

# 6 Redefining Cultural Identities in Digital Art Practices: Artistic Journeys across Cultural Boundaries and Ethnic Borders

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During the past several decades, globalization has blurred the borders among cultures, to some extent. The development of computers and the Internet has accelerated the collapse of cultural boundaries and changed the way people experience cultures; thus, defining one's cultural identity is now a more complicated process. These changes imply that approaching the concept of cultural identity in the new artistic practice of digital art cannot be based only on a traditional understanding of what culture means in society and how it interacts with art.

A number of art educators and cultural theorists have pointed out the changes in cultures in the digital age and the artistic implications of these shifts (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Bolter & Gromala, 2003; Burnett, 2004; Freedman, 2003; Langer & Knefelkamp, 2001; Ndalians, 2004; Paul, 2003). In particular, Burnett (2004) states that traditional "cultural distinctions" need new definitions and require a more complex view. He insists that we should reconsider the idea of community in computer-based communication and states that there is a big "difference between traditional forms of community development and what happens in digital spaces" (p. 159). For example, in the words of Burnett, communities created in the virtual world only exist as long as they are in need or as long as community members want to keep communicating with one another.

This chapter critically examines the changing roles of cultural identities in artistic practices in the age of globalization and digital technology and their implications for higher education. This study is based on the following research questions: Given that cultural boundaries and ethnic borders are collapsing and new theories and practices of cultural identity are apparent in the digital era, how do artists understand their cultural contexts and what are the implications for art education? Furthermore, how are critical

perspectives and practices used to negotiate artistic and pedagogical identity within these changing cultural contexts?

## Critical Inquiry into the Changing Roles of Cultural Identities in the Age of Globalization and Digital Technology

This study mainly focuses on the conceptual and artistic outcomes of a conference/exhibition project entitled *Virtual Conversations Across Visual Cultures: Cultural Identity in Korean Computer-Mediated Art*, which was presented at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City in 2006. Highlighting the theme of cultural identities in Korean digital art, this project consisted of a 2-day academic conference and three concurrent exhibitions, one of which took place at Macy Gallery, Teachers College. In order to explore the ideas and responses of conference presenters and participating contemporary artists, this study investigated the verbal presentations and written statements of the seven conference presenters, e-mail-based interviews with six participating artists, and their artists' statements and artworks. The conference participants were people of diverse backgrounds, including college professors, art critics, artists, art educators, and graduate students with various education majors. The six contemporary artists who participated in the Macy Gallery exhibition and interviews included YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES (two group members), Sung-Dam Hong, Soonok Jung, Shin il Kim, and Taejin Kim.

The conference/exhibition project took 3 years of planning. One goal of the project was to explore the potential of art ideas as agents of cross-cultural change in art education. While organizing this project, I, to some extent, conceptually depended on a conventional definition of cultural identity based on ethnic distinctions. However, as a variety of ideas,

perspectives, and opinions were exchanged through the conference programs and in the digital artworks created by Korean artists on view, it seemed to be apparent that we needed to go beyond the ethnic and geographic background of the country and to use a filter of critical perspectives to fully understand the concept of cultural identity in digital art. Consequently, the project explored diverse ideas about what cultural identity means in current society, and the kind of role it plays in digital art practice.

### Personalizing Cultural Identities: Artists' Perspectives

The capacity of artists to transcend physical and conceptual boundaries in exploring cultural identity was described by a presenter, Graeme Sullivan, as a "migratory" process because "artists, after all, are migratory as they explore physical traces that navigate pathways across cultural places and conceptual spaces" (Sullivan, 2006, p. 2). He described the way artists often personalize their cultural experiences through artistic journeys:

The image of the artist as a migratory individual who moves purposefully within and between cultures has

a particular resonance these days. This is especially so with artists who reside on both sides of the mythical East-West divide, and even more so with artists for whom their Asian heritage is the core experience from which they launch their artistic journeys. Whether traversing physical places around the globe, or traveling within virtual spaces, there is a dual sense of critical distance and embedded engagement that characterizes much of contemporary art. (Sullivan, 2006, p. 2)

Through e-mail-based interviews, the participating artists revealed how they explored and traveled back and forth across cultural and geographical boundaries and how they internalized the concept of cultural identity through their digital art practice. For example, artist Sung-Dam Hong pointed out that "self-reflection" is an important factor in his art. Through his artistic practice, he critically examines social issues and political events in his country and reveals hidden problems and violence on the part of the government. Hong claimed that, without his constant self-reflection, he would resemble the target that he had been criticizing, which he described as a monster.

