

# The Critical Theories for Korean Contemporary art: The post-colonialism and beyond in Sooja Kim's art works

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## Abstract

Korean contemporary art, one of the leading/central subjects for the post-modern art making, still displays the formal and conceptual "closeness" to the others, lending itself to a post-structuralist analysis of some of Korean artists' works. The study examines layers of desire, resistance, and ambiguity. This paper explores the theoretical basis for interpreting similarity, using Homi Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry' in order to demonstrate how Korean artists' works reveal the disruption and discrepancy between the Korean subject and the "other." In particular, Sooja Kim and Nikki Lee are to be discussed as reflective of this complicated circumstances.

## 1. Introduction: Presentation of the Korean Art

Korea became one of the most exuberant and productive centers in the world art scene. A number of artists actively participate in the well-known international art fairs and many Korean cities host world-wide art biennales. Korean art has demonstrated a fast and wide range of development both in numbers of artists and in the realms of art making. Artists adopting various western media have integrated current artistic issues both in modernism and post-modernism.

In doing so, young Korean artists often have tried to reverse the conventional and hierarchical/patriarchal conditions of Korean society, by recreating images of historic icons, in much the same way that many western artists have approached their art since the 1960's. In their choice of materials and themes, the similarity is clearly visible, yet not

quite.

Even though Korean arts are infused both with the Western and uniquely Korean elements, the formal and conceptual 'closeness' to western arts lends itself to a critical analysis of some of Korean artists' works, which reveals layers of desire, resistance, and ambiguity. Korea, based upon its' location in world art map, has been regarded as the 'local.' The artistic practice of the so-called 'local' belongs to the study of post-colonialism.<sup>1)</sup> Korea makes herself another art center in Asia and its' location and context provide significant meanings in the post-colonial study.

In this paper, I explore the theoretic basis for interpreting the similarity between contemporary Korean art and western art. I also demonstrate how Korean artists' works reveal a disruption of, and a discrepancy between the Korean subject and the "other." In their works, there is a desire to participate in the contemporary discourses of their Western counterparts. Yet, rooted in their identity as Koreans, young artists express efforts to transform and resist artistic conventions of western societies as well. In order to explain this, a new critical perspective is to be formed.

## 2. Theory

### 1) Visual Forms and Exchange of the Elements

The study of art history has long grappled with the relationship between the party that gives artistic elements and the party that receives them, and has sought to quantify

1) Korea's first avant-garde art movement 'art informel' has been discussed from the post-colonial perspective in my "Abstract-Expressionism and the Critical Approach to the Post-Colonialism" *Misul Sahak*, vol. 12(Dec. 1998): 155-173.

and describe the proper relationship between the two. Art historians employ the term "influence" for this purpose, "style," "form," "concepts," and "spirit" are additional terms used to describe this relationship. Even though the constituents change as time goes on, art as used to be visual products, cannot be free from those traces of visible artistic elements, which provide or provokes comparison.

The existence of the "other" continuously produces the object of desire with the support of power. Although art in these days claims a borderless execution, a map of cultural power still exists along the lines of territorial division. Thus, to define influences or relationships between cultures is a subtle and complex task.

Homi Bhabha, well known post-colonialist scholar, suggested the theory of "mimicry," which has been well received for its studies of post-colonial art practices. Mimicry, in general had been understood as copycat practices whereby the artistic elements created by the superior party are received and emulated by followers. In mimicry, the follower is the inferior who uncritically adopts the artistic results.

In "Of Mimicry and Man," the theory of 'mimicry' is used to refer to mirroring practices<sup>2)</sup> in art: the creation of the "local" reflecting the "center." According to the theory, the practice of "mimicry" is not a simple act of imitation nor a copy, but rather it is a political resistance to the original (central) creator, by which local artists potentially reverse or undo the 'original.' Bhabha's theory addresses those practices from the view of the colonized (the receiver) and challenges the traditional notion of similarity.

2) Homi Bhabha, "Of man and mimicry: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 85-92.

3) Edward Said, *Orientalism* (NY: Vintage, 1978).

4) Gramsci, *An Antonio Gramsci Reader*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: NYU Press, 2000): 189-221.

