fit women of average height and build.
   b. a garment in this size range.

trans-lation (træn-ləˈʃən, trən-) <noun>
1. a. The act or process of translating, especially from one language into another.
   b. The state of being translated.
2. A translated version of a text.
3. Physics Motion of a body in which every point of the body moves parallel to and the same distance as every other point of the body.
4. Biology the process by which messenger RNA directs the amino acid sequence of a growing polypeptide during protein synthesis.

miss translation: from fact to feeling to form

"Language can only live on and renew itself by hybridizing shamelessly and changing its own rules as it migrates in time and space."

The title “miss translation,” refers to my artistic practice as a whole, including my role, my process, and my projects itself. I’m using language to make emotional connection rather than grammatical connection.

The title also signifies mistranslation, failed translation, misinterpretation, imperfect interpretation, or the travails of an unmarried woman trying to make herself understood in a different culture, suggesting that my thesis is open to multiple interpretations.

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**Introduction**

This thesis is a narration of historical events translated through my own subjective filter; it represents my view of myself as a Korean woman and as an immigrant. It is also the summation of my personal experience of womanhood, which I reflect upon and understand through my artwork. The experience of my youth in the aspiring atmosphere of the rapidly developing Korean society of the 1990s is also an important element in my work.

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a reflection on an Korean woman’s mask

There are certain moments in my everyday life when I am conscious of frequent smiling that I can’t control. Why do I smile? I don’t know. I smile so much that sometimes my face hurts. It is natural to smile but at certain moments it feels artificial or automatic. Where is my smile coming from? What is behind my smile?

A smile communicates feeling, often as a sign of positive emotion like happiness or fulfilment. But when a smile functions under socio-political forces, such as media, nation, class, gender, geography, or religion, the smile can become a superficial mask that miscommunicates true feeling. In these instances can I avoid communicating inadequately when I smile falsely? To answer this question, I need to consider the socio-political forces that create the image of a smile, my smile, and your smile.

I didn’t question my smile so much before moving to America because in Korea everyone smiled. In Korea, I had not yet been taken out of my comfort zone to begin questioning the kinds of masks that I was wearing or what stereotypes I was projecting or conforming to.

In 2002, when I first landed at Los Angeles International Airport, America represented my hopes and promised fulfilment of my goals. I believed in the tenets of the “American Dream,” namely that America was a land of opportunity where people worked hard, and through dedication gained success. But I have discovered since that not dissimilar to my childhood ocean reveries this understanding of the American dream was inaccurate.
I realized that, for me, curiosity replaced hope. This led me to find satisfaction in the intricacy of failures and the frailty of illusions rather than in the illusions themselves.

In order to reveal this, I made a video piece called *Happy Hour* (2011), in which I sat in front of camera smiling for an hour, attempting to perform the contradiction between the artificiality of the endless smile of the fulfilled consumer and the pain of repression and superficiality. My intent was to create a performance that stretches the duration of a superficial expression beyond the human breaking point so that artifice visibly began to fracture and crumble.

I was thinking about the smile and solicitude in relation to the commodification of human warmth and generosity in consumer society but not in terms of how I was wearing Korean woman’s mask.

In 2014, my interest in *Happy Hour* continues, as it reveals the failures of illusions and preconceptions. Recently I started to question my physical, socio-political constraints, and constructions more subjectively because I am more conscious about the narratives that I have been defined by and how these relate to the identity that I carry with me: I’m a woman, I’m Korean, and I’m also an immigrant who smiles a lot.
I moved to America when I was sixteen and I gained different perspectives on different cultures and customs that I offer distance and closeness both when I’m in America or when I visit Korea.

I created five themes (see below) to contextualize my practice and exploration of these three categories that comprise my identity. These are the threads that unite my projects. I explore issues of gender, Koreanness, and emigration from Korea. The work is arranged by theme and therefore no chronology is necessary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Keywords</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Migration</td>
<td>immigration, tourism, translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Migration 2</td>
<td>trauma, repression, silence, absence, gap</td>
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<tr>
<td>Memory</td>
<td>preservation, power, symbol</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monument</td>
<td>beauty, women, mask, body</td>
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Throughout the process I imagined myself not only as an immigrant Korean woman, but also as a detective, investigating myself while trying to subjectively understand what it means to be these three categories. To do so I traced and translated the root of each identity, piecing together elements that to others may appear to have no connection or significance in the world, but to me are essential to my identity.

Sources are mainly drawn from my own life, memory, subjective experiences, as well as historical events that I stumbled upon in the world, such as news, literature, film, art, lectures, archives, or conversation.

My role as detective creates narratives of the observed, questioned, and collected. I recorded sources with a subjective, temporal, and fragmented voice.
Travel is essential elements in my work as travel continually destabilizes my present position to question the socio-political constrains that I inhabit. What makes people travel? Who travels? What do people gain from traveling? Trinh T. Minh-ha, a filmmaker, witter, literary theorist said, "Every voyage can be said to involve a re-siting of boundaries." I'm interested in travel because it shows what my boundaries are, boundaries that I cannot see when I remain in one space.

The paths people choose to travel shapes their lives and demonstrates who they are and what they desire to be. Had I not attended an all girls middle school or high school I might have become a different person. I would also be a different person had I not overheard one of the male teachers comparing a female-only classroom to a male-only classroom, saying, "You girls are dirty, but lucky, because you are easier to clean." He told the girls, "Male students are notorious for always sticking things into all kinds of holes. They even make holes." Female students at my school were unwillingly exposed to this kind of violent speech and acts on a daily basis, but we kept silent in response.

We were trained to follow the three fundamental principles (the bond between ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife), and the five moral disciplines in human relations (between father and son is one of love, ruler and subject is one of loyalty, husband and wife is one of mutual respect, elder and younger is one of order and discipline, friends is one of trust). These principles and disciplines are based on Confucianism. Growing up this guidance was simplified by the common refrain: you must always respect teachers, elders, and parents.

These strict social conditions that framed our historical and political environment were suffocating. As a result, I found relief in creativity, driven to find alternatives in everyday life, in order to breathe. I tried hard to come up with ways that I could make other students—most of whom were worn out by SAT preparation—laugh.

One of my performances to make other students laugh was an imitation of a famous social educator Gu Sung Ae’s lecture “A Shout: for the sex of our beautiful children.” Her lecture was first broadcasted on TV in 1998, when speaking about sex in public was considered taboo. Gu Sung Ae tried to break the taboos and mythicization of sex, by freely talking about what the female body; different relationships (including sexual) between women and men; how to prevent or recover from sexual abuse; the correct methods of contraception; and so on. My interpretation of the lecture, performed for my middle school classmates, provided new context and was shocking entertainment that evoked a hidden sensibility that most of the pubescent students were repressing. This performance then moved from one class to another.