Except for Sung-Dam Hong, whose artistic goal is a search for his cultural identity in a sense, most of the participating artists did not purposefully present

### Figure 1

Sung-Dam Hong, *Breakaway, the Century of Sound and Fury*, video installation, 1999. Used with permission from the artist.



their interest in cultural identity. In fact, while selecting artists for the Macy Gallery exhibition, as curator I focused on finding artists whose artistic journeys were spontaneous, flexible, and free—exploring their culture and society through a self-reflexive process and incorporating the findings into creative artwork. This is because it can be argued that presenting/representing one’s cultural identity through artmaking or, finding it while viewing a certain artwork, is not a process forced by cultural, societal, or political factors. Rather, it is a more personal and organic process of incorporating what artists encounter in their everyday lives from critical perspectives and a creative mindset. Artist Shin il Kim also shared these ideas in his interview comments:

I do not try to show my cultural identity in my artwork. In the process of artistic practice, a Korean cultural identity or a certain mixed cultural identity can spontaneously emerge. But, I tend to avoid leaning on one side and, as a result, try to mix the East and the West. However, my Korean sense is stronger, so, in many cases, my works are visually viewed as those with strong Eastern cultural values. I think that, in this process of repeated mixing, I can find another cultural identity of me. (personal communication, March 7, 2007)

At the conference, YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, an artist group with two members who create Net art, presented their Net art pieces exploring the conference topic, instead of giving a regular lecture. They provided their critical views on being forced to form a united national character under the name of cultural identity. The following is the text

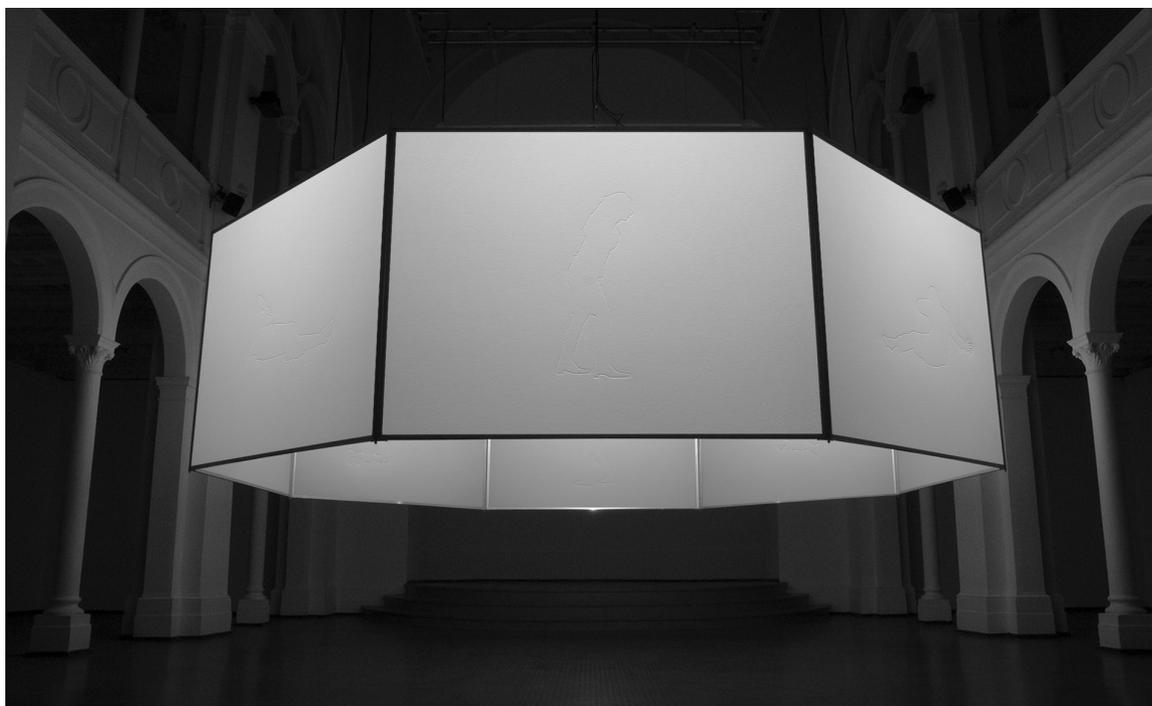
featured in one of the Net art pieces by YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES (2007) that were introduced at the conference, entitled *CULTURAL IDENTITY AND NOTHINGNESS*:

