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Art as a Political Act: Expression of Cultural Identity, Self-Identity, and Gender by Suk Nam Yun and Yong Soon Min

HWA YOUNG CHOI CARUSO

Introduction

A number of artists of color, including Asian American women, are creating art from the basis of their lived experiences. Within minority groups searching for their cultural identity, establishing self-identity is an important process. For various psychological and sociological reasons, artists seem inspired to seek deeper meaning and a broader participation in cultural work.¹ Asian American women artists, in particular, are currently making art as a means of exploring self-identity, cultural identity, and gender issues. Korean/Korean American minority women artists are creating art as a reaction to their cultural upbringing, which questions issues of identity, gender, ethnicity, politics, cultural, and socioeconomic status. These contemporary artists are breaking away from traditional cultural expectations and overcoming social barriers as artists, women, and Koreans/Korean Americans. With the growing public awareness of women's consciousness and sense of self as women in Korea and as an ethnic minority in America, these artists are redefining their identity. Despite the traditional patriarchal Confucian hierarchy; lack of social, institutional, and political support; and stereotypic gender, cultural, and socioeconomic status expectations for women, a few have stepped out of their traditional roles as women and have become successful artists in Korea and America.

The artworks of these artists are worthy of investigation because they appear to be a culturally, socially, and politically motivated artistic expression of the complex multifaceted Korean/Korean American life experiences as women and as Korean immigrant members of a cultural (ethnic) minority in American society. Therefore, two main research questions can be posed:

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- Given that art can be constructed out of layers of different experiences and influences, to what extent do the dimensions of cultural identity, self-identity, and gender interweave and contribute to the function of art as a political act for Korean/Korean American women artists?
- How do Korean/Korean American cultural, social, and female experiences influence the artistic expression of Korean/Korean American women artists?

In order to answer these questions, I selected case study methodology² and adapted elements of interpretive biography,³ and narrative approaches as developed by Wallace and Gruber.⁴ According to Denzin,⁵ interpretive biography involves the collection and analysis of personal experiences, life documents, stories, accounts, and narratives that describe turning-point moments in individuals' lives. Denzin argues that personal experiences and personal stories are derived from a larger cultural, ideological, and historical context. The intent of the biographical project is to problematize the social, economic, cultural, structural, and historical forces that shape, distort, and otherwise alter lived experiences.

By using narrative case study methods, I explore elements of self-identity formation, cultural identity, gender issues, personal thoughts, artistic expression, meaning of artworks, professional achievement, and life circumstances. I examine each participant's life in the Korean and American historical, cultural, social, and political environments. I interpret participants' outer lives (what they do) and inner lives (feelings, thoughts, inner self) to capture their deep, profound life experiences. I examine salient themes of their art expression and how the role of art and artistic activity is a part of political, cultural, social, and feminist activism. I further investigate their professional activities in order to identify the multiple roles that contribute to personal and professional identity formation.

For the purpose of this study, I selected the contemporary Korean woman artist Suk Nam Yun and the contemporary Korean American woman artist Yong Soon Min as primary participants. These two women artists, despite many social and cultural barriers, chose to become artists; feminists; and social, cultural, and political activists; in addition to fulfilling traditional Korean family and domestic roles. Yun and Min are regarded as the leading contemporary Korean/Korean American women artists whose artworks deal with issues of cultural, social, feminist, political, and hybrid identity and art as political activism.

Lippard acknowledges that visual images play an increasingly important role in society.⁶ Art that connects everyday experience with social critique and creative expression becomes a vital means of reflecting upon the nature of society and social existence.⁷ Artworks can function as a sign of resistance to colonialism and all forms of oppression, including traditional Confucianism. Such art serves as a reservoir of unofficial knowledge, a

critique of history and culture, and an affirmation of life. These artworks are understood as both a product of history and potential agent of social transformation.⁸ To understand issues of identity, gender, ethnicity, politics, culture, and socioeconomic status expressed in the artworks of contemporary Korean/Korean American women artists in general, it is important to study Korean cultural identity. This involves the process of understanding one's past and the beliefs and values that constitute cultural history.