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I was specifically busy spreading Gu Sung Ae’s shouting about the female body and how to prevent women from potential sexual abuse. I said:

Sexual abusers are everywhere. They are mostly invisible but you can sense it. They are all over. Those who warrant particular wariness are those who may be close to you like your NEIGHBORS or RELATIVES. You must always be ready to shout, HELP ME! Repeat after me, HELP ME!

Despite my effort to play with socio-political constraints I wanted to leave the country. I felt trapped by such speech, acts, disciplines, and taboos. The subtext and metaphors that contained violence affected me daily. Even at home I didn’t feel secure or free.

At the end of November 2002 I left Korea without knowing that I would move about thirteen times in the next eleven years. My first American room was located in Inglewood, California, right above Jalisco Bakery, the business that my aunt’s family was running. I learned cake decoration the first week I arrived. I was excited about decorating square cakes with spray paints and Disney characters. I felt like making an edible TV set of Spider Man, Mickey Mouse, various princesses, and superheroes.
Living with my aunt's family turned out to be a disaster. During less than two years of living with them, not only did I hear more Korean and Spanish than English, all my relatives seemed to be falling into a certain caricature; my gangster cousin gave me the new title "Fob" which means fresh off the boat. He constantly stole all the money from my piggy bank and went to jail for two years in Korea because of a fight with non Korean-American. My perverted uncle was an authoritarian, stingy man, and a child molester with a vile temper. My hardworking aunt only circulated between home, work, and church. She always tried to maintain her image as an "angel mom" and "holy wife." My two older female cousins were always out working or drinking. As my aunt and uncle's American dream got bigger their life over time crumbled. What didn't seem to change were the picture of Jesus and a picture of a big home in Beverly Hills that hung above the kitchen table, but even those started to lose their color from the sunshine.

My aunt sometimes told me of the dreams she had of driving a Mercedes and living in a house with a big pool, all made possible by the wealth she thought they would accumulate from the grocery store and several other businesses. Those dreams were shattered when her home and business were burnt down in the 1992 Los Angeles Riot. This tragic event followed the broadcast of a video showing five police officers brutally beating African-American motorist Rodney King. The news lit a fuse with the minority population when a nearly all-white jury (ten whites, one Latino, one Asian) in Simi Valley found the officers innocent of all charges.
On May 1, 1992, Rodney King was put on TV and asked, "People, I just want to say... can we all just get along? Can we get along"?

Much of the rioting took place in South Central Los Angeles, where many Korean and Asian immigrant storeowners were widely targeted. Two weeks after Rodney King’s beating, another grainy videotape of violence was released on television. It captured Korean-American grocer Soon Ja Du shooting 15-year-old Latasha Harlins after an angry tussle over a $1.79 bottle of orange juice. Latasha died clutching $2 in her hands. On the second day of rioting, Korean-Americans organized armed security teams comprised of storeowners. They did so because the police and National Guard had no presence in Koreatown and the community felt it necessary to create their own protection.

Where were the policemen? As reported by Dr. Tracy Buenavista, Professor of Asian-American studies at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), many police and National Guard were sent to north and west Los Angeles, worried that the violence might spread to areas like Beverly Hills. This upheaval had different meanings to people of different classes, races, and occupations.

7 South Central History. 5 April 2014 <http://www.southcentralhistory.com/la-riots.php>.
For me, this history is still very much present. I captured my exploration of this living history in my film *My Uncle J’s Exercise* (2012). In the long take of my uncle opening up his shoe and luggage store in downtown LA, he opens the door, rolls up the shutter, pushes open the black iron fence, and opens another door within the iron fence. Not only do the layers of protection surrounding his shop take a long time for him to open, he is also simultaneously locking each door behind him for extra protection. While eating his lunch on his feet, he looks out the gate every second, always on guard.

I left my aunt and uncle’s home because of the violence that I felt, but I needed to return to confront my uncle with my camera several years later. I was curious about his life and the background of such a violent individual. Who is he? Who is my aunt who is portraying herself to be an angel or holy wife? If I understand him better, will I be less angry? What kind of relationships can I reveal? What constitutes Korean immigrant life in LA? How does the reality of life differ from the stereotypes of Korean immigrants? Can I make a film about the life of the immigrants that I am part of? Will the making of this film empower me? Louise Bourgeois said, “I was able to exorcise my demons through art.”9 I want to confront my demons in order to exorcise them.

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The dialogue in *My Uncle J's Exercise* includes a reflection, “My Husband,” that was written by my aunt. In the film I narrate this text while I present images of my uncle and aunt. The film follows my uncle going through his daily routine: opening the store, having lunch, buying lotto tickets, getting coffee from 7-Eleven, playing golf after the excessive detail paid to exercise his body, cleaning the golf clubs, and taking a handful of daily pills. A section of the film also follows my aunt to a warehouse to pick up new shoes that had arrived from China for their business. We talk about the economy and her various business ventures we encounter on the trip.

“My Husband”
By Young Ok Tak

He escaped with his mother and younger brother to South Korea soon after the Korean War broke out. At time, the Korean War made his life very miserable. Living in the south wasn’t that easy during the war as a refugee. His mother died in Busan not long after they escaped. Under the sky, only the two brothers were left alone at such young age.

I can’t imagine how they survived during those tough time? But anyways, he survived well until we were married. At that time he was working at POSCO STEEL CO. After two years of marriage, he decided he wanted to go to the United States for better living.

So his American life began with having a great dream. At first, he opened a grocery store with his brother. Next, he was a property salesman for several years. He worked so hard until the world oil-shock occurred. After the oil-shock happened, he quit his job as a property sales worker and he opened a grocery store again.
By that time, his life style became as ordinary as any American's; buy a nice house, nice car, playing golf, traveling, etc... He was a father of three children and his life looked quite peaceful. And the store income was good enough to take care of his family until he was robbed by gunpoint.

He saved his life from that incident but some anxiety arose. After that, the LA earthquake took his income property that he had planed as his retirement. And another tragedy was the LA Riot. The riot took his grocery store that he ran for more than ten years.

After that, he changed his business to the bakery business. He had started all over again. He woke up at 5am early morning everyday. He worked as hard as he did in his previous jobs. He had owned the bakery for more than ten years.

Soon after ten years he wanted to go to Korea to open an English institute. While he was working, unfortunately, he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He had surgery there and he tried to put all of his energy into recovering his body; as a sort of self-therapy, dieting, exercising, taking supplements, golfing was in his daily routine.

Eventually he got his health back. Amazingly, during his recovery, he worked everyday too. He was born to be a workingman!! In Korea, he was driving kids back and forth from the institute to their home or visa versa.

He never showed signs of laziness. He reminds me of a train that never stops. Whether it's fast or it's slow, it must keep moving. Besides he never looked tired from his work, although he hides his emotions very well.

Several years went by in Korea, but he was missing his children in the states. He wanted to come back to the States. And one day he was in the States as a second immigrant.
Moreover, he had to start all over again in his 70's. He opened a luggage and men's shoes store in down town LA. His passion of life rose up again. He put all of his energy to set up and run the business.