5) Brian Wallis, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York, 1984); James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed., Russell Ferguson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992): 141-170; James Clifford, "On Orientalism" in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

6) Bhabha, "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonialist Discourse," *Screen* 24, no.6 (Nov/Dec., 1983): 25.

7) Ibid, 86-89.

From the traditional point of view, the visual similarity is regarded as the key elements for comparison and mimicry as the derogatory/negative term. When we talk about the Korean contemporary art, the appearance of the Western artistic forms and ideas makes the evaluation of Korean art difficult. Bhabha's theory, on the other hand, is useful to reverse any negative prejudice on Korean arts and eliminate the burden of the traditional way of examining the relationship.

## 2) The Location of the Subject

The cultural predominance of one class or group over another is indicated by Edward Said<sup>3)</sup> and by Gramsci. Gramsci explains hegemony as the manipulation of ideology by the bourgeoisie by virtue of their power, political security and cultural preeminence.<sup>4)</sup>

The imaginary cultural predominance of the West continues in the present. In the (post-) colonial era, subjectivity is the product of cultural merging or mixing between the West and the East, and between the two different intellectual and political traditions.<sup>5)</sup>

In "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonialist Discourse," Bhabha observes that "there is always, in Said, the suggestion that colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer, which is a historical and theoretical simplification."<sup>6)</sup> In contrast to Edward Said and other historians, Bhabha proposes the concept of liminality or marginality as an advantageous position from which to critique modernity and colonialism. By privileging the standpoint of the hitherto oppressed, Bhabha reverses the authority in history writing.

Homi Bhabha emphasizes "difference," as opposed to "diversity." In his critical anthology, *Location of Culture*, Bhabha discusses the politics of culture, in which the language of displacement and negativity replaces the positivist discourse of liberation, progress, and historicism implicit in modernist revolutionary movements.<sup>7)</sup> The locality he seeks for mapping culture is that of shifting boundaries, liminal positioning, hybridity, and difference. Bhabha examines the multiple layers that constitute post-colonial society and contemporary cultural struggles, such as identity, modernity, and representation.

He insists that "identity" is a "persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation where the image...is confronted with its difference, its other."<sup>8)</sup> Identity should be understood as in the process of formation rather than as existing through stereotypes.<sup>9)</sup> Throughout this process, theoretical attempts are made to understand the numerous layers and progressions that constitute the "other." Hence, the other becomes the object of desire, an un-positioned object of spectatorial regimes and thus the agent of an identity in the process of constant formation and affirmation.

When it is applied to Korean history, Bhabha's theory illuminates interesting dynamics shaping the identity and subjectivity of the Korean people. Since the Korean War, South Korea's extensive contact with the United States encouraged a strong imaginary relationship with the West, which became the one of most significant, working agents of Korean identity. Bhabha's study provides a useful tool to analyze the discourse of (post-) modern theory in Korea, in which a stereotyped identity was first formed and then found that is neither unified nor solid. This identity could be termed "Neither/Nor"- an identity that cherished neither a Western model of enlightened citizenship, nor a traditional Korean identity.

In this context, Korean artists have a subject which is open, constantly shifting, and unstable. Young artists utilize their ambivalent subjectivities to cope with "the other," and their subjectivities, as a power and knowledge, reform and change the works of 'others.' By revising the originality of the object by producing a partial vision of its presence, its own alienated and alienating intentions are concealed. The ambiguous double vision grows out of the presence of "the other." The artist articulates the disturbances of cultural and historical difference vividly.

According to Bhabha, similarity continued but there is the beginning of discourse for difference; 'the colonized mimic the other metonymically.'<sup>10)</sup> Subscribing to both the post-structuralism and the post-colonialism, Bhabha attempted to deconstruct the linear influence from the center to the local. He insisted that the latter reverses or undoes the power of the center by making it similar, "but not quite." In a way that sign is decoded, signified is working metonymically; it is delayed from its proper meaning by replacing it with a partial meaning of the signified to another signifier. A continuous

chain of empty signifier, represents the incomplete sign system.

Given a close relationship between two different subjects, there arises the desire. However, in theory, the desire always belongs to the colonized, the local artist, not to the "center" or "the West." The West never wanted to make counter-project inspired (or affected) by the other. Is there a mutual effect possible, a reciprocal or two-way action? Western artists are the object of others' desire on the contrary, the local artists are the subject of desire all the time.