Confucian Cultural Heritage

According to the Korean/Korean American scholars Kwang-kyu Lee, Ai Ra Kim, Byong-ik Koh, Pyong-gap Min, H. Jo Moon, and Young In Song and Ailee Moon, the Confucian cultural heritage is deeply rooted and saturated in the daily lives of Koreans.⁹ It provides political, social, and cultural meanings and functions in contemporary South Korea. Confucianism forms the core of Korean culture, and it is a moral force with political power and social influence.¹⁰ The Korean moral fabric, woven together by family, school, and government, has a cohesive structure of Confucian ethics, which affects the vertical and horizontal relationships in the social network.¹¹

In order to understand the roles, status, and social positions of Korean women, one must examine Confucianism, which is the basis of Korean traditional cultural values and beliefs that have greatly impacted the life experiences of Korean women in family and society. The Confucian heritage in South Korean society has contributed to family cohesiveness, educational excellence, and social harmony, yet it has also perpetuated authoritarian, factional, and male-oriented ideas and practices.¹² The most important elements of the Confucian philosophy concern male superiority and the social position of women in society and in the family.¹³ The social position of Korean men under traditional Confucianism is one of being superior to women. Social and political participation and institutional support for Korean women were limited under traditional Confucian practice.¹⁴ According to Ai Ra Kim, traditional roles for Korean women consisted of reproduction, care taking, nurturing, and home making.¹⁵ Kim states that the self is a natural emergent of social experiences, and traditional Korean women developed selfless self-images (self-identity).¹⁶ In Korean society, women are honored for their dedication and self-sacrifice by raising children and serving the family.¹⁷ Self-sacrifice and marriage were the primary means of survival for women in traditional Korean society. Consequently a Korean woman could not separate her existence and self-identity from her spouse. She developed collective identities with her husband and his family.¹⁸

The influence of the Confucian values on South Koreans has weakened during the last three decades because of the influx of Western culture, rapid industrialization, and modernization.¹⁹ According to Young-Hee Shim, the

rapid growth of the Korean economy over the last thirty years caused serious consequences for traditional values. The exploding economy affected the exterior and material aspects of life as well as the status of South Korean women. In contemporary South Korean society, many women are better educated and more capable of participating in socioeconomic activities because of modernization.²⁰ The rapid economic growth influenced and enhanced the consciousness of women and their sense of self-identity while conflicting with traditional values and social attitudes toward gender inequality, especially in the workplace. From the feminist perspective, Shim sees most Korean women continuing to struggle for status and gender equality in the workplace and at home.²¹

Lee states that the process of modernization in South Korea affected and modified all aspects of the social structure and behavioral patterns associated with Korean family life.²² Michael Robinson argues that despite changes in the traditional values in South Korean society, Confucianism remains deeply ingrained in the daily life of Korean people, but in an altered form.²³ Confucianism still serves as a guiding principle that shapes and governs Korean beliefs, values, social interactions, family systems, and the cultural lives of many Koreans, as well as Korean immigrants in America.²⁴ Shim²⁵ and Song and Moon,²⁶ however, insist that more changes are necessary to develop gender awareness and equity that will improve the lives of South Korean and Korean American women.

Korean Immigrants in America

In America, Korean immigrants face different definitions of family values, beliefs, and ideals. These definitions emphasize individualism and egalitarianism.²⁷ Korean immigrants, who bring their traditional cultural values to the United States, encounter conflicts in their family relations and daily lives as they try to adhere to their beliefs in the traditional Korean authoritarian and male-dominated values.²⁸ Pyong-gap Min²⁹ and H. Jo Moon³⁰ argued that, even in America, many Korean immigrants are still influenced by Confucianism while adjusting to their new life. The most significant change they face is the enhanced role and status of Korean women and their participation in the workforce.

