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Visual Reconnaissance

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The body of cultural production known as contemporary Asian American visual art has long included references from American popular culture. While such inclusion was partly indebted to postmodern discourses that attempted to reveal the artifice embedded in the boundaries separating "high" and "low" culture, it was mainly due to the implied function of Asian American art as a project of reactive critique. Images and references to American popular culture enabled many Asian American artists to resist the ways in which Asian American subjects were positioned in the mainstream American imaginary. As the artist Ken Chu once stated, "Asian Americans have been so defined by popular imagery that the only way to thoroughly discuss Asian American stereotypes is by using such imagery.[1] Reaching its greatest point of visibility in the early 1990s, references to popular culture within material works of art often made their way into the work of art as an object of critique.

More recently, however, other artists have refashioned popular culture's role within the material work of art. No longer the object of critique, it assumes renewed importance as an important means through which critique is enacted. Capitalizing on their immediate recognizability, images and images of practices taken from popular culture readily dominate the viewer's attention. One tends to view these images and practices in light of the contexts within which they came to be known on a widespread basis. What actually

determines interpretation, however, are the formal principles determining the function of each work. Often these principles are themselves imported from the visual tropes of advertising and other channels of mass media.

The use of immediate recognizability of images and images of practices in popular culture, however, allows the form's agency to remain largely undetected. The recognizability of images and practices from popular culture provides the artist with an alibi, releasing him or her from having to directly enact such representation. More important, such recognizability extends the scope of the work's political utility by inducing the viewer to generate his or her own readings. In the case of artists such as the Filipino American Paul Pfeiffer and Nikki S. Lee, this utility might be described as visual reconnaissance, whereby the formal depiction of images and images of practices within popular culture effectively reveals attitudes, preconceptions, and other constructions that might otherwise remain out of sight.

Strategic Turns

This is not to imply that earlier works incorporating references to popular culture consistently used images or practices taken from popular culture as the object of critique; for instance, the works of Tseng Kwong Chi and Martin Wong readily incorporated images from popular culture without such images acting as a self-evident subject of critique. Consider also Ken Chu's 1988 mixed-media work *I need some more hair products*. Densely packed within a small physical area are brightly colored icons highly suggestive of various landmarks of American adolescence: a red convertible, a hot dog, a record player, a bowling pin, and of course the mirror. Although varied in hue, all the images possess a similar level of saturation, which causes the eye to read them as part of a continuum. Coupled with its central placement within the space of the work, the relative largeness of the image of the Asian male compels the viewer to assume the presence of a narrative. The eye weaves in and out of the center, absorbing different images and in turn causing the viewer to adjust his or her view of the image.

With the image of the convertible, the road, the bowling pin, the record player, and above all the blond-haired, white male in the cartoon bubble, one particular reading consistently rises to the forefront: the Asian male's internal feelings concerning the trappings of American adolescence, and in particular adolescent desire. Even without knowing any biographical information about the artist or his prior activism with regard to promoting Asian American art,

Ken Chu, *I need some more hair products*, 1988. 21 x 25 inches. Acrylic on foamcore.

the formal logic of the work strongly moves the viewer toward a particular interpretation. Chu's generous use of bright, primary colors, as well as his reduction of forms to their fundamental contours (a single undulating curve for the road, an oblong tip suggestive of a surfboard), injects the work with a levity and immediate visual appeal often lacking in politically minded works of the time. Nevertheless, the work is a first-order representation to the extent that the images, taken together, outweigh formal organization and relationships as the generators of meaning.

The concerted importance placed on the agency of the artist, as opposed to the viewer's response, melded well with the sociohistorical context in which works such as *I need some more hair products* were made. The early 1990s in particular were characterized by a number of large-scale shows that promoted works by Asian and Asian American artists. Notable examples included "Across the Pacific: Contemporary Korean and Korean American Art" at the Queens Museum in New York in 1993, the landmark survey "Asia / America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art" at the Asia Society in 1994, "An Ocean Apart: Contemporary Vietnamese Art from the United States and Vietnam" at the San Jose Museum of Art in 1996, and "At Home and Abroad:

20 Filipino Artists" at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco in 1998. These exhibitions, as the curator Alice Yang has pointed out, emphasize the social context in which identity is situated. In this brief period, mainstream visual arts institutions began to be actively receptive to artists of color making works reflecting their experiences as nonwhite individuals.