Cultural identity and nothingness. Or perhaps we are not. And that is the theme that we would like to address briefly today. Who we are, where we live and work, and what we do. In other words, cultural identity, or perhaps, a lack of cultural identity. Nothing. People who have no identifiable culture. People whose culture is a mishmash of odds and ends. People, we hope, like ourselves, lucky people who don’t have the burden of representing a given cultural identity...What, though, does this world have to do with so-called cultural identity? And, in particular, Korean cultural identity? Nothing, we hope. We have no idea what Korean cultural identity is. Or is not. And frankly, we don’t care if we are creating it or working against it. This, we might add, is perfectly normal.<sup>1</sup>

During their interview, the members of YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES stated that, as artists, they consciously put themselves into their work but did not try to think what it meant to them and their art. Given my question about the revelation of themselves in their work, the group members answered, “We don’t really know...In fact, we’re not trying to reveal so much as to hide ourselves in our work” (personal communication, April 12, 2007). The artists’ responses offer important implications for how we can understand the roles of cultural identities in artistic practice in this ever-changing society that is full of digital technologies and virtual communications. As artists who work on Net art—mostly in a virtual format—the members of YOUNG-HAE

## Figure 2

Shin il Kim, *The Transubstantiation*, 2880 pressed line drawings on paper, sound, 8 video scenes, 8 rear projection screens (the size of each screen: 234x177cm), 8 DVDs, 8 video projectors, 4 speakers, a sound from Dalai Lama’s collection of talks, “Live in a better way,” playing backward, loop, sound, 2005. Used with permission from the artist.



CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES considered the presentation and representation of cultural and societal components to be a “burden,” viewing them as aspects in opposition to art.

However, it can be argued that the reason why viewers are excited about the works of these artists is that, to some extent, the viewers find some linkage between what the Net art pieces present and their own lives. And this linkage may be, at some point, closely related to society and culture. For example, one conference participant reflected on the Net art pieces, focusing on her cultural learning:

YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES emphasize the negative aspects of cultural identity that breed, “nationalism, oppression and demagoguery,” but we are still able to learn about modern Korean life from them. From their work I found out that Seoul is crowded, has traffic jams, movies, and cell phones. People are very much engaged in the corporate life-style. There is little cultural diversity. I learned that foreigners feel like outsiders, Korean food is very spicy. (personal communication, February 28, 2006)

It seems that cultural and societal factors are not opposed to art, at least for viewers who try to appreciate and communicate with artworks. Interestingly, the YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES artists also stated that finding those cultural and societal connections and implications in their work is “your job”—what viewers or interpreters should do (personal communication, April 12, 2007).

In contrast, artist Shin il Kim, who stated that he did not attempt to intentionally reveal his cultural identity in artwork, viewed cultural and societal contexts as an integral part of his art making: “I think that the main function of art lies in communicating with others through visual languages, so it is imperative to think about society and culture to expand the scope of communication” (personal communication, March 7, 2007). As shown in these statements, the artists whom I interviewed were constantly negotiating their cultural identities—consciously and unconsciously—in personal, spontaneous, and artistic ways.