In this new environment, Korean immigrants experience fundamental changes and must make adjustments to life in America. According to Kye Young Park, Korean immigrant culture making is based on the Diaspora experience and the social status of being considered a racial minority. Park states that Korean immigrants see culture making in terms of grafting. Their construction of cultural identity involves struggle, confusion, contradiction, and transformation in a heterogeneous and dynamic process.³¹ Many Korean immigrants who were raised in the ethnically and culturally homogeneous

Korean society had to adjust to life as minorities in the American multicultural society.³² During that process, Korean immigrants in America develop an immigrant racial ideology. Through the life experiences of confronting language barriers and cultural differences as a racial minority, they modify their Korean ethnic concepts and create new identities, cultural forms, and adopted ideologies.³³

Inn Sook Lee argues that Korean immigrants experience major changes in their lives in the process of making adjustments and transitions in America.³⁴ In that process, Korean immigrants reconstruct and reshape their sense of self-identity in America. According to Stella Ting-Toomey, for immigrants, identity change is an inevitable gradual transformation process.³⁵ She described the formation of cultural identity and how this cultural identity, in turn, impacts personal identity. Personal identities are acquired and developed within a larger web of our culture. The term identity is used as the reflective self-conception or self-image that we each desire from our cultural, ethnic, and gender socialization process. Individuals develop distinctive personal identities because of unique life histories, experiences, and personality traits.

Phinney explains that how individuals deal with their ethnicity has important implications for their self-identity.³⁶ Phinney³⁷ argues that an achieved ethnic identity contributes positively to self-esteem, which is a critical feature of the self-identity formation of ethnic minorities, and this impacts their life adjustment. Ethnic identity refers to one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one's thinking, perception, feelings, and behavior that is a result of ethnic group membership.³⁸ The person feels self-identification as a member of group, a sense of shared attitudes and values, and specific ethnic traditions and practices such as language, behavior, and customs.

The Role of Art

According to Park,³⁹ Korean and Korean American culture is very important to Korean immigrants because it represents their economic and political power as a racial minority in the United States. Hence, culture becomes a weapon to help attain self-esteem and empowerment. Lippard argues that within minority groups, searching for cultural identity and self-identity is an ongoing process, and art making helps them to connect to their identities.⁴⁰ Minority artists allow forbidden and forgotten images to surface, reinforcing aspects of identity that provide pride and self-esteem. Lippard states that art has social and aesthetic meanings and it enables artists to see the larger meaning of their life experiences.

Estella Lauter argues that art is related to social context.⁴¹ Art can reveal important aspects of women's thought and their life experiences. Art allows

people to reconnect aesthetic values with political activity. Art is assumed to reflect and interact with the values of a particular culture, which in turn interacts with others in weblike relation.⁴² Griselda Pollock argues that art is one of the social practices through which particular views of the world are constructed, reproduced, and even redefined.⁴³ Feminist artists speak about the hidden aspects of women's lives and their life experiences as women.⁴⁴ In art practice, women can engage in their artwork to expose ideological constructions by questioning the traditional cultural values and practice that constitute the discourse of a social system and its political, economical, legal, and educational power.⁴⁵ In the case of many women artists of color, feminism has grown within the contexts of racial or political work and is often inseparable from or absorbed by these contexts. Lippard asserts that hybrid experiences can become a significant aesthetic factor.⁴⁶ Lippard further argues that making art is not simply expressing for oneself but is a far broader and important task that involves expressing oneself as a member of a larger unity or community. So that in speaking for oneself, one is also speaking for those who cannot speak. Patricia Hill Collins states that by speaking out, formerly victimized individuals not only reclaim their humanity they simultaneously empower themselves by giving new meaning to their own particular experiences.⁴⁷ Collins argues that consciousness raising emerges as central to "the personal is political" because, through it, individual women learn to see their lives in political terms.⁴⁸ Lippard states that artists can't change the world alone, nor can anyone else, but art is a powerful and potential subversive tool of consciousness. She argues, "the political is personal."⁴⁹ According to Martha Nussbaum, the arts play a vital role, cultivating powers of imagination that are essential to citizenship.⁵⁰ The arts cultivate capacities of judgment and sensitivity that can and should be expressed in the choices a citizen makes. She believes to some extent that all the arts have a role in shaping our understanding of the people around us.