His motto is "When you do things, you can make it happen!" He never sits and cries, "How can I do this or what shall I do?" Once he decided to put his foot into action it was done. He works so diligently and sincerely like always. Where does his strong will power come from? He gives absolute loyalty to his life itself. Yet, he isn't a rich man that he desired to be. But he's still trying with all his might to make his life better.

I still remember, years ago one old Jewish man told him "Jae, you're more durable than the genuine leather!!"

And this is the way I see him as a wife. He is the one who really knows the true quality of life that was given to him. He never wasted certain things in his life, never complained or was depressed. He just lives his everyday life journey silently. And I also think he enjoys the adventurous life journey that he takes upon, sometimes it's very tough. I feel that he practices everyday to better himself for his family, whether the rest of his family members recognized it not, he is doing what he ought to do.

I surely believe that one day he will see that it all has finally come together!!

According to my aunt, he is more superhuman than human, someone who never sits or cries, almost a machine itself rather than a man who operates the machine. Although my uncle's greatest strength that may resemble a superhero might not be power at all, but rather, a very human quality: restraint. I also encounter restraint in my aunt's writing about herself. She, the holy wife, is hidden.
At the end of the film, I asked her several questions,

What does love mean to you?

Love means RESPONSIBILITY. That's ALL. Love is not the feeling, love is really logical.

Have you ever felt an orgasm?

I didn't know it was an orgasm, but now I know, oh it was the orgasm, but too late. I just recognized it too late.

When was it?

It was about my age, maybe forties?

If you can change one thing about him, what would that be?

I want him to change to enjoy his life... in daily bases. For example, he doesn't know what is leisure in spare time. Today, him and I went to buy some merchandise. I intentionally packed a lunch, I put it in the car, and then we went drive about three or four hours, and when we get back, I just stopped in front of a park. It was nice park, I always pass by. So we ate lunch over there. (Laugh) That kind of little thing in daily life... but he doesn't...

In asking these questions, I wanted to challenge the taboo that one shouldn't ask about an older woman's love or sexuality. Despite my aunt's delayed recognition of possible orgasm, her belief in love struck me. Love doesn't mean responsibility; it is something other than responsibility. Love is a feeling. Love isn't logical.
In the end, *My Uncle J’s Exercise* became a film about my aunt. Her speech and actions shed light on her American dream and provided context for the picture of a big home in Beverly Hills that hangs over the kitchen table. Her true dreams are simpler, trivial, even. She wants to go on a picnic but, unlike her husband who enjoys golf everyday, I have never seen her take any time for herself away from home or work.

After I shot this film, I spent many nights and days in my studio. I started to listen to a Korean radio channel on Korean poetry and Western philosophy by Shin Joo Kang. He is a Korean philosopher who wrote many books on Korean poetry, consumerism, philosophy, and most importantly, giving a lot of public lectures on how one should own their life, and how one should freely express their feeling. Through his radio channel, I got to know many Korean poets whom I admire, like Su Young Kim, Young Mi Choi, Dong Seon Hahm and Song Bok Yi. One night I was especially moved by what Shin Joo Kang recited: “Everyday life is a constant transition from feeling to fact and from danger to safety. If art is an attempt to restore real life, then art will proceed in the opposite direction from everyday life, that is from fact to feeling, and safety to danger.”

I perceive myself inhabiting a world turned upside-down, an unreal world in which the “normal” rational order has come undone. Therefore, I feel the need to migrate from fact to feeling, and safety to danger, to bridge the personal to the political.

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Trinh T. Minh-ha, a filmmaker, writer, and literary theorist further argues about travel,

"The travelling self is here both the self that moves physically from one place to another, following 'public routes and beaten tracks' within a mapped movement; and, the self that embarks on an undermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere."

This reminds me of the titles and subtitles of Isabella Bird's travel accounts Korea and Her Neighbours: A Narrative of Travel, with an Account of the Recent Vicissitudes and Present Position of the Country (1898) and Unbeaten Tracks in Japan: The Firsthand Experiences of a British Woman in Outback Japan (1880). Bird suggests the travelling body goes through 'public routes and beaten tracks' in foreign countries. Because travel always requires negotiations between the travelling self, a there, or an elsewhere, travel shapes people, both the travellers and the natives. In the case of Isabella Bird, her travels also impacted the Koreans, challenging not only how we see ourselves within our country, but also how other people see us. People travelled Korea long before Koreans were allowed to travel outside of the country.
The first Korean tourist passport was issued in 1983, but it was limited to people who are older than 50, only who can afford the deposit 2,000,000 won (about 2,000 US dollar based on today’s currency). The freedom of overseas travel actually took place in January 1st, in 1989.

During the 2013 summer vacation I went to Nepal for nine days with my family. The trip was arranged through a Korean travel agency. With the materials and thoughts that I collected during the trip I created a video/installation, Himalaya and Elephant (2013) and Resham Firiri (2013) using re-edited materials that reimagines and reconfigures these observed relationships in order to question the role of the tourist fantasy through the medium of video/installation, to question how body moves, and how image moves. In the book Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writing, edited by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in 1980, she starts her preface with an interview of Jean-Luc Godard that talks about the difference between making a political film and making a film politically, “As Brecht already said, it’s not important to know what are the real things but rather how things are real. The relation is in that reality. An image is nothing. It’s the relationships between the images that matter.”
I reveal the reality of the type of tourism that is often disguised by the smile in the tourists’ photo album. Instead of leaving the people and places as they appear in picturesque postcards, or on Facebook, I wanted to question what’s behind the tourist smile and the desire to travel by tracing the path that I took as a traveler.

My experience in Nepal, reminded me a classic travel book of Clude Lévi-Strauss, *Triste Tropiques: An Anthropological Study of Primitive Societies in Brazil,* published in 1955. Because he starts his book by saying, “Travel and travelers are two things I loathe.” Yet he traveled, and reflected upon paradoxical status of the anthropologist who remains as detached observer, and how writers create unreal stereotypes to fulfil reader’s pretensions and their thirst towards exotic. He writes that people like to read travel books because it presents illusion of a time that no longer exists. Further travel tales highlight differences between people, which have been ruined by what he refers as monoculture:

Amazonia, Africa, and Tibet have invaded all our bookstalls, Travel-books, expeditionary records, and photograph-albums abound; and as they written or compiled with an eye mainly for effect the reader has no means of estimating their value. His critical sense once lulled to sleep, he asks only to be given “more of the same” and ends up devouring it in unlimited quantity.

15 The English translation of his book was not published until 1970. The title in English means The Sad Tropics, but when it translated by John Russell, the title became A World on the Wane.
17 Ibdi. 412ff
18 Ibdi. 37f
19 Ibdi. 17-18
In Nepal, we visited several poor villages that seemed to function as a window for tourists to project their own past, pre-industrialized, post-war memory, to project themselves as being proud about the progress and modernization that has been achieved in a short time. They tried to distinguish themselves by handing out dollars, candies, and notebooks, just as foreign missionaries and military troops have shared their goods, money, and power with Koreans in 1950s and 1960s.