### Negotiating Cultural Identities and the Role of Art

Through their interviews and conference presentations, the participating artists described how they negotiated their cultural identities in art making, and the main issues that emerged were the roles of art and artists in society and their freedom and responsibility in artistic practice. To artist Sung-Dam Hong, communicating with other people through cultural exchanges is a critical role of artistic practice. In his view, the computer’s capability that makes it easier

to copy things and to communicate with others may promote a uniqueness of each culture, rather than blurring boundaries among diverse cultures.

*So, So Soulful*, a Net art piece that YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES created for the conference, is an insightful example of redefining cultural identities in today’s world. This art piece was created for the conference on cultural identity in Korean digital art but presented hardly any Korean cultural symbol or context. Instead, the main geographical and cultural backgrounds of the narratives in the art piece were Japan and the US. To my question about this choice of cultures, the artist group replied:



**Figure 3**

YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, *SO, SO SOULFUL*, Net art, 2006. Used with permission from the artist.

...we thought it would be interesting to show that ‘Korean cultural identity’ isn’t always what it seems to be. That a good part of that identity can be intertwined with Japanese cultural identity and American cultural identity. That ‘Korean cultural identity’ is what one makes of it. That ‘Kenji’ might be Korean, or that the nameless female narrator might be Korean. That appearances are deceptive. That life is complicated, oftentimes in a good way. That the global mixing of cultures and identities, although tragic in a purist sense, is a source of hope for many. (personal communication, March 21, 2007)

The artist group’s statement suggests that, in the age of globalization and digital technology, cultural identities cannot be understood and interpreted based only on conventional distinctions among cultures and nations.

Artist Shin il Kim expressed a similar idea about cultural identity in contemporary society, pointing out the mixing of cultural values. According to him, cultural identities are changing to a great extent due to globalization and the expansion of the Internet technologies, and these changes blur cultural and philosophical boundaries among countries. But, he also noticed the continuous impact of conventional ethnic boundaries on the understanding of cultural identities today. Thus, Kim focused on the hybridization of diverse cultural identities and insisted that cultural identities should be understood within the contexts of the past, the present, and the future.

### **Experiencing Virtual Identity**

People's interest in *virtuality* has increased with the development of digital technology. This concept of virtuality has also changed the way we understand our identities, to some extent. During his conference presentation, Graeme Sullivan defined digital technology as a "place," not a thing or a tool. In this context, the YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES artists create Net art in a new place that is virtual. As they actively use this virtuality of their art medium, their artists' talk was presented in the form of Net art—an online presentation through the Internet network. Even though the artists participated in the conference physically, their presentation was narrated by their virtual spokeswomen, Victoria and Lola.

What was apparent in the Net art presentations of YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES was the interaction between the virtual and the real. All the ideas in the presentation were provided through the *virtual* narrators, not by the artists. However, *real, physical* conversations with the artists that took place at the conference's panel discussion and during their interview implied that the ideas were those of the artists themselves. At the conference, some of audiences were not familiar with the form of Net art and looked confused about the artists' virtual presence. Therefore, in the panel discussion, topics such as virtuality, communication between artists and viewers, and the role of art were addressed and shared in light of the works by YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES.

### **Interacting in Between Cultures: Artistic Journeys Within and Beyond Cultural Boundaries**

This study was based on an assumption that in this era of digital technology and globalization, artists often explore cultural contexts beyond cultural boundaries. This collapse of cultural borders in artists' free and flexible journeys was demonstrated in the cases of YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, Soonok Jung, and Shin il Kim. According to the data, these artists believe that traditional boundaries among countries and cultures do not play as important a role as they did in the past. After their critical and reflexive examination of conventional cultural distinctions, they emphasized the need for new theories and practices that facilitate the changes in the current era. This result resonates with what Ecker (1990), Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001), and Burnett (2004) insist upon regarding the changes in cultures, communities, and artistic practices due to the development of computer technology. While Ecker (1990)

emphasizes the infusion of cultural diversity and its educational implications for cross-cultural art education, Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001) highlight the complexity of cultural identity in today's world by maintaining, "there is no such thing as 'an' African American culture or 'a' Native American culture or 'a' Jewish culture" (p. 7). The research findings in this study also reaffirm Burnett's (2004) ideas about the changes in how culture and community are interpreted in a digital-based society.