Without a mutual reaction, the discourse of desire seems to fall apart. It is clear that mimicry or influence is not just based upon trade of artistic elements. The real distinction between the giver and the receiver is the differentiation between the one who holds power and the other who lacks it. It is, thus, political and ideological. Bhabha's 'mimicry' theory opposed to those premise, criticizes the West's reproduction of the ideology as the subject of the history writing. Bhabha might have tried to dissolve this tenacious connection hidden behind the relation of two. Yet, his mimicry theory contains several problems that impair a reversal the conventional studies of "local or /post-colonial art" as his title indicates, the whole relation is ever more ambivalent or obscure. Bhabha does not fully explain the word 'metonymy,' and the way in which the difference is hidden in similarity. It is still ambivalent how precisely metonymical similarity is distinct from general discussion of similarities.

The theory of mimicry, as with other post-structural theories, aims to undo the syntax which affects the reproduction of art and its interpretation. Syntax, for example, addresses the relationship between signifiers or between signifieds, while semantics explore that of the signifier and the signified, and deal with the changes of meaning, as in the relationship between the artist and her/his works and the meaning or motivation behind them. Semantics is diachronic. Syntax, rather deals with the signified, and as such is synchronic.<sup>11)</sup>

8) Ibid, 45-47.

9) For example, Lacan asserts the formation of the subjectivity in his book. *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alain Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton N Company, 1998).

10) Bhabha (1994): 87-90.

Mimicry might work changing the structure of traditional reproduction, yet the theory very much resides on an examination of the relationship between artists and their works. This is close to semantics. In its methodology and effect, the new theory should go against the common ideation, and should challenge the old levels of interpretation. In Korean art, according to Bhabha's 'mimicry,' could those formal and conceptual similarities deliver the syntactical renewal?

### 3. Artistic Environment of Korean art

Korean contemporary art has become one of the strongest contenders in the world art, and artists are eager not to be left behind leading international trends, or at least they want to follow or engage in with the international standard. In the 21st century, information circulates fast in real time regardless of subjects, and identical formalities and themes appear almost at the same time around the world. Many works seem to be reproduced without an initiator of reproduction.

A number of artists try to figure out their own themes and expressions along the international standard. Moreover, the theoretical framework encourages the artists to catch up to the "newness," and historians, curators, artists and other members of the art circle want to participate in the contemporary discourses. As an ideological institution, their interests in institutional power and their theory-oriented attitudes accelerate this trend. Art critics evaluate the works of art according to the state of theoretical knowledge. Subsequently, theories emerged from western academics became institutionalized quickly in Korea. Supporters of theory are responsible for the proliferating the trend as the object of desire. Under this circumstance, a number of Korean artists produced a wide range of art works which are discussed in the Western theories and concepts.

#### 1) Artists and the critical theories

For example, there are feminist artists, such as Sooja Kim,

11) Barthes, Roland, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975); xi -xv.

<Walking doing laundry>, 1997/ Juhe Yang, <Counting time21>, 2002 /Suk-nam Yun, <Blooding house> 2004/ <Red Rice> 2003/ Mira Lee, <Digital print>, 2003, and more.

Problems related to the body or the female fantasy to the body is represented by Lee Bul in <Monster> 2002/<Cyborg> 1999/<Fluxes> 1998/ <Amateurs> 1999. Lee, who won the Special Award in Venice Biennale in 1999, distorts or exaggerates the body as the objects of eternal desire and sexual fantasy. In particular, <Monster 2002> and <Cyborg 1999> the artist expresses the female body as the mechanical hybrid where the other's perspectives and desires intermingled.

For Kitsch, Jung-hwa Choi, in <Site of Desire, Plastic Baskets> 2005/ <Lobster phone> 2004/ <Touch me> 1998, takes ordinary commodities and makes banal, humorous art pieces. For political and existential resistance, Caf October, <Art for no-war> 2001/ Yong-sun Seo <Bombing> 2004/ <Nokeun-Lee> 2001/ Hakchul Shin <Modern history of Korea> 1983/94), Jeong-gi Min <Keumkang Mountain> 1999/ Ok-sang Im <Korean War> and more are active.

