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Creative Counterpoints

## Tactics of the Landless: Laying Claim to (Diasporic) Space in kate her rhee's Digital Artivism

In 2002, kate hers RHEE's (known then as kate hers) artivism landed her in jail. "Sex Education for Finding Face in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," was a performance video installation that, as Kim Stoker describes it:

"combined two sets of video footage: one of a close-up of [rhee's] mouth upside-down repeating the words over and over 'I had an abortion when I was 18' and footage shot when she staged a performance in Myongdong, a popular shopping district in downtown Seoul, dressed in a high school girl's uniform with a pillow stuffed under her shirt in order to make it appear as if she was pregnant. During the brief performance she laughed hysterically without saying any words while a crowd of onlookers gathered to watch and speculate whether or not she was crazy or if she was performing some kind of joke. Police officers interrupted the performance and took her away after just a few minutes into an hour-long performance."<sup>1</sup>

RHEE is a transnational adoptee who was adopted from Seoul, Korea to Detroit, MI in 1976. International adoption first began as a humanitarian effort as a consequence of the Korean War (1950 - 53) primarily as a way to place war orphans, the majority of whom were of mixed parentage fathered by American servicemen, abroad in western countries. Since the 1980s, however, the majority of adoptees have been the children of single, unwed mothers.<sup>2</sup> From 1953 to 2002, 151,697 children were officially adopted out of Korea, the majority of whom were sent to Western

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Stoker, "Beyond Identity: Activism in Korean Adoptee Art," in *Duksung Women's University Journal* 34(2005): 235 - 236.

<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive history of transnational adoption in Korea, see: Kim Stoker, "Beyond Identity: Activism in Korean Adoptee Art," in *Duksung Women's University Journal* 34(2005): 223 - 248.  
Eleana J. Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*, (Durham: Duke University Press) 2010.

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Europe, Australia, and North America.<sup>3</sup> Unofficial estimates surpass 200,000 persons, making RHEE one of the 200,000 adopted Koreans living abroad in some 14 countries.<sup>4</sup>

According to RHEE, “Drawing and painting can’t impact an audience on the same level as performance.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Kim Stoker’s “Beyond Identity: Activism in Korean Adoptee Art” explains, RHEE’s performance attempted to impact her onlookers on multiple valences. First, as a diasporic subject, she commented on Korean society’s rigid and homogenizing social norms by breaking them so effectively that she was imprisoned.<sup>6</sup> Second, as a transnational adoptee, RHEE posed as a pregnant teenage schoolgirl in order to comment on the fact that unwed motherhood is so taboo in Korean society that the majority of children who are sent abroad for adoption are the children of unwed mothers.<sup>7</sup> In this way, RHEE brought attention to Korea’s continued policy of exporting their unwanted children rather than erecting social service programs to support such children and mothers.

Today RHEE’s work shines light on a very different (but related) kind of social problem within Korea -- the fact that Koreans consume plastic surgery at the highest rates per capita globally. It is such widespread obsession with beauty that she seeks to address in the first chapter, “Made in Korea,” of her current project entitled, *Modern Beauty Ideals in the Age of Digital Technology*. According to her artist statement:

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<sup>3</sup> Stoker, “Beyond Identity,” 236.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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“My critical investigation of this extreme make-over of an entire nation (and Asian continent) is at once a visual anthropological presentation and an expressive contemplation of personal history. South Korea represents a microcosmos in respect to the ways that women's bodies worldwide are consumed and controlled.”<sup>8</sup>

While her work continues to impact audiences through performance, what sets this project apart from her earlier work is that she not only focuses her critiques on the digital realm but also uses digital space as the stage for her performances. In other words, unlike “Sex Education for Finding Face in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” which was performed in one moment of time and space and accessible to only those who physically inhabited that moment, RHEE's current work is continuously accessible with every click, view and visit to her website. If as urban anthropologist Manuel Delgado asserts, artistic productions within the genre of activism “interpellate the spaces they interact with--the street, the plaza, semi-public areas--in order to address the inherent qualities that demonstrate their willingness to cover up all types of ruptures and cracks, signs of vulnerability in a socio-political system that these artistic productions reject and discard,” then RHEE disrupts stable notions of space, place and nation by expanding and extending all of these to cyberspace.<sup>9</sup> Just as she staged her performance video installation in the very public bustling consumer and tourist center of Myongdong in order to disrupt Korea's socio-political status quo, RHEE's current work seeks to reveal another set of “ruptures and cracks, signs of vulnerability” and how they travel the circuits and infiltrate the spaces of the digital medium to global proportions. In so doing, RHEE claims digital space as diasporic

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<sup>8</sup> “Statement on the Modern Beauty Ideals in the Age of Digital Technology,” accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.estherka.com/artistinfo/statement/search-for-modern-beauty-in-the-digital>.

<sup>9</sup> Manuel Delgado, “The Limits of Critique: ‘Artivism’ and Post-Politics,” accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.arxiulimen.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/LIMEN2.-The-limits-of-critique.pdf>.