Howard Gruber argues that art should, above all things, mobilize people for struggle.⁵¹ To unmask prejudice and secure justice, we need argument, an essential tool of civic freedom. Maxine Greene states that a concept of freedom is associated with the power to act and to choose the capacity to become different.⁵² The principles of equity, equality, and freedom, for her, mean using imagination, tapping the learner's courage to transform. Greene insists that the process of coping with diversity and striving toward significant inclusion is derived to a large degree from an awareness of the savagery, the brutal marginalizations, the structured silences, and the imposed invisibility to the present.⁵³ Marginalization can destroy a community by excluding and demeaning large numbers of the population. Greene argues that the arts can awaken us to alternative possibilities of existing, of being human, of relating to others, and of being other. She calls for inclusion, pluralism, different voices, and democracy.⁵⁴

According to Danto, art is political in consequence, even if politics should not be its immediate content.⁵⁵ The power of art is the power of rhetoric, and rhetoric, aimed at the modification of attitude and belief, can never be innocent.

Elliot Eisner acknowledges that works of arts are a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture.⁵⁶ Eisner also states that art provides the conditions for awakening people to the world around them. In this sense, the arts provide a way of knowing. The arts help people to notice and understand a particular environment and their place in it. The imaginative image functions as a template by which people recognize their perception of the world. The arts provide a platform for seeing things in ways other than they are normally seen. It is one of the reasons the arts are regarded as subversive.

With the growing public awareness in Korea and America about the issues of identity, gender, and the power of women, artworks that deal with political and social statements are receiving greater attention from critical writers. These issues are reflected in important art magazines such as *Wolgan Misool*, *Art in America*, and *Art AsiaPacific* in Korea and America. Women's art is recognized as a vital and important part of contemporary art and political expression in Korea and America. It can be inferred that artists have the capacity to improve and transform society by expressing their critical vision and voices through art as a political act. In the following section, I explore these issues with an analysis of two Korean/Korean American women artists and their artworks.

The Art of Suk Nam Yun

Suk Nam Yun is a founding member of the Korean feminist art movement and a leading female artist in Korea. Through her artistic expression, she raises questions about feminist issues and Korean traditional cultural practices. Yun was born in Manchuria (China) in 1939, and her family returned to Korea when she was six years old. She currently lives in Seoul, South Korea. Yun studied English literature at SungKyunKwan University in Seoul and received art training in Korea and America, studying at the Pratt Institute Graphic Center and Art Students League in New York City. Her major medium is mixed media installation. One unusual aspect of Yun's life is that she began her career as a professional artist at age forty when many other Korean women are resigned to family tasks. Yun decided to become an artist to discover a sense of self and to reconstruct her identity. Yun as an artist dedicated her life to reaching the goal of gender equity and helping to transform social and cultural practices. She is fighting against a definition of Korean women as self-sacrificing and those who live for others while

losing their sense of self. These traditional values, which are based on a Confucianism patriarchal structure, are taught and reinforced by Korean cultural beliefs, social practice, and institutions. Yun is passionate about the amplification of her feminist and political voice and its meaning through art expression.

Mother's Eyes Series

In 1993, Yun had a solo exhibition titled *Mother's Eyes* at the Kumho Art Museum in Seoul, Korea. Her subjects often deal with the life of her mother and Yun's thoughts as a woman, daughter, and mother. Yun expressed respect, compassion, and deep love for her mother, a widow, who worked hard to raise six children after the death of her husband at age thirty-nine. In the artwork titled *Mother* (1996), which was exhibited in the 1996 Venice Biennale (Italy), Yun arranged 100 burning candles to represent the sacrifices and services Korean mothers make for others. Yun tried to give respect to the family roles of Korean women, which are often taken for granted. In traditional Korean culture, the mother is expected to sacrifice herself for the family while maintaining an ambivalent position between her son and daughter. Mothers tend to favor a son over a daughter in the traditional Confucian patriarchal society. Simultaneously a Korean mother as a woman is oppressed and suppressed by the same social construction she supports. This is a contradictory practice in Korean culture. In Yun's installation titled *Wishing for Son* (1993), she expressed important social and cultural issues including gender discrimination whereby sons are favored over daughters. Even though it is the twenty-first century, many Korean women are still under pressure to have sons in order to continue the family name and bloodline.