There was, however, an intense awareness that this receptiveness was only temporary and that artists had to act quickly to claim a share of the art world for themselves. As Thelma Golden, the curator of "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, one of the most controversial and prominent shows mounted during this period, observed, they knew they had to "work hard while the 'getting was good' because we understood that a moment might come when it would no longer be."[2] The curator of "Asia / America," Margo Machida, contended that Asian American artists deliberately magnified their visibility through self-representation, namely, by linking conspicuous images of their racial selves to "the social and physical fabric of the nation."[3] For her, such self-representation played a crucial role in contesting representations imposed by the supposed American "mainstream" and in responding to a specific and finite moment within art historical time.

From the mid-1990s to the present, the frequency and prominence of these exhibitions, contingent on common ethnic roots or ethnic-specific experiences, have decreased with the waning of the art establishment's appetite for multicultural novelty but also because of the increasing disinclination of artists to concede their claims to difference, especially material differences of form within their respective bodies of work, for the sake of contributing to the notion of a unified "Asian American." In a letter to Godzilla, the now defunct Asian American visual arts organization that was instrumental in kindling a politically effective notion of Asian American art during the 1990s, artist Simon Leung wrote, "What strikes me is the demand such a voice of identity places on the viewer during such instances when it is the organizing principle of an exhibition."[4]

Leung's comment indirectly pointed to the problems with the "identity" rubric: though useful politically for its ability to consolidate the efforts of many Asian American artists attempting to be heard as individuals, it ironically prevented any attempt to formulate a holistic interpretation of individual works. The heuristic value of the artwork lay less in its status as a material object than in its perceived capacity to illustrate a particular critic or curator's intent. Resulting assessments often crystallized images into iconographies

of displacement and racial anxiety. This happened even when the material forms and formal relationships used as supporting evidence more convincingly pointed to other, sometimes contradictory readings. A work's images were immediately seen as direct indices to a particular experience external to the material work rather than being initially considered as part of a discrete, physical system contained within specific material boundaries such as the picture frame, the film loop, or the beginning and end of a performance.

Even with hindsight, it has proven immensely difficult to break away from this programmatic mode of interpretation. In her recent introduction to one of the most recent additions to Asian American art criticism, *Fresh Talk / Daring Gazes*, Elaine Kim refreshingly engages in a close analysis of the early San Francisco-based painter Yun Gee (1906–31). Her exploration of the work's formal operation is adequately sustained to reveal the indeterminacy of meaning; the viewer, she concludes, cannot ultimately know whether the figure in the painting is "committing suicide or trying to soar like the birds in the sky above him."[5] Her analysis, however, returns to the paradigms of coherent, often nation-based subjectivities; she expounds on the ability of "Asian American" art to engage with "American" art, even when, as in the case of Byron Kim's monochromatic canvases, it is clear that the engagement takes place on the level of visual conceptualization physically articulated through the manipulation of form and its affect rather than on the level of textual rhetoric espoused by the artist or the viewer.

Other cultural critics have actively sought interpretative alternatives, however. Many look to rhetorics of transnationalism, globalization, and the like, though not as a means of confirming the subjecthood of Asian American cultural production. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, for instance, perceived the abandonment of the nation form as it pertained to culture to be the "most exciting dividend of living in modernity at large."[6] More recent is Kandice Chuh's argument for the active incorporation of transnational modes of analysis as an important means of reframing Asian American studies as a potent method of critique rather than a futile pursuit of abstract definition.[7] Transnationalism, she contends, offers the possibility of undermining the assumptions upholding the myth of coherence, with regard to both the paradigms of the singular American nation and the consolidated Asian American experience.

Other critics, of course, have long understood the pitfalls of globalization and its rhetoric. Witness the early warnings of Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, who speculates that transnationalism may aggravate what she perceives as "liberal

pluralism's already oppressive tendency to 'disembody' ";[8] Dorinne Kondo, who cautions that transnationalism is easily absorbed into the falsely benign guise of "universality," which often exists in tandem with the privileging of Euro-American norms;[9] or Dorothy Wang, who states that delinking race from signs of locality "run[s] the risk of reifying something phantasmatic called 'Asianness.' "[10]

Most artists are keenly aware of these pitfalls. Yet most also understand the dialectical nature of globalization's rhetoric. While not directly addressing Asian American cultural production, the art historian Miwon Kwon's rejection of both the psychic alienation of nomadism and the fetishization of the stable, suggested that locality has special resonance for Asian American artists, an increasing number of whom travel back and forth between the United States and their countries of ethnic origin. Kwon takes issue with the notion of the liberated artist "freed" from the shackles of locality, yet she also emphasizes the need for a studied distance from the antinomadic nostalgia for a settled place proposed by the art historian Lucy Lippard among others.[11] Citing theorist Henri Lefebvre's configuration of a dialectical, rather than oppositional, relationship between the abstractions and particularities of space, Kwon contends that "it is not a matter of choosing sides. . . . Rather, we need to be able to think the range of these seeming contradictions and our contradictory desires for them together, at once."[12]