However, concurrently, the data indicate that there were also artists who did not agree with the idea of blurring conventional cultural boundaries. In the case of these artists, culture and cultural identity are explored mostly within traditional distinctions among nations and ethnic groups. For example, artist Sung-Dam Hong believed that cultural exchanges happen within cultural boundaries. He insisted that the advancement of digital technology can increase the uniqueness of and enrich the cultural heritage of each culture, rather than blurring the borders among cultures.

The data indicate that the participating artists find mixed cultural values in their societal environment. During their interviews, they often focused on cultural hybridization and collisions that are apparent in current societies. While some participants understood cultural identity beyond their own ethnic distinctions, others still remained within these boundaries. While some participants interpreted cultural identity as related to a certain national character within the context of homogenized culture, others focused on the need to explore cultural contexts beyond conventional ideologies from the past, particularly because of the digitization in artistic practice and, in general, in the lifestyles of today. One common pattern emerging from the results was an emphasis on the will and role of artists as free and open-minded creators in the high-tech age of cultural changes. The ideas of educators such as Carr-Chellman (2005) and Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001) are examined as part of this discussion.

### **Artistic Freedom in Mixing: The Will and Role of Artists within Cultural Collisions and Hybridizations**

The issue of mixed cultural values was raised by many participants, and this concept is shown to be important in interpreting cultural identity in the digital era. This context of mixing in cultures was particularly apparent in the cases of YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES and Shin il Kim. These artists presented thoughtful ideas about their role in this



**Figure 4**

Soonok Jung,  
*Internal Landscape*,  
mixed media  
installation,  
2006. Used with  
permission from the  
artist.

digital age, when diverse cultures crash into each other and are hybridized to some extent. Particularly, the concepts such as cultural *collision*, *hybridization*, and *mixing* were highlighted by these artists.

Most participating artists focused on presentation and expression. They seemed to believe that the way in which their works might serve as a representation of current cultures and societies was beyond their discipline. The data reveal instead that the primary consideration of the participating artists is to express what they think and feel while living their everyday lives. During their interviews, the notion of artistic freedom was addressed by most of the participating artists. In many cases, incorporating artists' cultural identities into their artwork accompanies the presentation of certain cultural symbols, involving representation and interpretation. This was apparent in the case of artist Sung-Dam Hong, who focused on the topics of Korean political, societal, historical, and cultural events and their meanings. But some artists in this study found that to intentionally present certain cultural symbols to represent their cultural identities went against their will and freedom to express themselves in their art making, to some extent.

This appears to be why many artists in this study, including YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, Soonok Jung, and Shin il Kim, stated that they

did not intend to consciously show their conception of cultural identity in their artworks. But this does not imply that they are not aware of their culture and cultural identity in artistic practice. In this study, all of the participating artists expressed their personal interest in the ever-changing culture of today and showed their deep understanding of the process of cultural changes. Rather, they seemed to view their freedom and will to express their artistic interests as their goal. The artists considered the interpretation of their cultures and identities as represented in their works of art to be a function for the viewers. Thus, most artists in this study were interested in communications and interactions with their viewers and audiences.

The data suggest that computers play a primary role in artists' processes of presentation and expression. Also, computers sometimes serve as guidance for viewers' interpretations of and interactions with digital artworks. The findings concerning artists' digital art practices resonate with Bolter and Gromala's (2003) theory of "window and mirror." In their view, computers serve as a window and a mirror—tools for presentation and representation. Through a digital interface, artists view the world—both physical and virtual—and reflect on themselves. In this way, the digital interface serves as a window to see the other side of the world and a mirror to reflect on their own

**Figure 5**

Taejin Kim, *Art, Market*, video installation, 2005. Used with permission from the artist.



appearance and environment. Many ideas of the participating artists about their culture and self support this theory of “window and mirror.” The artists’ focus on their artistic freedom and will to choose their own subjects and express them in very personal ways also parallels Goodman’s (1996) view of the computer as “a filter that selectively screens, colors, and constructs a new reality” (p. 19).