In her installation *Genealogy* (1993), Yun incorporated and emphasized the family registration book (*Jokbo* in Korean), one of the symbols of Korean male-centered culture and the patriarchal society. Yun argued that a Korean woman's space (role and status) in society does not exist, and she expressed the suicidal state of a woman's mind and criticized traditional Korean patriarchal cultural practices. Yun expressed the frustration of a Korean woman who could not continue the family line because she could not have a baby and, more importantly, a son. In this situation, the husband often takes a concubine to have a son. The husband cannot register the second wife's name (identity) with honor as a member of his family until he divorces the first wife, even though the second wife produced a son to continue his bloodline and family name. The son from the second wife (illegal spouse) is placed in the family book. In *Genealogy*, the seated woman represents the secure position in the family book as dictated by the Confucian social order. The other woman, who could not provide a son and was subjected to family pressures and traditional Confucian beliefs, hangs herself. Through this work, Yun criticized the powerless position of Korean women living under the Confucian patriarchal family structure.

In her mixed media installation, Yun uses materials such as natural wood that come from scrap pieces of rough logs. She paints images of Korean women on the wood using acrylics in colors such as lime green, blue, pink, and black. The patterns that she paints are based on traditional Korean fabrics such as silken cloth and *Okyangmok* (cotton fabric) to represent women who are dressed in *Hanbok* (Korean female dress). She incorporates Korean cultural motifs and patterns in her artworks to convey the representational image and narrative meaning that deliver her feminist political voice.

Pink Room Series

Yun created a series of artworks that dealt with women in the home environment. The series included chairs and sofas to convey the cultural identity and feminist issues of contemporary Korean women in a materialistic society. This society emphasizes a shallow life style, which focuses on possessions, beauty, external appearance, and the loss of self-identity rather than self-worth and gender equity. In the *Pink Room* series, Yun criticizes the uprooted, mindless empty life style of contemporary Korean women who desire material objects while lacking a sense of self-worth and self-identity. In this series, Yun re-creates a home environment such as the kitchen, the living room, and the bedroom, which represent female spaces that make her subjects grapple seriously with their identity. Yun creates multiple layers of hidden meanings in those spaces using various objects, such as chairs, shining beads, and pink-colored walls. The *Pink Room* (1997) often changes to a disturbing and aggressive place and represents the unstable energy of hysteria and derangement emanating from these pink domestic spaces. The *Pink Room* represents the social status limitations and the working places of Korean women, which are limited to private and domestic spaces.

Despite the pretty appearance of the traditional pink silk fabric on the chairs and sofas, which reminds the viewer of a cozy domestic space, Yun's installations contain an aggressive message concerned with psychological tension and instability. There is a collision of Korean traditional living space with contemporary Korean life styles for people who are experiencing rapid economic development, a materialistic society, and Westernization. Yun expressed her concern and criticism about the problems of women's identity in contemporary materialistic society, and emphasized the importance of an individual looking into the self and developing self-identity and self-worth.

One of the salient elements in her artworks is the use of sharp iron spikes incorporated within chairs and sofas. The steel legs fitted on the chairs appear stable, but their knifelike appearance expresses the fierceness of women in form and material. By upholstering chairs and sofas with a pink fabric

and fitting them with steel legs, Yun turns them into personifications of women. The chair legs are related to *Eunjangdo*, which were the small knives that Korean women carried for self-defense during the Choson (Yi) dynasty (1392-1910). The sharp iron spikes were stuck into the seats of the chairs and sofas so no one could sit on them. The spikes suggest one cannot take the roles of women for granted like an empty seat.

Through her art, Yun raised the social, cultural, and feminist consciousness of the viewers and spoke out for many other Korean women who could not speak for themselves. Yun has a passion for, and a dedication to, the social and cultural transformation of the roles and status of Korean women in society. She has strong convictions and a positive belief that she can make a difference in the lives of Korean women. For Yun, art has become a form of feminist political cultural activism. She empowers herself and others by raising awareness about sociocultural ideological identity, class, and gender issues affecting Korean women. Yun has emerged as South Korea's leading feminist artist, gaining national recognition by speaking out about her beliefs and sharing her political feminist statements through artistic expression. Her cultural, feminist works and artistic achievements are highly valued and recognized by the South Korean government and the professional artist's community in Korea. In 1996, Yun received the Eighth Joong-Sup Lee Award. She was the first woman to receive the highest honor for a South Korean artist. In 1997, Yun received The Prime Minister's Award for her contributions to the Korean women's movement.