Art as a daily commodity, Hongseok Gim's <How deep is our love>, 2000/ <I'm gonna be #1>, 1996/ <Oval Talk>, 2004 are well received. Gim reversed the conventional idea on objects' fixed function and its usage as a sign. <Oval Talk> symbolizes the U.S. president's official discussion in his oval office, yet the red oval shape replaces the real meaning of this phrase. He attempts to reverse the political and ideological weight of the language and destroy them with humor.

Sora Kim's <Cosmo Vitale>(2005) is another interesting piece, which is a music video of well-known Korean pop songs sung by foreigners. She wants to alienate familiar sounds with different voices in a new context, examining the way in which so-called 'Korean-wave'(Han-ryu) was constructed as an ideology.

Dukhyun Cho's archaeological work, <Kurim Project; from the past of Country E-so>(2000) deals with the western tradition of 'site specific,' combining with a literature of lost country E-so. For diaspora, Sooja Kim, <Bottari truck-moving cities> 1997/ <Needle woman> 1997; and Doho Seo, <New York House/ Seoul house> (1998) are fairly interesting.

For pop culture and cultural difference to the other are, Dongki Lee <Ato-mouse> (2000)/ Dong-uk lee, <Green

giant> 2003/ Youn-doo Chung <Borame dance hall> 2002 /< Bewitched> 2003/<Ever-Green Tower> (2001). In <Ever-Green Tower> Chung photographs a number of family of the same town house in a same angle, so the each scene shows typical of the Korean family portrait. Yet in pretty similar house, 'not-so-similar' people's appearances reflect their different desires.

Some artists, working closely to pop art, visualize various commercial or popular icons in artistic format. For example, Jin Ham makes small figures in clay. They crawl on a finger, fight on hamburger, live inside or on the cup noodle, or carry balloons. The artist challenges the world of common sense with his hilarious imagination in his miniature-scale in <Doll biting finger> (1999).

For the tradition of Minimalism, In-hyun Lee, <Sedimentation of painting> 2003/ Chun mo Nam <Stoke line> 2003; for Conceptual art, Beom Kim <An Iron in the form of a Radio, a Radio in the form of a Kettle, a Kettle in the form of an Iron> 2002/ E-so Park (Honesty / Dal-Ban-Do) represent these movements.

Beom Kim, changes the function of the ordinary facilities. For instance, he presents iron with the shape of radio, kettle in the shape of iron, and the radio in a shape of kettle. He wants people not to be fooled by its appearance and concern more about the way in which signs work, i.e. their arbitrary system.

For interactive art, In hwan Oh's <Lost and found> (2002); and for the homo sexuality and sexual identity in Korean culture, In hwan Oh, <Contents> (2004) is remarkable. It consists of a list the names of gay bars at specific area, Itaewon in Seoul. For multi media art, Sin-il Kim <Active Anesthesia- The Attitude of Cranial Revolution>(2008), Sanghee Song <The Message from the Sea>(2008), Yung-jin kim, <Horoscope> 2001/ Sung min Hong, <Won't get harmed> 1997/ So-youn Chung, <Breathe> (2002); art/mind and religion, Han soo Lee, <Homage to dali> (2004); for the painting technology, Duk hyun Cho, <Layers> 2000/ Bum Moon, <Slowly together> (2003) and the list goes on and on.

Still a number of artists continued to paint traditional painting style ranging from hard-edge abstract to expressive figurative style. Yet, young artists, discussed above and more, work under the post-modern discourses, because the art

institutions still proliferate those western theories as a token of 'new' and 'charming.'

#### 4. Meaning of Absence and Presence

Among those artists, some are challenging the cultural differences observing the relationship between the subject and the other. In particular, Nikki Lee and Sooja Kim provide us a unique realm for theoretic vision of Korean contemporary art. Women as subjects, their choice was at the core of a feminist attempt to decode women artists' social and cultural responses to gender ideology. At the same time, they suggest the 'Korean perspective' which is beyond the limit of western vision to art and its context. Korean women artists not only point the critical problems of western theory, but also suggest desirable perspectives for Korean art works.