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space by making her critique as a Korean American transnational subject (living in Europe). In other words, we might understand RHEE's performances as "tactics of the landless"--ways of making claims about, without the ability to lay claim to, Korea (or anywhere for that matter) as a nation. Thus, her current work is framed in and through the episteme of the diaspora illustrating the precarious ways in which the diaspora relates to the spatial but also how the digital might change the very nature of that relationship.

### **"Double Eyelid Tape Tutorial"**

In "Double Eyelid Tape Tutorial," RHEE's choice to use a remake of opera aria, *Habanera*, originally from *Carmen*, references not only K-pop's ubiquitous appeal but also, as she states, "highlights a European classical music tradition which has been appropriated by Korean mega-popstar Park Ji-yoon in 1997."<sup>10</sup> Just as Park Ji-yoon appropriates a European classic, making it into something else entirely, so too can Korean "looks" be said to be a product of such hybridity. In South Korea, plastic surgery has always been imbricated within structures of colonial and military dominance. Before World War II, Japanese elites embraced cosmetic surgery as a means of remedying perceived physical inferiority to Westerners. Following this logic, elite Koreans also began to debate the merits of plastic surgery given Korea's tenuous global position as a colony subject both to the superiority of the Japanese and the West. Yet, as Asian American studies scholars Eugenia Kaw, David Palumbo-Liu

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<sup>10</sup> "Double Eyelid Tape Tutorial," accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.estherka.com/works/double-eyelid-tape-tutorial>.

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and Nadia Kim have pointed out, it was not until the end of the Korean War that plastic surgery, and the double eyelid procedure in particular, was made available to the masses through the US military's efforts to build public relations between Koreans and Americans.<sup>11</sup> Akin to the chocolate and soda the soldiers passed out, US military doctors performed the double eyelid procedure to alleviate Koreans of what they medically diagnosed as their "suspicious looking" eyes. Indeed, plastic surgery in South Korea is an afterlife of the Korean War and in many respects we can say that the plastic surgery consumer—alluded to over and again in popular media—was born in and of the Korean War and US involvement there. Beauty at the end of the Korean War, in other words, was deployed as a "war by other means."<sup>12</sup>

In the sixty years since the armistice was signed, however, plastic surgery has been produced as economically necessary in South Korean culture. In this way, cosmetic surgery is a form of "body work" that encapsulates both work performed on the body vis-à-vis surgeries and the work the altered body is readied to perform, or perform better, in a national market economy. Since the 1997 IMF Crisis during which unemployment went from 3% to 20% as a result of the country's restructured economy and the government's neoliberal policies severely limiting social services, cosmetic surgery is seen as an economic necessity literally framed in advertisements, popular culture and daily conversations as "self-improvement" and "self-investment."

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<sup>11</sup> David Palumbo-Liu, "Written on the Face: Race, Nation, Migrancy, and Sex," in *Asian/America: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 81–115; Eugenia Kaw, "Medicalization of Racial Features: Asian American Women and Cosmetic Surgery," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 7, no. 1 (1993): 82; Nadia Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 53.

<sup>12</sup> Mimi Thi Nguyen, "The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarianism, Imperialism and Global Feminisms in an Age of Terror," *Signs* 36 (Winter 2011): 364.

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In fact, plastic surgery in South Korea is so ubiquitous that half of all of South Korea's plastic surgery clinics are located in the city of Seoul and most of those—some 430—are located in Gangnam, or the Beverly Hills of Korea and the 15 square mile neighborhood made famous in PSY's viral hit "Gangnam Style."

It is precisely the viral popularity that "Gangnam Style" signifies that RHEE's use of YouTube as a medium for her parody beauty tutorial references. That is to say, YouTube is part of the new visual economies that are deeply imbricated in Korea's economic and political position on the global stage. Today, Korean products are now household names—Hyundai, Kia, Samsung—and its cultural products are known worldwide—Girls' Generation, the Wonder Girls, Rain, and 2NE1, to name just a few. In fact, as literary scholar Jin-Kyung Lee has shown in *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in Korea*, Korea can no longer simply be considered a neocolony of the United States but has emerged as a capitalist subempire in its own right, evidenced in part by its exploitation of cheap labor from Southeast Asia and Mexico.<sup>13</sup> Pop culture has been part and parcel of Korea's newfound hegemony and soft power. Dubbed *Hallyu* or "the Korean Wave" by Chinese reporters in the late 1990s for its rippling popularity among Chinese teens (the first besides Japanese pop culture to gain such popularity in the region), Korea's "subempire" status and soft power rankings have been further solidified by its increasing pop cultural hegemony throughout Asia in particular but also to various

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<sup>13</sup> Jin-Kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in Korea* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

degrees in the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, and among a diversity of communities within the United States.