Yun's artworks have been exhibited nationally and internationally at the Gwangju Biennale 2000 (Korea), 12th Sydney Biennale (Australia), National Museum of Modern Art (Tokyo, Japan), Venice Biennale (Italy), Asia Society Museum (NYC, USA), Art Museum of Beijing (China), Ho-Am Museum (Korea), Vancouver Art Gallery (Canada), and Gallery Velan (Torino, Italy). Her works are in the permanent collections of the National Museum of Contemporary Art (Kwachun, Korea), Queensland Art Gallery (Australia), Fukuoka Art Museum (Japan), Mie Prefecture Museum (Japan), Taipei Fine Art Museum (Taiwan), and the Kumho Museum (Korea).

The Art of Yong Soon Min

Yong Soon Min was born in 1953 in South Korea and immigrated to America at the age of seven. Min completed her B.A., M.A., and M.F.A. at the University of California, Berkeley, and continued developing experimental, mixed media installations. She is a leading Korean American artist and currently lives in Los Angeles, California. Min is a professor of studio art at the University of California, Irvine. Her artworks focus on her straddling life experiences and their impact on her identity formation and artistic expression as a Korean immigrant in America. Min's artworks are about her

complex life experiences and her political views about social, cultural, and historical events in Korea and America. Through art expression, Min reconnects her Korean cultural roots and learns about her self-identity as a Korean American.

Ritual Labor of a Mechanical Bride

In 1993, Min participated in the exhibition *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art* at the Queens Museum of America in New York. Min's installation titled *Ritual Labor of a Mechanical Bride* was a life-size re-creation of an *inhyong* (doll), which is the lifelike replica of a traditional Korean bride. A doll bride stands on a carpet smartly inscribed with wifely sentiments "Welcome/please walk step by step all over me/now as always/I am your humble and obedient servant/your comfort girl/your faithful daughter."⁵⁷ Once the viewer steps on the carpet, the elaborately dressed figure is supposed to bow and an audiotape voice whispers, "where is my demilitarized desire, where is my decolonized body politic?"⁵⁸ By using a traditional Korean bridal dress and words such as "Please walk step by step all over me" on the carpet, Min exposes the traditional social status and roles of Korean women as powerless in society and subjugated in Korean history. In addition, Min, as a Korean American woman, looks beyond gender to suggest how it becomes entangled with issues of race. By using English as the language of entreaty and seduction for her mechanical Korean bride, Min directs her critique at the Western, male gaze, under whom Asian women have been historically constructed as passive, exotic objects of desire.⁵⁹

In another 1993 exhibition, which dealt with identity issues of Korean women, Min created an installation titled *Dwelling*. In this artwork, a Korean woman's identity is symbolized by the elegant Korean traditional dress that floated down from the ceiling of the gallery. Clothing and fabric carried feminist, cultural, and political messages. Min used a lightbulb inside of the dress, exposing its visible skeleton composed of twigs and scraps of photographs. Below the dress is a pedestal of white-jacketed books. Min exposes the issues of Korean/Korean American identity, the complexities of living in another culture as an uprooted immigrant, and addresses the secondary status of Korean women. This artwork is a form of historical understanding that is important in making sense of her self-identity, Korean cultural identity, her self-images as a Korean American woman. This Korean dress symbolizes the strong identification with the Korean female and her subjectivity.

Defining Moments

In 1992, in an installation composed of a six-part black-and-white photo ensemble titled *Defining Moments*, Min connected crucial events in Korean history to important dates in her life. According to Elaine H. Kim and Lilia

Villanueva, Gary Hesse, and Min's statement, the four dates written on Min's nude torso in her photographic installation have significant meaning.⁶⁰ One was July 1953, the year of Min's birth and the end of the Korean War. The second date was 19 April 1960, when Min witnessed the Korean Student Revolution in Seoul as a child. The third date was May 1980, the time of the Gwangju Massacre in Korea, another event that marked the awakening of Min's own political consciousness. On 29 April 1992, the Los Angeles race riot that engulfed the Korean American community was another defining moment for Min as a Korean American. These three events occurred on or close to her birthday.