##### 1) Woman from the Verge: Nikki Lee

Young and daring Nikki Lee chooses to assimilate herself to a certain group of people, through which she accentuates the interaction with 'real life.' She became a member of a sub-culture group from relatively marginal drag queens, white trash, exotic dancers, punk, extreme sports players, lesbian- to the upwardly mobile-yuppies, seniors, latino, tourists, swing dancers.<sup>12)</sup>

Each of Lee's projects requires extensive research and physical preparation. For her *Exotic Dancers Project* (2000), Lee actually found employment in a strip club. For the *Ohio Project* (1999), she lived with a family in a trailer park for two and a half weeks, and for her the *Skate boarders Project* (2000), she taught herself the sport on the streets of San Francisco. Even though she seeks total assimilation, Lee never attempts to deceive anyone in her temporarily adoptive community; she explains from the start that she is an artist and invites her new friends/lovers/colleagues/ to participate in her work.

Lee usually discussed from the social and feminine perspective that undoes the fixity of subject and visualizes

12) Nancy Spector, "Nikki S Lee: Of Self and others." in Hermes Korea Misulsang, exh.cat. (Seoul: Art Sonje, 2006), pp.96-97.

cultural differences. The group she participated has its unique criteria and features, yet she became easily one of them, which is reflective how much those strong and natural characteristics are not that original or specifically innate for a group. It is learned and experienced one. Dress code, hair style, attitudes visually define the cultural group's identity. After several months of observations and practices, she becomes a member of the group.

Lee's performance-based photos are usually compared to those of Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura. The artist is the main object of the photos, yet they kept changed themselves to someone else. Sherman and Morimura emphasized the fictional monumentality by adopting and reconstructing the images of past and future, religion and art, Lee rather becomes a real part of that group.<sup>13)</sup>

<Parts>, her new art projects, gets into the bottom of the domain of human relationships. The photos depict various scenes of man and woman, yet only a woman exists as a part of the whole picture and a man vanishes out of the picture, leaving only a trace of his presence. Here the viewer must contend with not only what is there but also that which is missing. Her presence, but lack of the male's represents the counterpart's desire and expectations.

13) Soyeon Ahn, "Women inside of me\_some experiments of female image and identity," op.cit., p.81.

14) Sooja Kim was introduced either to Korea or to the Western art world in her late thirties. She has lived in New York since 1998, age of 41 and actively involved with various art exhibitions, including 48th Venice Biennale D'APERTTUTO section (1999), Sa Paolo Biennale (1998), Istanbul Biennale (97), Kwang-ju Biennale (2000); One-person Shows at Hyundai; Seomi; Roding galleries (2000) (Seoul), On (Osaka), ICC (Tokyo) 2000, Kunsthalle (Bern) (2001); Traditions/Tensions, Queens Museum; Asia Society; Grey Art Gallery (NY) (1996-98); Secession (Vienna); Louisiana Museum of Art; Copenhagen: Hayward Gallery, London; P.S.1Contemporary Art Center (NY) (1997-2000) etc.

15) For these exhibitions, Marnie Fleming, "Soo-ja Kim: A Laundry Field-sewing into Walking, Looking into sewing," in *Soo-ja Kims Solo show*, Oakville Gallery (Ontario), 1997.

Hans-Ulrich Obrist, An Interview "Sooja Kim: Wrapping Bodies and Souls," in *Flash Art*, no.92 (Jan-Feb,1997), pp. 70-72.

Honghee Kim ed., "Concpetualizing the Ordinary," *Women: the Difference and the Power*, Seoul, 1994.

<Bottari Truck> was created for the exhibition curated by Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru in 1997. A truck filled with bottari moved Korea for 11 days, and focused on the issue of the 'nomadic.'

Lee's recent works combining still photographs and video, demonstrates how the meaning of images is changed through contextualization. She extends her interest to the creation of multiple implications caused by superimposing images on media that are socio-culturally incoherent.

## 2) Sooja Kim's <Bottari> and <Needle Woman>

Soo-ja Kim(1957-) is carving out distinctive and significant marks in the history of Korean art criticism. Mostly, she has received considerable attention from Westerners for addressing gender and cultural issues in her work.<sup>14)</sup>

Her choice of subject and motifs are taken from traditional Korean women's labors. She became known as "bottari artist." Bottari, a round-shaped-bundle filled with cloths or everyday commodities, is made of cloths or bed cover. Kim used colorful textures of traditional cloths, and found a philosophical idea out of the domestic female environment.