Kwon's call for a dialectic approach reflects the predicament of artists stuck between a sincere desire to enact change through critique and the desire to partake in the products and methods of globalization. Particularly included in the latter are the images and practices of popular culture. As Paul Pfeiffer comments, "Globalization does not only have to be of the corporate kind, with the frightening erasure of political meaning and agency that it suggests. Globalization can also be an antidote to American provincialism and its crippling effect on our creativity."[13] His functionalist approach reflects the approach found in his and other artists' works, where practices and images found in popular culture function as points of provocation rather than the central objects of critique.

How the viewer extracts representation from the work, however, depends on the work's ecology of form. In this context, *ecology of form* refers to a work's fundamental material structure as it is defined by recursive principles that bind its parts together as a coherent visual function.[14] In the case of Pfeiffer and Lee, these principles are closely related to those employed in advertising: the contingent relationship between images visible on a defined material field, the size

of the images vis-à-vis the defined field of the image, and the physical dimensions of that field. It is principles like these that help to reveal the presence of negative attitudes and systems, including those pertaining to globalization, that might otherwise remain obscure. When coupled with the alibi of popular culture's instant and overwhelming recognizability, principles of form appear to disappear; in the brief few seconds that, on average, constitute the entire encounter between the viewer and the material work of art, a work's formal ecology remains subordinate to the immediately visible—and above all familiar—image.

One can describe this symbiosis between form and popular culture as a strategy of visual reconnaissance. The military provenance of this term alludes to the strategic nature of many works that seek to covertly uncover various phenomena of power external to the work (e.g., the inevitable superiority of capitalism as an economic model or the rationalization of essentialist categories in the name of efficient information processing) by having the viewer reveal his or her allegiance to them. This kind of stealthy operation is necessary, for the oppressive elements of any powerful institution, system of belief, or regime are cunningly intertwined with its benefits, including easier access to mobility, expanded possibilities for creativity, and better opportunities for dialogue with multiple groups and individuals. In addition, the oppressive aspects of multiple forms of power are widely propagated through visual forms of communication or the modes through which images are organized into systems of visual depiction. Individual images have less importance than the overall ways in which they are put together. As a result, an imperative exists for producers and critics to address this issue directly.

Visual reconnaissance's greatest importance, though, stems from its ties to notions of the local, the immediate, and the specific. Based in large part on the definition of *visual reconnaissance* in military strategy as the intentional act of visual observation as a means of obtaining information about a defined, chosen geographical area, visual reconnaissance in relation to visual art serves as both a marker and a reminder of the importance of material form, its logic, and its structure as active agents in the project of critique. The heuristic value of tracing practices of visual reconnaissance, then, lies in the inevitable prioritization of material form as the foremost index to a work's meaning. It forces the critic to deduce his or her evaluation from a visible, confirmable body of evidence accessible to all viewers. In this way, the practice of visual reconnaissance offers a methodological escape from the kinds of disembodied, irrelevant, and speculative aspects of globalization's rhetoric resoundingly

criticized—and so enthusiastically embraced—by numerous cultural critics, Asian American and otherwise.

Advertising as Critique: Paul Pfeiffer's Visual Tropes

As an illustration of the workings of visual reconnaissance, take the digital works of multimedia artist Paul Pfeiffer. Celebrated for works such as *The Pure Products Go Crazy* (1998), *The Long Count (I Shook Up the World)* (2000), and *John 3:16* (2000), Pfeiffer chooses digital media as his medium of choice for its implied supremacy over "the will of the creator."[15] His meticulously crafted digital remasterings of popular films and athletic events have frequently been seen as commentaries on the way in which advertising and mass media tend to reduce the individual self to variables that are easily consumed, digested, and discarded. By using strategic editing and looping techniques to effect the absence or repetition of key images—techniques that are immersed in the dissemination of popular culture—Pfeiffer does not depict so much as mimic the tactics used by large global behemoths to manipulate individual perceptions.[16]