On my second day in Nepal we went to Chitwan National Park, where our tourist group took an elephant ride for a safari tour. That night I secretly left my family, accompanied by a young Nepali guide who was an employee at the resort where we were staying. I was curious about the life of Nepali guide who speaks fluent English, yet he hasn’t been any other country. We set awhile by the river to talk, and he sang me a Nepali folk song, “Resham Firiri,” which I recorded, and later translated it into English.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{My heart is fluttering like silk in the wind} \\
\text{I cannot decide whether to fly or sit on the hilltop} \\
\text{To the dog—it’s puppy, puppy, to the cat—it’s meow meow} \\
\text{Our love is waiting at the crossroads.} \\
\text{One-barrelled gun, two-barrelled gun, targeted at a deer.} \\
\text{It’s not the deer that I am aiming at, but at my beloved.} \\
\text{Aeroplane in the sky, motor on the roads, if not then bullock cart.} \\
\text{If your heart feels the same as mine then come.} \\
\text{The tiny baby calf is in danger at the precipice.} \\
\text{I couldn’t leave it there, let’s go together, my love.}
\end{align*}
\]

20 Author: Nepal, Resham Firiri. 2013. MP3
21 Author’s translation (translated based on five different versions of the existing translation that she found online)
Many people who tried to translate this song into English expressed a loss of meaning and the impossibility to achieve a perfect translation. Walter Benjamin remarked that:

*Just as the tenor and significance of the great works of literature undergo a complete transformation over the centuries, the mother tongue of the translator is transformed as well. While a poet’s words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal.*

I later found out that this song is a very popular folk song in Nepal. I heard it over and over again throughout the trip. At first I liked the idea of folk song as “cultural marker, political pointer, and artistic quest” like Trinh T. Min-ha suggests. Folk songs transform and pass on over time by the people. People sang it while doing everyday work, walking up and down hills, and at festivals. Today it remains firmly rooted in the society.

This love song made me think about the song’s metaphors as they relate to walking, hunting, encounters, distances, modern inventions, and influence in Nepal. This song was once sung by villagers and now has transformed by popularization and internationalization. It is still in the process of transformation and reinterpretation, at times shifting from folk to pop. Once this was a Nepali tradition but the song today has lost some of its meaning in this process, which creates the gap, or develop new meaning.


I think this song strongly represents the phenomena of globalization and digitalization: commodification and transformation of culture triggered by traveling bodies and technology. Perhaps culture is not static, the same way that body and memory aren’t static. The words ‘authentic’ and ‘tradition’ are subject to interpretation.

In my work *Resham Firiri* (2013), I use this folk song as a backdrop, which I once again translated from English to Korean. These two languages have a different sound, look and connotation. I don’t want to create a hierarchy between two languages. Each one is foreign to the other; therefore, in order to have more possibilities to build up the new relationship between the two, I must give them an equal attention. But in reality the dominant language is always getting in the way of the mother tongue.

The mask functions as a mirror; it doesn’t claim to be real, but is the true reflection of illusion. As I was exposed to ideals of beauty, tradition, and femininity, I wanted to play with language and image in order to reveal the gap between reality and the ideal.
memory

You never know what you are going to learn when you travel from one place to another. One thing that can happen when traveling is that you discover shocking information. This shocking information can be something that you never heard or something you had forgotten. Erased memory cannot be translated, but it can be embodied in the body. Susan Bordo, a feminist philosopher, remarked, "The body... is a medium of culture," suggesting that the body becomes the site that reflects the standard determined by ruling ideology. In her book *The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault*, she further explains:

The body is not only a text of culture. It is also... a practical, direct locus of social control. Banally, through table manners and toilet habits, through seemingly trivial routines, rules, and practice, culture is 'made body,'[...] As such it is put 'beyond the grasp of consciousness... by voluntary, deliberate transformation,' our conscious politics, social commitments, strivings for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our bodies.

The body not only remembers the shock of the personal tragedy, but through customary rules and discipline, the body remembers how to behave without conscious recognition. Elaine Scarry, professor of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value at Harvard University, mentions relationship between the body and nation, in her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*:

25 Ibid. 25-26
The nation-state penetrates the deepest layers of consciousness and manifests itself in the body itself [...] The political identity of the body is usually learned unconsciously, effortlessly and very early.26

AA AA

In 2009, I visited the home of my parents' old friends who still live near the abandoned home where my family lived until I was four in Uljin, Korea. My trip was motivated by my effort to erase the memory of a recent break up with the person I loved.

In order to clear my mind I walked from Uljin, the town where I was born, to Ulsan the city where I grew up, to deal with my sadness. The distance between the two places is about 225km (139miles). If I walked about seven to nine hours a day, I thought I could get to Ulsan in a week, with a cleared mind.

When I arrived at the village, the old couple picked me up from the station and took me to their home. There they told me stories until late in the evening. They were stories that I had forgotten, or didn't understand, about my childhood.

They told me of my parents' decision to move to Ulsan after my dad's long period of suffering from mercury poisoning, which he developed when he was a professional welder at the Uljin Nuclear Power Station.

They also told me about my older brother who I had only heard about once from my aunt when I was in third grade.

He died in a car accident when he was five and I was two. Apparently, I was with my mom and brother at the time and we were walking across the street. My mom was holding me and my brother was walking by himself when a car hit him.

The stories about the mercury poisoning and the death of my older brother were shocking. In a way the shocking information pushed me to walk further. My physical limit needed to be pushed to not to forget but also to escape.

I wouldn't have heard those stories if I hadn't taken that walk, because my parents had decided never to talk about these tragic events. Because my parents kept this history to themselves, they were trapped in silent memories and I was deprived of the possibility of helping all of us heal. As a result of hearing about this history, I developed more empathy for my parents. This new understanding enabled me to encourage a friend of mine to focus more on her relationship with her father when he became ill.

This friend was dining with her father, who was visiting from Israel, at a Boston restaurant when suddenly; her father had lost consciousness for several minutes. Thankfully he eventually regained consciousness. Even so, they spent the night at the hospital to test his health and to make sure he had recovered. My friend was worried about missing so many classes due to her father’s illness, but I suggested to her that she prioritise her father over school.

I then felt hypocritical about what I had said. I actually felt emotionally conflicted myself, unable to follow my own suggestion: What kind of friend am I?
Even though I wished I could be more sympathetic to my mother, I couldn't because my mother and I had this emotional gap because of her silence.

One day I watched films that reminded me of my own situation. I watched three films: I, You, He, She (1974), News from Home (1976), and The Meeting of Anna (1978), by Chantal Akerman. All three films moved me. News from Home made me feel very uncomfortable. I felt motivated and at the same time tremendously guilty about something I couldn’t decipher.