In her exhibitions such as *Sewing into Walking*, and *Cities on the Move-2727Km, Bottari Truck*, she began to install space with traditional bed-covers, objects, and the bottari. Those old fabrics, recycled from other cloth, have a story of their own.<sup>15)</sup>

"I suppose I was attracted to the cloths as it was a part of my life. It also had an inside and an outside which permitted me to have an ongoing conversation or interaction through the process of needlework."

Sewing is a very feminine activity and domestic burden for a woman, and Kim elevated the status of women's housework, which had been denigrated and encompassed the realm of the ordinary that had been excluded by modernism.'

Kim mentioned that "I try to give meaning to this everyday routine in my artwork: I feel an empathy with it as an artist. For me there is a certain artistic value in these mundane female activities, which retain a lot of contemporary art issues- including performance, labour, time and ritual."

### <Needle Woman>

In another well-known video work; 'Needle woman', the artist stands back from the viewers with no movement and crowds pass by her with no notice throughout metropolitan

cities around the world. It looks as if she is the needle weaving all the people together. This *<Needle Woman>* has been chosen for the Arsenale Show in the 51st Venice Biennale(2005). As whose motto "Always a little Further" signifies, it chooses upcoming young artists for new trends.

In the catalogue of *<A Needle Woman>* exhibition, an art-critic Harald Szeemann wrote that, "sew, spread, fold, wrap, assemble, tie; these apply to working with brightly colored traditional fabrics used for bed covers....She masterfully sets her fabrics, rich in memory and narrative, into the situation of the moment.... Kim's art may touch upon Zen Buddhism, meditation, suspension of the body, the emptying of the mind and force....This leads us to consider linking Kim's work with Western existentialist or phenomenological trends, prone as they are to claiming universalism. For instance, the mere fact of the artist's Da-Sein (her being + there) in her videos might to some extent relate to Heidegger's notion of Ek-sistenz as analyzed in being and time."<sup>16</sup>

Then, he compares Kim's *<Needle woman>*(1999) to those of German Romanticism artist Friedrich.

"...(B)y the fact that she 'turn away from the viewers and look into the space before her; her works were compared to the 19th century German artist Caspar David Friedrich....The title figures of these stand full-length, parallel to the painting and in the foreground, exactly in the middle of the composition. Solitary individual, they stand confronted by the immeasurable magnitude of nature. They are subject and object of our gaze. The artist strikes a delicate balance between presence and absence: she is at once herself and the 'other.'"<sup>17</sup>

His remarks raised several critical questions; first, a deep-rooted convention of the Western formalist perspective; second, the Euro-centered western viewers and theoreticians by connecting the western products (artifacts) to those of other countries. They all consequently suggest the Western influence over the other area. Besides, woman artist is compared to man artist and it somehow insinuates the originality sprung from the western male artist. From the formal analysis, artwork locates itself in the history, which is mapped and constructed by the Western scholars.

Yet, at the same time, Szeemann regards Kim's works are 'post-colonial.' Here is the ambiguous status of post-colonialism. 'Post' in the post-colonialism is supposed to

dismantle the colonial ideology in specific areas, criticizing them as imaginary and manipulative. However, Szeemann regards Kim's works as postcolonial discussing it under the linear relationship with the Western achievement. Post-colonialism here, exemplifies the male invention, supporting the modern mythology rather than de-constructing the conventional ideology.

If the theory is still dependent upon the hierarchical difference and severance between West and East and regards East as the receiver of the central trends, the post-colonial theory is self-contradictory and falling apart. Is post-colonialism the Westerner's view on the East, and it depend upon the division between East vs. West, man vs. woman, spirit vs. material?

## 5. Beyond the post-colonialism and criticism: For a New Difference

Homi Bhabha theorizes the concept of liminality or marginality as an advantageous position to critique modernity and colonialism. By privileging the stand point of the hitherto oppressed, Bhabha reverses the authority in history writing. He raises the question on constantly shifting boundaries and unstable identities throughout his writings. As the most visible phenomenon in the colonial discourse of power and knowledge, mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable other as the subject of a difference that proceeded among to be almost the same. In his usage, mimicry extends to creative reception of Western practices, in which "otherness" could be negotiated by the 'local' (i.e. Korean) subject.