Thus, RHEE's choice of a YouTube beauty tutorial not only references the myriad beauty tutorials one can find on the web these days but also the fact that South Korea is the most wired nation globally, with the highest number of DSL connections per head worldwide, and these levels of connectivity are reflected in South Korean marketing, music, and business campaigns. Korean entertainment companies themselves leverage their stars' pop music on social media sites as their main platform for launching and sustaining the popularity of their global pop stars. According to cultural studies scholar Stephen Epstein with James Turnbull, "Korean popular music is driven by the visual. . . . The savvy use of YouTube, literally and figuratively a key 'site' for the experience and distribution of music at a mass level, has now become a core component of Korean entertainment companies' promotion strategies, especially at the international level."<sup>14</sup> That is to say, visuality both in the sense of pop music's tendency toward spectacle and in the emphasis on pop stars' aesthetic appeal, has become a key factor in K-pop's global production and distribution, if not *the* key factor. As such, K-pop stars' "looks" are micro-managed by entertainment companies and then commodified alongside their music and dance. As a package, then, these are promoted abroad to international fans via YouTube and other visually driven sites.

In the particular realm of bodily aesthetics, then, Korean cultural productions

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Epstein with James Turnbull, *Girls' Generation? Gender (Dis)Empowerment, and K-Pop*, ed. Kyung Hyun Kim, 316–17 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

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proliferate a standard of beauty deemed particularly Korean and associated with Korea's seemingly successful forms of consumerist modernity. According to my interview with a representative of South Korea's tourism board, this connection between popular culture, beauty and marketing is not lost on South Korean governmental agencies. In fact, Korea's medical tourism industry, established in 2007, spends very little, she told me, on advertising for its biggest market, cosmetic surgery—*Hallyu* is their global advertising. As a result, *Hallyu* fans travel across the world to Seoul in order to look just like their favorite Korean actors or pop stars while embarking on *Hallyu* tours during recovery.<sup>15</sup> In fact, such global advertisements are so successful that 30% of all cosmetic patients in Korea are Chinese and South Korea's medical tourism generated a profit of US\$349 million in 2014 while *Hallyu* accounts for US\$4.8 billion in annual export revenue.<sup>16</sup> South Korea's cultural hegemony points to new formations of modernity in Asia that defy east-west binaries and are creating regionally specific cultural and social meanings through tangible practices of consumption and embodiment. As these figures indicate, the social issues RHEE touches upon in her digital activism are not confined within Korea's national borders and her positionality as a Korean American living in

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<sup>15</sup> Sharon Heijin Lee, *The (Geo)Politics of Beauty: Race, Transnationalism and Neoliberalism in South Korean Beauty Culture*, (PhD Diss., University of Michigan, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Bae Ji-sook, "Cosmetic Surgery Emerges as Export Product," *KoreaToday*, January 27, 2010. Peng Qian, "Feature: South Korea's Medical Tourism Revenue Slips Amid Growing Malpractice," [www.xinhuanet.com Asia&Pacific Edition](http://www.xinhuanet.com/asia/PacificEdition), February 10, 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-02/10/c\\_133984026.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-02/10/c_133984026.htm) (accessed April 29, 2015); "South Korea: Korea Increases Number of International Patients," *International Medical Travel Journal: News*, June 4, 2014, <http://www.imtj.com/news/?entryid82=442510> (accessed April 29, 2015). Kyung Hyun Kim, "Indexing Korean Popular Culture," in *The Korean Pop Culture Reader*, Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) 2.



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Germany give her a unique position from which to explore beauty's global dimensions.

### **“I Love The Way I Look! Schicke Möpse T-Shirt Testimonials”**

As RHEE explains on her site, “The German expression “schicke Möpse” is similar to the slang nice tits, jugs or puppies. In German, Mops is the word for a Pug dog. Möpse is the plural.”<sup>17</sup> In her video performance, RHEE uses real testimonials of satisfied women who have had breast augmentation surgery and juxtaposes it with footage of one of the women (RHEE herself) doing housework. In this way, RHEE uses the mundane in two ways: first, by replacing breast augmentation with a t-shirt, she exposes the commodification of body parts and the ways in which we have grown desensitized to the buying and selling of bodies in parts and in whole. Second, by juxtaposing the testimonials with mundane household chores, RHEE highlights how cosmetic surgery and breast augmentation in particular, is normalized through aggressive marketing practices that have become all the more accessible and thus invasive through the medium of the internet. As RHEE explains, this juxtaposition is meant to liken women's cosmetic surgery consumption to “Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, the 1950s idea that women were naturally fulfilled by devoting their lives to being housewives and mothers.”<sup>18</sup> Through her playful performance, then, RHEE emphasizes that neoliberal demands for self-management have become as pervasive

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<sup>17</sup> “I Love The Way I Look! Schicke Möpse T-Shirt Testimonials,” accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.estherka.com/works/i-love-the-way-i-look>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

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and commonsensical--another kind of woman's work--as those that frame women as domestically bound wives and mothers.

Both "Double Eyelid Tape Tutorial" and "I Love The Way I Look! Schicke Möpse T-Shirt Testimonials" illustrate the creative possibilities and counterpoints forged through digital space. RHEE's diasporic state of "landlessness" gives her current work a floating sensibility -- in and out of yet simultaneously critiquing and poking fun at the local, the global and the transnational. If, as RHEE has said, "Drawing and painting can't impact an audience on the same level as performance," then we must ask how the permanent yet timeless qualities of the medium shape the impact of digital activism.