News from Home was shot in New York City. The camera is not looking up or down, it is shot from the perspective of city streets, moving cars and subways inhabited by everyday people. Akerman's body is absent, but we hear her voice, when she reads numerous letters from her mother. Only at the end of the film do we see Manhattan as a whole that is disappearing. The camera sits on a ferry moving slowly away from NYC.

I thought I was experiencing the usual self-doubt generated from the writing of my thesis, but in the back of my mind the News from Home kept bothering me. The fact that the film showed social alienation without commenting or criticizing anyone in particular made me question this condition itself. Akerman kept a distance from her mother's letter by reading it in English (not her first language) in a soft-spoken voice without much emotion. Her mother's letter reminded me of my mother who has a similar tone and similar concerns about the economy, health, and the geographical distance between herself and daughter.
In the film, closeness and distance calmly coexist while making me confront the alienation of the human condition, and the nature of migrations through the film’s constant movement.

Reflecting on *News From Home* prompted me to consider what it means to be a filmmaker and a cultural producer in a world where film is mass consumed and heavily influences society. Akerman’s film generated these questions and thoughts without offering any answers or criticism, giving the audience an opportunity to create with their own answers. This reflexively questions the ontology and possibilities of film. Such questions moved me to call my mom to ask her how she was doing.

But my feelings were still left unresolved from what I said to my friend and from Akerman’s film. Even though I was aware of the fact that I was acting like a child, having such uncomfortable feelings about my mom, finding her selfish in her projection her own desires onto me, I couldn’t feel any way to forgive her. For example, after a long argument over the phone about my decision to work at a leftist political cultural space in Seoul, Korea, my mom quipped, “Don’t come back to Korea if you’re going to associate with them!” My mom was afraid that I would end up on the current government’s blacklist, which would create disadvantages for my family’s future and myself.

I wanted to understand her, her desires and fears, accept the way she is, and feel a preciousness of having her in my life, but I didn’t know how. My brain could comprehend the situation but my heart wasn’t moved, and I couldn’t fake it.
When I felt conflicted after telling my friend that her father was the top priority, I watched an interview of Chantal Akerman from 2011. I watched the same interview over and over again. In it she talked about her mother who had been detained at the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Akerman’s mom suffered a lot of trauma as my mother did. While they were different types of trauma, deep suffering is deep suffering. They each decided to never to talk about their situations. Akerman said she couldn’t say no to her mother because she felt the need to protect this person who had suffered so much. After watching the interview, I sent my mom text message saying, “I’M SO SORRY.” I didn’t hear anything back from her.

Akerman spoke about her mother’s migration and silence:

> When I look at my parents, I see that they are very well integrated here. They have strong ties to Belgium. For them, coming here represented an extraordinary opportunity. They don’t have this feeling of exile. In a way, they have made a break with their past. They have found a place here. They have found something more easily than I have. I think that we represent the generation in which the repressed comes back. That’s why we have problems. Instead of asking questions about the past, they had to rebuild their lives. And because they didn’t tell us about that past, because they didn’t pass it down to us, what they did pass down was precisely this sense of uprootedness.

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Ackerman explains how repressed histories are reproduced as an absence, haunting the second and third generations of war or those who have experienced painful personal histories.

Being raised in the third generation after the Korean War, which has seen a state of armistice for the last sixty years, this has also been a part of my own experience. The past is absence that is in my body.

Theresa Hak Kung Cha, Korean-born American artist and writer, who felt the same burden of absence, translated her memory in her book *Dictee*, she wrote: “The decapitated forms. Worn. Marred, recording the missing, the absent. Would-be-said remnant, memory. But the remnant is the whole.”

Whether the traumatic experiences have been denied, or repressed, it is important to remember that the healing of the wound is a collective process that requires time, effort, and care. Not only to heal, but to prevent such traumatic violence from everyday life. One of the ways in which people can avoid the accumulation of illness from the repression is by freely expressing our feelings, but the truth is that it doesn’t happen easily because of other forces.

One of Korea’s bestselling non-fiction writers, and a popular lecturer, Shin Joo Kang, suggests imagining repression as a spring, “If you press the spring, it bounces back. But a problem arises when it doesn’t bounce back immediately. Due to whatever controls the mechanism for bouncing.”

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When the spring doesn’t bounce back, the pressure reaches its apex. If someone does not express their feelings spontaneously to prevent possible disadvantages from stronger people, they may find the weaker who has no power to harm them back. Shin Joo Kang refers this phenomenon as the reincarnation of anger.31

Sometimes there are trauma or repressed emotions expressed through the flesh, as we can see from people who suffer from paralysis of the facial muscles,32 which takes away facial expressiveness, including the ability to smile.33 This study shows how it is important to be able to express our feelings freely. When you are not true to yourself, “you become a puppet of the system to which you belong.”34 Here, Shin Joo Kang argues that one of the ways that we can know if we are living in an authoritarian or totalitarian society is to know how easily we feel free to express our feelings.

Chantal Akerman’s film News From Home caused a massive emotional reaction in me, the same way that Kafka’s writing and Shin Joo Kang’s lecture did. Their works challenge me to think and question how we overcome a sense of uprootedness and where such feelings stem from. How do we overcome oppression? How can we liberate ourselves? One of the reasons a sense of uprootedness is generated in effort to stop the suffering transmitting to next generation. Akerman mentioned:

31 Ibid. 5 May 2014
People of my parents' generation told themselves: we are going to spare them the story of what happened to us. Because they did not transmit their histories, I searched for a false memory, a kind of imaginary, reconstructed memory rather than the truth, as if I had no access to the things that were true. 35

Is Akerman's mother sparing her daughter or herself from her memory? We cover the memories; we select the stories to tell through subjective filter, even before we forget. One of the ways the obstacle produces the absent is, like Chantal Akerman suggests, by "reconstruct[ing] memory," to create new memories that questions the absent. For me, this allows for exploration of the gap between what I heard and buried, and what I remember and what I forget.

When I was five, my family moved temporarily to the countryside, again due to my father's temporary work at Sam-Cheon-Po power plant. We spent a year there. These memories are represented in my claymation video piece, Memory Of The Moving (2011). I tried to give a form to my memory of my family riding on my father's motorcycle together, going out to clean our new house before we moved in.

I wasn't sure about the order of events, the details of the event felt murky, and nevertheless the atmosphere seemed vivid. I thought we moved once, because I only remember two houses that we lived in.

In my mind I was certain we moved from a house with many friends to a house with a big yard. I believed that my memory has a gap, but I wanted to touch it, or shape it before it disappears. So I gave myself an order to form what I can recall with clay—the raw material of a sculptor or Disney animation.

I started with set covered in clay and used only that clay to make the stop motion video. Each scene was captured and reshaped according to my memory. After I completed the animation I called my mom and asked about her memory of the events to fill in the gaps. Apparently we discovered that my memory was incorrect and reconstructed. According to her we moved twice not once. The order of events in my recreation happened in incorrect way. Like experimental psychologist neuroscientist Endel Tulving explains, “memory naturally fluctuates from one retrieval attempt to another” 36

*Memory of the Moving* is about two different memories that were captured from a single event; it is about past and present. We use language as a tool to translate our memory but there is a gap. For me it was not the history that was important but the absence of this history, the gap, and the space in-between represented by the meeting point between the memories of two different people that are now living far away from each other. It is the events themselves that cause the gap. The fact is the gap exists.