However post-coloniality has no ideal-typical essence, as its practitioners claim. In the larger allegory of the crisis of Western imperial domination grasped as a symptom of the internal contradictions and intensifying crisis of late capitalism, the post-colonialism is characteristic in its unstable, open quality. It should aim to refute (criticize) the format it constitutes every moment.

In *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, San Juan Jr. said

16) Szeemann, *A Needle Woman*, Exh. cat. (Bern: Kunsthalle, 2001), no page printed.

17) Ibid.

"Prejudiced against foundational scripts by indigenous "minorities" and aborigines, the postcolonial critic such as Bhabha, Spivak- usually beings with the critique of western logocentrism or metaphysics....Unless he/she wants to sanction the permanence of Euro-centrism, he/she must prefigure in the same move of inversion and distanciation his/her autonomous trajectory. He/She thus needs to expose and repudiate the constitutive effects of the intellectual division of labor in the world system that she has just erased from her account."<sup>18)</sup>

Juan said "In this performance, the "post" in "postcolonial," which replicates First World conservatism, is thus still sublated/subjected to a stance of displacement begging recognition not from the masses in Africa, Asia, or Latin America but from their tutors, Western master-theoreticians of the "sublime."<sup>19)</sup> It is very good to point out postcolonialism today.

Postcoloniality is thus one of the language games of positionalities whose rules of global capitalism has devised and deployed in order to refurbish its worn-out ideological apparatus, for subjugating people of color and service its new flexible production scheme. As scholars point out, the theory is keenly affected by the economic (late-capitalism), political condition, and seems very hard to get out of the institutional we bled by the West.

Since 1990, Korean art has expanded its realm by integrating various genres and subjects. Even though each artists has her or his idea, it seems still to be evaluated with the help of the other's (i.e. the West's) history. Bhabha's mimicry theory makes sense in Korean contemporary art, because, there exists similarity, which also provides a clue about differences. However, does this ambivalent difference undo the power of the West successfully? Are those difference clear/striking enough to reverse the hierarchy or too discreet to change the relationship?

Bhabha criticizes the west's location as the subject, and it has been replaced by a multi-centered art map. However, still the Western power to write history is strong, and the relationship between the leading art and the other cannot be easily changed. Even though the distinction between the first

work in a style and its followers (and subsequent works) gets hazy, and appearance or visual elements no longer belong to the core of criticism, Korean art still depends upon concepts or attitudes that are imported from the West. We have to be more critical towards the theoretical similarity of art works that deepens a reliance on the West.

Those theoretical and conceptual frameworks are tied to institutional power. In order to achieve a specific status of Korean art, which voices something unique of its own, and different from anything else, artists should work towards anti-institutionalization.

In the absence of Korea's own theoretical context, there is no real critical perspective to address the relationship between Korean art and western art. Anti-power and anti-institution, those are the real answers to the question of Korean art, answers that will free the art from the location of local.

Kim and Lee both talk about feminine sensitivities, which have been attached to a void and an absence as a meaningful place. Lesser, minor, similar, secondary, the objects of value in any post-theories have been replaced. Kim, as a needle, ties people's wounds and comforts them, and with her Bottari, she wraps things up together into a new form. By surpassing the dualism, the opposition between two parts; between mother and daughter, past and present, labour and art, East and West, life and death, the artist celebrates the lives of women as the producer and the keeper both in visual and the textual lineage. Beyond this unification, a new position for the feminism and post-colonialism is achieved. She turns away from a typical assertion of the theoretic framework in 'post' and suggest a real difference.

Korean artists have learned how to recognize the difference. They turned down from a typical assertion of the theoretic framework in 'post-' suggest a real difference. That is the answer of the 'post.' By liberating oneself from the West-oriented subject, technique, sensibility, theories and expression, they empower the status of the 'Korean artists' utilizing its' composite images as an artistic means of self-projection, and as a tool to analyze and critique historical forces shaping the other's identity. Perhaps, Korean artists, as those theories proclaim, can make really new and different art works, which are not that similar from anything else.

18) San Juan, Jr., *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 57-58.

19) Ibid., p.60.

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