In the series *Defining Moments*, Min offers a chronology of political and historical events relating to her personal history. The first image in the series serves as a guide, with a list of the dates presented spiraling outward from the artist's navel across her torso, beginning with 1953, the year of her birth and the end of the Korean War.

Superimposed over her face in each piece are appropriated images taken from the historic events. The third and fourth images in the series represent two of the most significant student uprisings in recent Korean history, 19 April 1960, which marked the date of the student uprising that overthrew the government of President Syngman Rhee and the year of Min's immigration to America, and 18 May 1980, which references the Gwangju student uprising and massacre where hundreds of people were killed. The fifth image of the series marks the 1992 Los Angeles riots, which had a direct impact on the lives of many Korean American business owners located in south-central Los Angeles. The sixth and final image in the *Defining Moments* series does not reference a particular date but imagines a possible reunification of North and South Korea with the image of Paektu mountain, the mythical site and place of the Korean people located in North Korea, which serves as a symbol for the supporters of Korean reunification. Written across the Min's forehead and chest are the words "DMZ" and "Heartland," signifying both the political and symbolic separation and connection of the Korean people.⁶¹ Min produced artworks inspired by her autobiographical life experiences as a Korean American immigrant who assimilated into American culture.

Bridge of No Return

In 1998, Min had a solo exhibition at the Art in General gallery in New York, where she displayed a large mixed media installation titled *Bridge of No Return*. The installation consisted of a long S-shaped steel structure over seven-feet high and twenty-three-feet long. It was a curved Yin-and-Yang-like installation, which consists of a tall transparent wire fence that resembled what Min saw at the DMZ in Korea. The DMZ and Bridge of No Return still exist in Korea. Perhaps Min sees herself as a child of the Cold

War since she was born the year the Korean War ended. These two walls are so close together, yet so far away by political division. The Bridge of No Return, located on the 38th Parallel in the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea, was where the exchange of prisoners of war took place at the end of the Korean War in 1953. This fence represents the political issues separating North and South Korea. Each side of the installation wall was covered with text, words, and images of the collective memories of North and South Korea. One result of the Korean War was that Korea was divided into two different countries, and this caused the separation of many families who are permanently and innocently cut off by the political power struggle. Those families suffered a great deal of pain and displacement experiences that left deep scars in their hearts, so the Korean people have a strong desire for reunification of their nation. This work reflected Min's own conflicted sense of attachment to and removal from her country of birth, Korea. By representing the divisions between the North and South Korean people, Min acknowledges her own feelings of displacement as a Korean American and expresses her critical perspective of the historic political power struggle.

DMZ xing

Min created another politically sensitive installation, which is concerned with the suffering of Asian Diaspora people in America. In 1994, Min had a solo exhibition in Hartford, Connecticut. The installation *DMZ xing* was about the oral history of Southeast Asian refugees in Connecticut. Min argued that how we understand ourselves, and our relationships to the world, involves history. By studying history and observing what was happening in the world, Min learned more about her self-identity. Visual narrative was a vehicle of expression for Min. There is a reality to what the refugees went through and what Min went through as an immigrant that she describes as a balancing act between two worlds where immigrants feel severely dislocated. She believes immigrants have to acquire a new awareness to make their way through the process, which requires persons to reclaim their culture of origin. Min expresses her painful experience as an immigrant in her artworks etched with words "for those of us whose histories have been marginalized, or who have been colonized or displaced, or have lost a heartland, memories are all we have." Min combines works that communicate the cultural, historical, political, social, and psychological impact of immigrant life through personal stories. By using art as a political act, Min becomes a cultural informant and educator within the art world and raises questions about her self-identity and her Korean American cultural, ethnic identity. She ventures outside of her ethnic and gender background and presents views of worldwide cultural, historical, and political events in order to reach a wider audience.

In summation, Min's choice of subjects reflects her life experiences as a Korean immigrant and includes a critical perspective of social, cultural, historical, and political events and issues in Korea and America. She is inspired by art that comments on the human condition in which both the intellect and the heart are engaged and challenged.