### **Digitization in Artistic Practice: Cultural Exploration beyond Homogenization and Nationalism**

Another important issue raised from the data is whether cultural identity can be understood within the context of national character. This finding was particularly apparent in the responses of participants with a Korean cultural background. Some participants agreed with this idea, while others emphasized the need to go beyond this view of cultural homogenization. The research participants often related the notion of cultural identity to tradition and history, because they thought that they could find Korea’s unique character in its traditional culture. Many of the Korean presenters at the conference emphasized striking a balance between traditional culture and Western practices and theories to preserve their unique cultural heritage. On the other hand, this tendency to focus on building a certain national character under the name of cultural identity was criticized by some artists in this study.

This critical view on nationalism and cultural homogenization was particularly apparent in the ideas and artworks of participating contemporary artists. These artists seem to be flexible, open, and adaptable

when personalizing the concept of cultural identity. While creating digital artworks, they often explore the notions of culture and cultural identity beyond ethnic and national boundaries. Therefore, many artists in this study explore cultural identity beyond the country’s homogenized culture and nationalism. As seen in the case of YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, even the artists’ cultural background hardly impacts their artistic experiences. The use of digital technology, which enables artists to experience cultures in virtual spaces and communities, seems to expand and deepen their flexible cultural exploration beyond ethnic borders and national boundaries. These findings confirm the theory of Ballengee-Morris and Stuhr (2001), who highlight the conceptual “fluidity” of geographical boundaries in national and global cultural identities.

In addition, some conference participants’ view of computer technology as a shortcut for the country’s development reflects the “technological determinism” that Carr-Chellman (2005) criticizes in relation to technology-based education. In Carr-Chellman’s view, technological determinism is dangerous as “social systems are by their nature non-determinist” (p. 129). Therefore, the data suggest the importance of understanding, interpreting, and defining cultural identity beyond the traps of nationalism and homogenization. Also, it can be argued that art educators and students who conceptualize cultural identity in a limited context can learn from the digital art practice of contemporary artists, who are conceptually flexible in adjusting to the cultural hybridization and collision that are happening in the current time.

## Redefining Cultural Identities: Tradition and Transformation

According to the research findings, the artistic journeys of artists using digital technology take place both within and beyond traditional cultural boundaries. A collapse of cultural boundaries that often happens in interactions in digital-based societies today does not necessarily result in unifying or homogenizing cultures. The data indicate that, instead, cultural changes create an increase and enrichment of diversity. Through cultural hybridization, the scope of cultural diversity has been expanded, and this goes beyond just a mixture of diverse ethnic groups. As a result, new theories and practices regarding cultural identity formation, which is a more subtle and profound process, are required.

This chapter reveals that the ideas of tradition, transition, and transformation play a main conceptual role when the artists and art educators in this study explore cultural identities in digital art. Their cultural exploration and self-examination in artmaking is, in a way, a process of negotiation within the cultural changes apparent in today's cultures, societies, and communities. In addition, the process of negotiating artistic identity and pedagogical identity is, in many cases in this study, based on the concepts of presentation, representation, and expression in digital art practice. This interactive process of artmaking and meaning-making based on the participants' understanding of cultural collision and hybridization as well as cultural transformation and change suggests the existence of intercultural and trans-cultural movements in today's tech-based society (Burnett, 2004; Mesa-Bains, 1996).

Thus, the data revealed in this study reaffirm the importance of challenging cultural assumptions that are embedded in our understanding of interactive relationships among technology, art, and culture (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2004). This means that, by going beyond the boundaries between the traditional and the present, the old and the new, and the known and the unknown, contemporary artists who create digital artworks negotiate their cultural identities, and this creative and critical process offers implications for art educational practice. According to the findings, it can be argued that the transformative and transitory characteristics that are apparent in digital art practice should perhaps be fully understood by art educators through open and flexible instructional approaches. This will be particularly important for higher education, where students' learning can be directly connected to the art practice of contemporary artists.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 <http://www.yhchang.com/NOTHINGNESS.html>