Such appears to be the interpretative consensus. Yet the agency of Pfeiffer's work lies in the formal structure that compels the viewer to generate representation from his or her encounter with the material work. His work replicates key tropes found in the formal structures of advertising, three of which are especially pronounced. The first is centripetality: the field of the image has a definite center, whether or not it coincides with the actual physical center of the projector screen. In *The Long Count (I Shook Up the World)* (2000), a digital triptych showing a three-minute clip of boxer Muhammad Ali's most famous matches, including his 1964 match against Sonny Liston, the ring and the audience are left intact but all images of the boxers have been expunged. Yet the erasure only emphasizes the concentric organization of the images projected on the screen. The crowd is an amorphous, shifting entity surrounding the boxing ring. Conversely, the ring is a space segregated by parallel ropes, which serve as a barrier preventing the eye from perceiving real spatial depth. The eye inevitably returns to the physical center of the projection screen.

Other works feature competing claims to playing the role of the center. *The Pure Products Go Crazy* (1998) shows a well-known scene from the popular Tom Cruise film *Risky Business* (1983). Here Cruise plays an imaginary guitar (the famous "air guitar" scene) in a moment of postpubescent liberation, wearing

Paul Pfeiffer, *The Pure Products Go Crazy*, 1998. Dimension variable. CD-ROM, project, mounting arm, and bracket. Courtesy of Projectile, New York.

Paul Pfeiffer, *John 3:16*, 2000. 7 x 7 x 36 inches. LCD screen, mounting arm, and 2′7″ video loop. Courtesy of Projectile, New York.

nothing but white underpants and Ray-Ban sunglasses. In the loop, Cruise is unceremoniously trapped within the suffocating confines of a small projector screen orgiastically and helplessly wriggling on a couch in repeated sequence. Only a scant two seconds in length, the loop arrests the image of Cruise within the field of the projector screen. The image never rises, never changes position; indeed, the image is almost completely parallel to the couch on the left-hand side.

Far more visible and recognizable than any other image on the screen, the image of Cruise appears to be at the center. Yet here the image is arrested, ossified, made into an object. The image's reduced status to that of a piece of furniture redirects the viewer's attention to the coffee table in the middle of

the screen as the real center of the image field. Still, Pfeiffer allows the viewer enough clues—namely, the underwear and socks—to recognize and contextualize the image. He or she may still perceive the image of Cruise to be the real center of the image field.

Two material readings thus exist: one is the image of Cruise as a long, tubular form within a larger system of geometric forms, and the other is the image of Cruise as an excerpted figure taken from, but necessarily tied to, a context external to the material work. The viewer accommodates both readings by locating commonalities between the possible interpretations that might result from either route. The first assumes the image to be ontologically identical with those around it—within the image field set up by Pfeiffer, the image is just a piece of furniture, albeit with the capacity for repetitive movement. The second reading summons the phenomena pertaining to the film—its establishment of Cruise as a major film star, the desires of heterosexual adolescent males, and the claims of the film industry to construct new myths and recycle old ones. The common subset between these two readings is an interpretation of Cruise as a product, on an ontological par with an inanimate object, manufactured and packaged in the same way as a couch in a suburban home or a multi-million-dollar film.

The trope of centripetality is enhanced by a second trope, a transformable kind of image magnification that consciously attempts to elevate the image to the status of an icon. Excessively used throughout advertising, it is a trope in which the camera zooms to magnify a particular image, imbuing it with a larger than life aura. The efficacy of this trope is based on the viewer's realization of the magnification process. He or she realizes this through two sets of contrasts. One is the proportional difference between the sizes of the projection or television screen and the subject when the viewer perceives both as objects in the physical, material world. A beverage commercial, for example, often features a sudden close-up of the product being marketed. Its actual size in the physical world may be six inches or so, but it comes to occupy more than half of an average-sized television screen. Its affect comes to have a disproportionately high impact on the stationary viewer.

The other contrast is the relational size of the image vis-à-vis the perceived surface area of the image field. An endless loop comprised of over five thousand images of basketballs collected from various NBA games, the primary image of *John 3:16* (2000), is that of a basketball whose physical size measures no more than seven inches. Yet it covers the entire surface area of the projection screen. The title resonates with the basketball image's domination, evok-

ing the oft-quoted biblical verse heavily invoked by Christian missionaries ("For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but will have eternal life").