Min has participated in national and international exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (CA), Pacific Museum (CA), Museum of Modern Art (NYC), Asia Society Museum (NYC), Whitney Museum (NYC), Queens Museum (NYC), Chicago Art Institute (IL), Walker Art Center (MN), Corcoran Gallery (Washington DC), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (CA), Camerawork Gallery (London, UK), Kumho Museum (Korea), Baugio Art Festival (Baugio, RP), Folkwang Museum (Essen, Germany), Galeria Municipal da Mitra (Lisbon, Portugal), and Havana Biennial (Havana, Cuba).

Research Findings and Conclusion

The development of cultural identity, self-identity, and gender identity by Suk Nam Yun and Yong Soon Min was influenced by their life experiences in the social, cultural, historical, political, and educational environment in Korea and America. Yun and Min's life experiences had a direct influence on their artistic expression. For Yun and Min, art serves as the vehicle for searching, finding, and expressing their ethnic, cultural, and self-identities. Art making helps these artists reinforce political actions that express their personal motivations. Through the art-making process and personal art expression, they gained a voice, self-knowledge, and a sense of self.

Yun believes that as an artist her contributions to society gave her self-satisfaction and personal achievement, and that it was also her public duty as a member of society to speak out. Her artistic expression and feminist activism are a symbol of actions for social and cultural transformation in South Korea. Yun's voice is more than her personal expression—it is a voice for many other Korean women who cannot readily speak. Therefore, political feminist cultural activism contributes to the formation of her Korean self-identity and professional identity as an artist.

For Min, art offers her the possibilities of independence to explore a range of personal interests and concerns. Art is a personal quest for truth and meaning in what she experienced and observed as a Korean/Korean American. Social and political issues, combined with her life experiences, moved her to raise social and political issues through artistic expression whereby she began a personal reclamation of Korean history and memory. Min is searching for her identity, making reconnections with her Korean ethnic and cultural identity. Through art, she is stabilizing whom she is, negotiating with herself, and finding self-resolution of a woman who is

straddling Korean and American cultures. At the center of her practice, she insists, is the belief that the art-making process is a political act. She uses art as a tool for cultural criticism and to raise social, political, and multicultural issues in America.

Yun and Min allow the viewers to reconnect aesthetic values with political visions. Their art reflects the beliefs and values necessary for social transformation, and their art deals with deeply personal matters, which become highly politicized. They learn to see their lives in political terms as Korean women, as Korean immigrants, and as members of a racial ethnic minority in America. Their daily lives are permeated with socially constructed power relations of gender, race, and class; therefore, their artistic creativity, political actions, self-identity, and professional identity form a weblike relationship. Their inner desire to reconstruct a sense of self, with a passion for social justice, equity, and freedom and hope, is put into action through their art. All these aspects contribute to who Yun and Min are today as artists, feminists, cultural activists, and educators. As Collins argues, consciousness raising emerges and is based on the belief that the personal is political.⁶² She asserts that breaking silence can be a triumphant process in a life experience. Min and Yun broke silence and laid the foundation for a collective group voice. By giving vision to ideas, they empowered themselves and simultaneously empowered other Korean/Korean American women and artists.

Suk Nam Yun and Yong Soon Min sought to make a difference and to try to pursue possibilities for themselves and for others in society. They take risks outside of their comfort zones to reach new possibilities for their goals by challenging cultural, social, and gender limitations. They take on difficult tasks and continuously reshape their self-identities and professional identities through the art-making process. By using art as a political feminist act, they are fulfilling their personal ideals, professional ideals, and social responsibilities, and in their minds, they are becoming whole persons. Through my research, I learned from these artists that art was the vehicle for self-development, self-identity formation, and a means to examine one's individual and cultural identity. Furthermore, art as a political act can play an instrumental role in personal and social transformation. Artists such as Suk Nam Yun and Yong Soon Min serve as role models as cultural activists, educators, art community leaders, and consciousness-raising organizers who help others to reevaluate society from multiple perspectives. In this sense, these artists serve as important links among local communities, schools, museums, and art institutions. Furthermore, they function as mediators among national and international art communities and institutions. These artists fulfill the role of cross-cultural critics, educators, and ambassadors between America and Korea, and between the broader global community.

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