

## ART REVIEW

### Digital Art and the Internet

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#### *Art Review Co-Editors*

During February and March 2006 three collaborative digital art exhibitions occurred in Manhattan and Brooklyn, U. S. A. and Seoul, Korea. The exhibits were available on the Internet as part of a cooperative graduate art education course between Columbia University and Seoul Women's University, sponsored by the New York Korean Cultural Service and the Arts Council of Korea. The course/conference, entitled *Virtual Conversations across Visual Cultures: Cultural Identity in Korean Computer-Mediated Art*, investigated contemporary Korean art theories and practice. Events included a three-day conference with international speakers, a panel of Korean artists, a performance, and simultaneous exhibits in Columbia's Macy Gallery, Brooklyn's Pearl Street Gallery, and Seoul's Bahrom Gallery. On display were the works of Korean artists, Ms. Kyungwon Moon, Ms. Soonok Jung, Mr. Shin Il Kim, Mr. Taejin Kim, Mr. Sungdam Hong, Ms. Soonhwa Oh, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, Mr. Yikwon Peter Kim, and twenty Korean students from Seoul Women's University.

Among the group of exhibited works in Columbia's Macy Gallery, Soonok Jung's large-scale drawing with complex web-like details caught our attention. Using images of tubes and pipes, Jung depicts a transgender cyborg that goes beyond the unification of two gender categories. Jung uses an electronic pen and a computer to render images that are transferred to transparent vellum drawing paper sandwiched between plexi-glass sheets. Her works contain a technological substructure composed of a syncretic blend of drawing skills and digital software. Jung expresses her desire to be free from issues related to her Korean identity and go beyond cultural and gender boundaries. In her irregular net-like drawings, life is represented by entities that appear isolated and disconnected yet tangentially linked. In a macro-view her drawings are like Mayan hieroglyphic temple paintings sustained by connections among the present, past and future. Complete images appear, disappear, reappear and then decompose into composite elements. Her artwork demands many hours of labor and the final computer-mediated statement blurs the line between the subdued and the



emotional. In our fast paced contemporary life, Jung's drawing invites viewers to take time and discover what is inside the maze of pipes, tubes, nuts, and bolts.

Yikwon Peter Kim presented performance art in the Macy Gallery, based on his ancestors. He explained his thoughts about the roles of artists: "I strongly believe that artists have the invisible power that can lead our society and can reach out to influence the way people live their lives. As a result, I am compelled to reveal the power that exists in my art practices."



While Jung and Kim are living and making art in the U. S. A., some artworks in the exhibitions came from art students attending Seoul Women's University. They displayed twenty unframed digital prints (36" x 42") from video stills in two exhibitions, one in Brooklyn's Pearl Street Gallery and the other in Seoul's Bahrom Gallery. The exhibition was entitled "*Filtering Everyday*," and it focused on exploring cultural identity in contemporary Seoul. The instructor Taejin Kim asked his students to develop an individual concept and make a visual and written statement using mixed/multi media— painting, drawing, performance, audio, digital photography, and video. The students had to investigate an issue of Korean cultural identity in daily life through the medium of their choice and create images with computer-mediated art. Each work revealed a personal interpretation of identity and a constructed perspective replete with multiple questions and statements about gender, self-identity, and status in the technologically advanced society of South Korea.



Eunyoung Kang's work, entitled "*Caution*," warned viewers that the human brain had to be approached with trepidation as it often produces accidents or thoughts that are dangerous. We might misperceive the brain as a rational computer but it has emotional elements that produce unpredictable thoughts. She made a connection between computer processing and the human brain noting the mind has emotions a

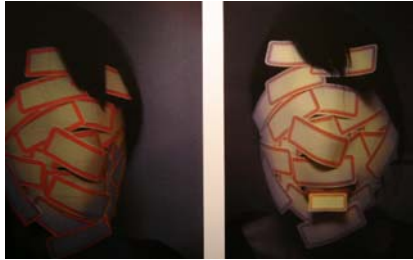
computer lacks.

Jisun Yeum's work, "*Me as a Fetus*," took us into the world of emerging consciousness where sensory input is filtered and mediated by the mother's womb. After people experience life, is there an urge to return to simpler times when they were children? If life is a painful experience, should adults dwell upon a safer pre-natal existence? Her unnatural baby was a lab created surrealistic



virtual fetus with multiple eyes super-imposed on its head in an artificial environment.

Seunga Hong's face taped over with blank paper labels, entitled "*Timid Exhibition*," hesitantly revealed her identity while concealing her inner emotions.



A label generally describes the content of a folder or container, but her blank labels did not reveal what was inside. The muted mouth and bandaged eyes could neither speak about nor see life. She remained hidden under overlapped paper labels that concealed her identity and emotions. She longed for affirmation while concealing intimate feelings. The outer appearance and inner feelings

constructed her being. The viewer was tempted to peel off the labels to discover the person inside. There was a contradiction of hide and seek where opposite feelings clash with each other.

Most of the works in the exhibitions dealt with blended themes of conflicting self images and individual perspectives on traditional and contemporary Korean culture and life. After viewing the works, we were left with a feeling of being neither here nor there. This conflicted sense of self-awareness and otherness was accelerated by global communication that placed the viewers in two geographic and cultural locations simultaneously. These artworks, based on daily life and identity issues, reflected a strong desire to be part of technological development. Pressures from globalization and the desire to succeed in Korea and America contradict the desire to reestablish a stronger Korean cultural identity through art. The Internet accelerates the rate of cultural depersonalization while eroding traditional Korean cultural identity. According to Professor Graeme Sullivan, co-coordinator of the exhibition at Columbia University, the image of the artist as someone who moves purposefully within and between cultures has current resonance. This dual sense of critical distance and inherent connection is an aspect of contemporary art. Art ideas can invigorate discussions about culture, communities, and the curriculum because they can be adapted to the local environment.

What is a better way for an artist or a curator to present and share a cross-cultural global conversation about differences and similarities between Seoul and New York City than through computer technology? Digital media offer an opportunity to move from the physical space of the gallery into the virtual space. A concentrated effort was made to examine how artistic practices can expand multi-cultural conversations and critiques when facilitated by digital technology and the Internet. The speakers, digital artwork, performance, a panel of artists, and computer-mediated art shows interfaced not to reach a conclusion but to expand and explore and raise further questions about aesthetics and issues of Korean cultural identity.

**Acknowledgement:** We express our thanks to the faculty at Teachers College Columbia University; Dr. Graeme Sullivan, Chair Arts & Humanities Program; Dr. Judith Burton, Director of Art and Art Education; and Ms. Borim Song, Ed.D. candidate and conference co-coordinator, for providing information about the events and access to the artworks. We also extend our acknowledgments to Macy Gallery (<http://www.tc.columbia.edu/ceoi/virtualconversations/artists.html> ) and Boris Curatolo, Director of Pearl Street Gallery (<http://pearlstreetgallery.net/index.html> ).

### **Recommended Citation in the APA Style:**

Caruso, H. Y. & Caruso, J. (2006). Digital Art and the Internet. *Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education*, 8(1). Retrieved your access month date, year, from [http://www.eastern.edu/publications/emme/2006spring/art\\_review.pdf](http://www.eastern.edu/publications/emme/2006spring/art_review.pdf)

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