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Two memories are projected and standing next to each other in the monitors. By two films having a parallel conversation, one image without sound, the other text and sound without image. It was important for me to emphasise that the gap exist. It is emphasised by juxtaposing one animated visual memory, the other is phone conversation translated in English in black screen, to show the relationship between the two, the text and image, the daughter and mother, and the absent and memory. There is an invisible force that creates the gap, same as the invisible forces that moves people migrate.

Two monitors is placed on a dolly to elevate the fact that the memory is unstable, unstableness that generated from the absence, with an attempt to create new memory that solidarity and love possible. Without realizing the gap in the process of translating to one language to another, from one person to another, the return of the repression, the absence will continually haunt me.
Monuments are stand for glorified moment embodied by heroes. In Korea during Park Jung Hee’s regime, between the 1960s and 1970s, many monuments were erected in public spaces, including on the main streets of cities, in parks, and in historic sites. The public monuments from this era include statues, war memorials, and monuments for historical events. These years represent the core era of post-war Korean history, during which modernization and economic development was achieved.

In the early 1960s, the monuments of Democracy were built in Gwang-Ju to honor the victims of the democratic revolution, celebrating emergence of civil rights. These monuments commemorate the astonishing fact that the Korean people had been freed from the 1945 occupation by Japan. Not long after, in 1948 Korea chose a democratic system and confronted the dictatorship of Lee Sung Man and his regime. Actually, the Republic of Korea is an exceptional case among developing nations. As a result of the Civil Rights revolution, President Lee’s statues were destroyed (1960) and monuments commemorating the Civil Rights movement were erected at Korean University and Seoul National University. This historical event symbolized the power of students and education.

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38 Ibid. 20
Among many monuments, Monument for the Young Man, Victims of the April 19th Revolution (1963) was erected at Suyuri (the northern region of Seoul) in collaboration between students, civilians, and the new government.\(^{39}\) This monument, which was the nation's first major monument, marked the first instance of a nation constructing a massive public monument alluding to a specific point in history. This example shows how the meaning of 'public' changes according to historical and social situations. The reason I am exploring the public monuments is evocation of diversity, adaptation and absence.

Throughout my art practice, I question how to make a sculpture that can invite people to actively explore and experience, how to empower viewer to see themself, and how monuments also can liberate. My previous artistic exploration, including Action Figures (2012), Background (2011), Carry-On Monument (2013) and Washington Hanami (flower viewing) (2012), is investigating these questions.

Action Figures is a sculpture series that I made in my first semester to question the role of monuments in Korean society. This project was specifically informed by one of Korea's postwar industrial monuments, erected in the center of my hometown, Ulsan, in 1967, consisting of geometric arches and realistic statues representing laborers. Their shapes were simultaneously relevant to totalitarian public art and the liberal Western nations' abstract modern art.

\(^{39}\) Ibid. 26
This Ulsan Industrial monument, built by Chil-Sung Park to commemorate Korea’s rapid economic development and industrialization that represents Korea’s ‘bright future’ and the effacement of the reality of modernization.\(^4\) Even though Park was trained as a Socialist Realist sculptor in North Korea, he defected to the South, where he continued his work of producing public monuments.

My sculpture series *Action Figures* was informed this monument. The aesthetic of the monument, which was built under the military regime, cannot be separated from the ruling ideology, and must be read as a reaction against the suppression and mobilization of military authoritarianism.

*Action Figures* are imagined with “action features”: to walk, inhabit, scale, protect, and activate the public spaces around the monuments to suggest new meanings and possibilities for public space that are concealed largely by the dominant structure. I used milk cartons and foil to work with household materials, to remove them from their normal context by giving them an anthropomorphized sculptural form.
milk cartons, foil
photo: ACT Cube, ACT Venus lab
Carry-On Monument is a project that inverts the use and meaning of the pedestal in art and monuments in the public space. The pedestal makes the work seem rare or precious and important. Elevated, undemocratic or authoritarian in connotation, the pedestal celebrates death, the dead, and nationalism. Also, I reconsider the function of the inscription on monuments. The importance of these inscriptions has been acknowledged since the Greek period. These Grecian pedestals identified the subject of the statue, the hero’s achievement, and name of the donor. In my case, the inscriptions are used to indicate a type of living monument, direction, date, and location.

Carry-On Monument is a carry-on suitcase designed to be used as a pedestal in various public spaces such as parks, subway stations, schoolyards, or streets. It is intended to invite people to be a ‘singing’ monument, ‘speaking’ monument, ‘reading’ monument, ‘waiting’ monument, ‘making a wish’ monument, ‘eating’ monument, ‘smiling’ monument, and so on. Unlike the traditional monument, Carry-On Monument is movable, light, flexible, functional, economical, cross-cultural, and reversible (its use and metaphor). Instead of being a permanent pedestal, that elevates a static statue or monument, this piece intervenes in a public space to invite and collaborate with the public to become a temporal living monument. The people who actually activate the monument are those who use the public space, such as singers, protesters, passer-by, sales person, or the homeless.

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Carry-on Eating Monument, 2014.

"THIS CARRY-ON IS DEDICATED TO A PERSON ENGAGED IN AN EXPERIENCE OF THE WORLD"
Washington Hanami (flower viewing) is a surrogate for the Washington Monument during the Cherry Blossom Festival. In Washington Hanami (flower viewing), the monument has been removed from the image. The public’s interaction in this work signifies the neutralization of the original symbolic use of the cherry blossom by Japan as a gift to the United States. For other countries like Korea it was a symbol of occupation. Through the theme of dispersion of both the postcard and cherry blossom, I invite the viewer to engage in the process of stripping down the monument to reveal its skeleton. I left the cherry blossom trees alone on the postcards so that they could circulate in this context from the public’s hand to their loved ones with their personal messages.

These interests are also represented in my video/performance/installation work such as Budae-Jigae (2013), and Sausage Tank (2013), which explore history, memory, and violence, but through the perspective of food and language. In both works, I am using the sausage as a motif to express qualities of everyday life and question how memory is shaped through culture.

Cherry Blossoms, from Washington Hanami (flower viewing), 2012.

postcard, 4x6
Front and Back detail
In my case, I am using the sausage as a war object or instrument since sausages were an important component of canned food imported to Korea from other countries during the War to feed American soldiers. The sausage also has an association with “progress, prestige, success, and the West.” For these reasons, I see the sausage as an object that represents wartime and violence.