From this, the viewer easily derives multiple interpretations: that the ball is a virtual object of worship, granting life "eternal," as literally denoted by the players forever embedded in a perpetual loop on an LCD screen; that the use of the verse John 3:16 insinuates the blasphemy of those who manipulate globalization for their own purposes of accumulating capital; and, finally, that those who exploit the power of the deified ball and its aggregate promises of upward mobility, material affluence, and celebrity glamour are interested not in breathing life into professed believers but in capitalizing on those viewers who have disarmed their natural vigilance through the inertia of fascination. The viewer realizes certain antihumanistic tendencies at work behind the glowing facade of transnational kinds of popular culture, dovetailing with Pfeiffer's own words: "The diaspora is not about us; it's about Michael Jordan. To see him soar through the air, a sparkling shiny creature traveling at the speed of light, landing in every first, second and third world city all at once, is to understand you play a minor role in a very big game."[17]

All these secondary readings have much to do with the third trope, the elasticity of duration and its affective potential. The effects of Pfeiffer's works vary according to their length. As with *John 3:16*, the duration of the loop in *The Pure Products Go Crazy* is so brief as to make the image appear fixed in time. The viewer perceives the image as an object. In *The Long Count*, however, there is some trace of a narrative trajectory as the faces in the crowd change expression. A sense of expectancy greets the viewer as he or she anticipates the boxers about to emerge in the ring. Waiting and waiting, the viewer realizes that the expected event will never occur; the loop starts again. A few more minutes into the encounter, the repetition turns into tedium as expectations rise and fall. Yet another few minutes and the viewer becomes physically exhausted, his or her will to perceive sapped by repetition.

These three tropes greatly multiply the work's capacity for representation. However, the capacity of the work to act as a node within a larger visual system, including both advertising and visual art, also offers a ready excuse for ignoring, or obscuring, the artist's ethnicity. Following Pfeiffer's catapult into the New York art world limelight as a result of his participation in the Whitney Biennale in 2000 and his designation as the inaugural winner of the Bucksbaum Prize, the world's largest monetary prize given to a living artist, he was suddenly reinscribed into a universalizing rubric that had no space for his

experiences as a nonwhite individual. During the awards ceremony for the Bucksbaum Prize at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Pfeiffer was presented "purely" as an artist working in multimedia with no mention of his ethnic heritage or sexual orientation, despite his previous involvement in and collaborations with Asian American arts groups such as Godzilla, as well as gay rights groups. In like manner, critical assessments of his work have consistently emphasized him as an "individual" artist, willfully or myopically ignoring how ethnicity contributes to the formation of real individuality.[18]

Granted, the mechanics of Pfeiffer's work, or the components of a given work and how they are put together to form a cohesive entity, support these attempts to deethnicize him. His emphasis on editing techniques such as splicing and looping catalyze almost all readings of his works. Yet, although a treatment of the mechanics through which a work is created is necessary, if only to circumvent the supposition that the primary merit of Asian American art is somehow embedded in the visualization of ethnic heritage, the glib erasure of his ethnicity is equally disturbing. It begs the question of whether the ascendancy of a nonwhite into the pantheon of the contemporary art establishment is dependent on that artist's surrender of his racial identity. As the writer Luis H. Francia rhetorically asks, "Are artists forced to check their ethnic baggage at the door?"[19] This example of the Bucksbaum awards ceremony points to an especially visible way in which identity is refashioned to suit the needs of those who control access to capital (in this example, the Selection Committee of the Bucksbaum award and the Whitney Museum) at the expense of revealing those parts of the self not in conformity with bright-line categories.

Hiding in Plain Sight: The *Projects* of Nikki S. Lee

How, then, to respond to this situation? Perhaps by the most overt means available. We turn now to Nikki S. Lee, whose series, *Projects*, demonstrates a remarkable experiment in remaking identity. Begun in 1997, the series consists of fourteen sets of multiple snapshots in which the artist posed as a member of various American cultures and subcultures, from a skateboarder in San Francisco to a hip hop groupie in New York. The sole exception is *The Schoolgirls Project* (2000), which is based on the artist's student days when uniforms in Korea were mandatory. Trained as a photographer, first as an undergraduate and later in graduate school in New York, to which she moved from Seoul in 1994, Lee is a keen connoisseur of styles, able to sort through and discern

surface differences in costume, gesture, and environment. This is evident in the level of detail in her masquerades, such as the brand-loving yuppie banker in the blue shirt with the beefy white trader boyfriend in one scene from *The Yuppie Project* (1998) and the Jheri-curled neighborhood diva with a gold nameplate necklace in *The Hispanic Project* (1998).The artist avers that her preparation for the masquerade begins with "going to the places where people shop for clothes. More than anything you can tell what people are like by what sort of things they buy for themselves."[20] Yet she adds that "while style is important in my work I don't analyze the style. . . . That would be stereotyping. I become the style."[21]

