

Changing Roles of Cultural Identity within Digital Art Practices

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The visual arts provide us with an opportunity to reflect on “what we have become” rather than merely to examine what could be created based on the conditions we have.¹ In this respect, the artworks of contemporary artists can help viewers revisit who they are and how they understand their experiences in this rapidly changing world. The creative journey of an artist often entails a careful investigation of his or her own cultural and societal environments. With the development of digital technologies, the definitions of community and culture have changed and need to be reconsidered using critical inquiry. This is because there exists a big “difference between traditional forms of community development and what happens in digital spaces.”² Globalization has blurred cultural distinctions and borders, to some extent. In particular, as a result, the defining of each individual’s cultural identity has become a much more complicated process.³ These changes and challenges imply a need for new theories and critical perspectives in examining how contemporary artists approach their cultural identities; the meaning of identity may evolve as an artist travels back and forth across geographic, cultural, ethnic, and virtual boundaries in the course of an artistic journey.⁴

In an attempt to explore the conference theme of “aesthetic responses to the multiple and often contradictory realities that people navigate” in today’s world of globalization and digital technology, this presentation discusses how contemporary artists understand their cultural identities while creating and presenting digitally-based artworks. The main focus will be the artistic explorations of three Korean artists who have been successful in the international art world: Atta Kim, Shin il Kim, and YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES. Using a digital process, Atta Kim creates large-scale photographs that deliver the artist’s self-reflexive messages about the meaning of human existence and his own unique interpretation of self, others, and the world in relation to the formation of identity. Shin il Kim is a conceptual artist who is deeply interested in the relationship between the traditional and the innovative, the visible and the invisible, and the East and the West, making animation videos and installation pieces. As a two-person group, YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES works actively across the globe, making net art pieces with creative narratives accompanied by music. These two artists explore diverse social, cultural, and political issues in a poetic and philosophical manner; virtual reality and identity are important elements of their art making.

1. Nadine Kalin, “Art’s Pedagogical Paradox,” *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research* 55.3 (2014): 199.

2. Ron Burnett, *How Images Think* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 159.

3. Borim Song, “Redefining Cultural Identity in Digital Art Practice: Artistic Journeys across Cultural Boundaries and Ethnic Borders” (2009).

4. Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito, *Re-collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

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The computer plays a primary role in an artist's processes of presentation and expression, as a window and mirror.⁵ Presenting and representing one's cultural identity through artistic creation is not a process forced by societal or political factors. Rather, it is a more personal and organic process of incorporating what an artist encounters on a daily basis. Artists constantly negotiate their cultural identities—consciously or unconsciously—in personal, spontaneous, and artistic ways. In this negotiation process, artists become aware of the roles of art and artists in society, and their freedom and responsibility in artistic practice. They also witness the mixing and hybridization of cultural values. By going beyond the boundaries between the traditional and the modern, the old and the new, and the known and the unknown, contemporary artists who create digital artworks negotiate their own cultural identities, and this creative and critical process offers meaningful implications for today's world.

5. Jay D. Bolter and Diane Gromala, *Windows and Mirrors: Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003).