Budae-Jjigae was invented during the famine years of the Korean War and post-war period. Koreans managed to use leftover meat discarded or handed-out from the U.S. army bases to make this dish. “Budae” means military base and “Jjigae” means stew in Korean. This stew eventually became a very popular dish. Through the Budae-Jjigae video, I wanted to address a kind of violence that is rooted in the memories of the food, in the act of mixing the leftover meat from the army base with the traditional Korean ingredient Kimchi. Once adapted and borrowed words for the American ingredients now play a huge role in all globalized countries. It is possible to think about industrialized wartime food as a form of colonization or as means of self-colonization.

Under the misery of war, the sausage united different parts of Korea, reshaping daily life among people who previously relied upon traditional ingredients. Sausages and sausage dishes today still continue to evolve in the face of war and new waves of migration. Sausage Tank was created as an extension of Budae-Jigae project.

I also claim that food and cooking is essential to the creation of the political community. Since the sausage is primarily considered as a social process and political symbol, similar to Monument. The difference between these objects is that the sausage stands for the memory of everyday life that is always moving, in contrast to the monument, which in most of the cases stands still as authority or the state created it, as long as the state is still in control.

Despite its symbolic meaning, we take the creation of these dishes and the language that defined them for granted, like many other types of food that have been disseminated during wartime. Here I want to think about different ways to bring out hidden or forgotten meanings of the sausage to the street where we can collectively reconsider the implications of authority and man’s destructive desire for power.
Installation of *Budae-jjigae project*, 2013.
1-channel video installation with sound, color, 9:46 minutes.
posters, photographs, playwood, wheels

Image from *Sausage Tank project*, 2013.
from the series of photographs of sausage tank at public spaces
Sausage tank in this photo is traveling DMZ observatory.
WELCOME

A Commemoration Luncheon to activate the preserved history of the development of canned goods and their relationship to violence.

PRAYER

Father of mercies and giver of good, by whose power were we created? by whose bounty are we sustained? and by whose sprit are we transformed? For thy love’s sake. Amen.

COOK

S. Y. KWON, MISS, TRANSLATION

MENU

A COMMEMORATION LUNCHEON
-SAUSAGE TANK-
1950-6.25~2050-6.25

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APPETIZER
(moving image)
Sausage U.N. Korean

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MAIN
(moving sculpture)
Sausage Tank Demonstration

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SIDE
(possible intervention locations)
MIT Institute for Soldier Nanotechnologies
Washington DC Korean War Memorial
US Army Base Town in Korea
Korean War Museum

Part of the Sausage Tank project, 2013.
For one of the reviews, I made a menu inspired by Navy luncheon menu during WWI.
Army Base Stew

Budae Jjigae was invented during the famine years of the Korean war and post-war period. Koreans managed to use leftover meat discarded or handed-out from the U.S. army bases to make this dish. "Budae" means military base and "Jjigae" means stew in Korean. There is no exact recipe for Budae Jjigae, but popular meats for the stew are Spam, hot dogs, and sausages. This stew eventually became a very popular dish.
Many of my female friends who work in different fields in Korea from my hometown Ulsan are pretty. Regardless of occupation, most have undergone some plastic surgery. Some just have had touch-ups of their eyelids, given as a graduation gift from their parents; other have had more than two or three surgeries, or have had them redone. This seems to have become a common global phenomenon of obsession, with a certain self-image influenced by popular culture and celebrity.

One day when we were together, one of my friends suggested that her child would be perfect if she later get a nose job. I was shocked. What is the role of plastic surgery? What is the political mechanism behind all of this? Where is the image of the ideal Korean woman coming from?

The first Korean national beauty contest was held in 1957 and has continued ever since. But the contests’ effort to identify a pure, natural, and unadorned beauty of Korea is being compromised by fantasies for plastic surgery and media production, which made twenty finalists for Miss Korea 2013 all look the same. The imposed image of twenty finalists reveals how the majority of Korean women are trying to change their looks to meet a single standard.

They all have similarly big Western eyes, like those often seen in Japanese Manga or the Barbie doll that I once played with. They are exaggerated versions of Westernized, cutified, enlarged, sexualized, and depicted images of desirable women’s eyes.

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They are seen as flesh to be on display in the beauty contest. This phenomenon demonstrates how Korean women are expected to have a certain look in order to be considered beautiful. In current Korean women’s beauty magazines, more than one-tenth of the pages are plastic surgery advertisements (if you consider actresses or models who have undergone plastic surgery as advertisements for plastic surgery, the number gets greater). I’m invited into the world of plastic surgery filled with success stories, where I’m forced to look and compare the successful versions of before and after images of women.

When Miss Koreas are nominated, they are famous for always thanking beauty salon director Won-Jang, the person responsible for beautifying the contestants. Won-Jang benefits the most from these competitions, as well as beauty, clothing, resort companies who sponsor the event. At the end, nominated contestants are expected to represent Korea in other countries and participate in multicultural/universal beauty contests to represent the beauty of Korea. Recently broadcasted Korean soap opera “Miss Korea,” about making the pageant in the early 1990s, shows that the protagonist hesitate to get free plastic surgery by being an experiment.

“Who will you marry if you can only choose between handsome but poor or ugly but rich?” This type of question asked of potential representatives of Korea implies that all contestants are going to marry, and that the value of a husband is measured by whether there are either rich (ugly) or handsome (poor).

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"Who will you marry if you can only choose between handsome but poor or ugly but rich?"
Korean woman are not only, of comfort, but a toy or doll that has to be shaped in a certain way to be comforting.

Now the pressure to conform to an ideal is not only felt by Korean beauty contestants. Even though it is an established fact that South Korea has one of, if not the highest, rate of plastic surgery per capita in the entire world. We are in an age where plastic surgery is a common expectation of a certain standard of sexuality of women all over the world. And based on this, there is no denying that women are always going to be the subject of sexual attraction.

Korea itself the empire of plastic surgery, especially the beauty district of 'Gang-Nam' that attracts many foreign women travellers who wants to “catch both rabbits,” a Korean metaphor for Killing two birds with one stone: having the experience of sight seeing and having faces that are worth sight seeing. It’s exploitative and it furthers the commodification of women, moves to a consumer society under capitalism. Women are becoming more and more a consumer product.

In the book Way of Seeing, John Berger demonstrates that sight is a reconstruction just as plastic surgery made possible to reconstruct the appearance to match the ideal beauty:


48 In 2014, May 17, Korean singer Psy's 'Gang-Nam Style' marked the record of most watched video in YouTube. The song 'Gang-Nam Style' refers to the lifestyle of Gang-Nam district of Seoul.
a sight which has been re-created or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved—for a few moments or a few centuries. Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look as a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other sights.49

These obsessions and behavior towards plastic surgery show how the subjugation of women has continued even though we have brought in the idea of beauty contest. Why do we need to see semi naked women in order to say that she is the most beautiful woman? Why do we need to celebrate the idea that her nudity is something that needs to be celebrated, or needs to be recognized as superior to something else? Why Korean women are trying to look more like “Westerners,” looks are perhaps also attractive to a Western audience, as they are trying to be beautiful to international eyes. What we are seeing in beauty contestants presented as, then, are Westernization when in fact it’s actually the exact opposite what Westernization ought to be, the accepting of individual subject.

In *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Michel Foucault proves that even the fundamental human need such as sexuality is socially constructed:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledge, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.  

I'm following Foucault's point that the body is not only a text of culture but also a practical and direct locus of social control. In Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (1982) the female body is represented as a sign of an oppressed colonized body, especially, one from the third world. In order to show the rules and signs of imperialists controlling colonial subjects, Cha exaggerates a female body, which tries to correct movements of her tongue and body that already shaped by her native language. She writes:

*She mimics the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all). Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking gestures with the mouth.*  

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I'm interested in how Cha creates a multiplicity of narratives in time, space and memory through structural reconfigurations of language and translation. She treats text as images and images as text.

Until the mid 20th century, the majority of Korean women had little social agency. For example, before Korea opened its doors under the pressure of imperialist power in 1876, women from age 6 until the day of their arranged marriage ceremony were often kept away from public view, living their lives in a women's apartment, without any freedom or education. Even after they were married, there were seven reasons that husbands could return their wives to their parents, like a defective product: for not producing a male child; incurable disease; theft; jealousy towards a husband’s love affair; infidelity; incompatibility with her parents-in-law; and a quarrelsome disposition.

After the Japanese occupation (1910-1945) and the post-war effort to modernize Korea, the plight of women did not improve. Despite those changes, the fact is women were forced into the work force because of the economic necessity to better their situation. Even today, in current Korean soap operas, women are depicted as hysterical.

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For the majority of women, the war brought not only dislocation of their lives, but deeper poverty, and disruption. Based on extreme cases there was a lack of social agency due to the combined spirit of patriotism, militarism, and Confucianism, even further intensified by the wartime condition. Since the Japanese occupation, many women were forced to work in a men-oriented war zone to comfort them. Afterwards the level of comfort was transferred to the semi-secluded public space near American Army bases under the guidance of the Korean military regime.

The Kisaeng (Korean courtesans) culture, female entertainers—poets, musicians, and dancers, trained from an early age in the performing arts were turned into commodities by the Japanese. Soon they were regarded as untouchables, prostitutes to serve male authority. According to the writer and broadcaster Gloria Chang: “They were part of a polluted class and yet practiced the most refined of the arts, which provided the basis of Korean arts and culture.” In the process of objectifying these women, the Japanese degraded their artistic rituals and trained them to become courtesans for their own profit. They also used them to construct a certain view of Korea women as exotic, sensual, passive, and subservient, with an intention to identify image of Korea as women, and women as courtesans.

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In 1900, the Japanese occupiers planned to export ten of the most beautiful Kisaengs to represent Korea at the Paris Exposition, to display in the Korean village area along with the local products. But the plan was cancelled due to the sudden death of the person in charge, and lack of a shipping budget.\textsuperscript{59}

Image taken from the performance that I'm currently developing

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. 156
an image of runaway daughter comes to acquire such modern aspirations.
conclusion

In this thesis I document the path I took during the past four semesters through five themes, such as migration 1&2, memory, monument, and image, informed by my identity as a Korean woman immigrant. Aside from my theoretical work, these themes are explored in various media such as performance, video, essay film, objects and installation.

In 2012, I created a character that I have defined as the “honest clown.” As an artist, I wasn’t interested in the image of the clown but rather the role of the clown in my imagination, which expressed the characteristics of the jester, the buffoon, the hobo, and the Shakespearean fool. I imagined the honest clown to be a mystical character, not subject to social structures like class and gender, but a character that questions how these social structures are imposed, created, and changed. The honesty of the honest clown evolved from the kindness and humility of the traditional jester. Like the court jester, honest clown wishes to allow the audience to see themselves and tries to restore the agency of identity and release the being imprisoned beneath the skin. If we examine the family tree of the honest clown, we encounter musicians, actors, acrobats, poets, dwarfs, tricksters, and madmen.
Installation view of the *Honest Clown* exhibition, 2012.
Honest Clown Poster, Bent Wall, Happy Hour, and Fool's attachment.
Art Center College of Design, Fine Art Gallery, Pasadena, CA.

Bent Wall: styrofoam, pins. 22ftx8ftx1/2ft
Fool's attachment: plunger, bent wood
Happy Hour: 60:00 min video, single channel, color, sound
In the *miss translation* project that I started to develop in 2014, my interest in the honest clown character remains the same. I created a character who plays the role of the woman spiritual traveller. Unlike the image of a perfect woman, my ideal woman is a woman who challenges our perception of the perfect woman. She is a temporal figure. Her image can shift based on the circumstances of time and space. She wants to explore the metaphorical properties of objects beyond their social and economic value. Her honesty and humor is connected artistically in her genealogy. I want to channel my roots and motivation of artistic energy through miss translation.

My ideal woman is traveling through her utopia. She reproduces her reality as magical fiction. She imitates the stereotypes of women, immigrants, and Koreans that are in karaoke videos, soap operas, advertisements, news, films, and literature, and she surprises her audience with tricks that make fun of the distinctions between these socially and institutionally defined categories, intentionally emphasizing the vulgar and comical.

My work also consists of existing characters. At first glance these characters look like stereotypes of a student, soldier, action figure, courtesan, and tourist. However, when you stare long enough, you notice that these stereotypes express or disguise their emotions. I'm not interested in creating a comedy but by playing with such constraints of reality, I'm using humor to strip down the masks of these characters that society has imposed on them.
This scene is part of the erasing of seven words of Korean moral (fidelity, service, diligence, truthfulness, faithfulness, and justice)
In a conversation with Jean-Luc Godard, Chantal Akerman describes how one can escape one's unbearable personal history through humor. As Akerman says:

*The jokes are part of the same thing, like a return of the repressed. The jokes were told because life was unbearable. It was a way of denying what happened through mockery, keeping it at a distance by making fun of it. When history becomes unbearable, you stage your own misery and laugh at it.*

During the last two-year process, I was exposed to questions, confrontations I might not have experienced if I hadn't taken this journey. These two years of my journey represent personal research as well as the ability to find the political, sociological, theoretical, historical, as well as scientific context. As a result, I have gained understanding of my identity, which had eluded me because of a haunting gap.

Going through this process, I find myself beginning a new investigation of a smile, not my smile but the smile of another person. One photo that I stumbled upon recently shows the Safety Administration Minister of South Korea at a police university graduation, smiling, two hours after a ferry—ironically named "Time"—started to sink with about 300 Korean high school students aboard. Now all of those children are gone—absent from sight. My role as an artist and a person is to bring these kind of tragic absences back to life.

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Everyday life is a constant transition from feeling to fact and from danger to safety. If art is an attempt to restore real life, then art will proceed in the opposite direction from everyday life, that is from fact to feeling, and safety to danger.

- Song Bok Yi

(Your Suffering Cannot Even Make A Leaf Greener)