Her premise of identity as an intrinsically malleable notion coheres well with one of the implicit premises found in curatorial and critical thinking pertaining to Asian American art: the struggle to assert and have others recognize the Asian American artist's capacity for autonomous decision making. As implied by the immense number of writings and exhibitions featuring some variation on the binary logic of "Asia" plus "America" (often dressed up in the rhetoric of hybridity), the enterprise of Asian American visual art thus far has been deeply invested in the notion that the Asian American artist can choose whether to be racialized or not. Lee's choices of attire, posture, and gesture certainly confirm the possibility of the autonomous artist; in *The Tourist Project* (1997), for example, she departs from the most likely model of the proverbial tourist from East Asia by donning tube socks, sneakers, and nylon fanny packs identical to those worn by the tourists that flood Times Square from the American Midwest. She borrows from the archive of popular idioms, but her cues are mixed, even erroneous, at times. This is not a reflection of her failure to assimilate but evidence of her agency manifested as the subjective choice.

What really enables Lee's hyperconsumption to exceed its presumed initial role as merely another form of self-representation are the visual tropes of exceptional centripetality and the dissembling capacity of magnification to eliminate the presumed boundary between the worlds of the viewer and that captured within the picture frame. Here the trope of centripetality becomes exceptional because it is an aggregate of formal relationships and tactics. Lee does not take the photographs herself but entrusts their shooting to a friend or even a bystander. Yet she implicitly chooses each photograph's formal organization by virtue of her relationship to other objects and subjects whose presence is expected within the photograph. Throughout the *Projects*, Lee is often at the physical center of the photograph, and the centrality of her image is reinforced by two primary modes of overall formal organization. One is a

Nikki S. Lee, *The Hip Hop Project (1)*, 2001. 21.5 x 28.5 or 30 x 40 inches. Fujiflex print. Courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow Artworks and Projects and the artist.

Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project (4)*, 1998. 21.5 x 28.5 or 30 x 40 inches. Fujiflex print. Courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow Artworks and Projects and the artist.

concentric model in which contextual props, or other members of a particular group, radiate from her. The second is the implicit frame, in which Lee may not occupy the physical center of the photograph but instead becomes the center by virtue of the other figures, which form an amorphous frame around the body of the artist as in scenes from *The Hip Hop Project* of 2001.

In both models, the artist often launches the trope of exceptional centripetality by means of her outward, frontal gaze. This leads to something of a paradox. Lee's gaze, positioned at the approximate eye level of the anticipated viewer, immediately draws the viewer's attention into the realm within the work—the specific context in which she finds her subjects, whether it be San Francisco (*The Skateboarders Project*) or various sightseeing locales around New York City (*The Tourist Project*). At the same time, however, the frontal gaze induces the eye to consider Lee as part of the material, physical world of the viewer. The barrier between the world of the viewer and that within the photograph gradually dissolves, causing the viewer to conflate the image of the artist with the artist in the flesh.

A scene from *The Yuppie Project* shows the artist outside the window of a boutique walking a small, well-groomed dog. In a sleek, fur-trimmed black coat, Lee appears to be overburdened with consumption—an expensive leather handbag and the telltale light blue of a Tiffany shopping bag. Slightly off center, Lee's black coat provides visual balance between the black suit of a doorman or passerby on the far left and the glossy finish on the doorframe of the boutique. Further consolidating black as a structural anchor for the photograph as a discrete visual unit are the clothes of a young white woman in the lower right-hand corner, who stops to pet Lee's dog. Her garments, too, are black, as is what appears to be the recognizable matte black of a Barneys New York shopping bag. At periodic intervals, patches of high-value color appear—the bright blue Tiffany shopping bag, the pale orange interior of the illuminated boutique, the light gray overcoat worn by the young white woman. The regularity with which this occurs suggests that the entire photograph is a world contained within the photographic frame. Yet the frontal gazes and smiles of the two women directly connect with the viewer, thus troubling the claims of the photograph to depict a world independent of that of the viewer.

Even more effective in compelling the viewer to disregard the presumed boundary between the world within the photograph and that of the viewer is the trope of magnification. An example is *The Hispanic Project*, which is set in New York City's Hispanic, particularly Puerto Rican, neighborhoods. Turned to the side, the artist looks out at a point that ostensibly lies outside the frame

Nikki S. Lee, *The Hispanic Project (25)*, 1998. 21.5 x 28.5 or 30 x 40 inches. Fujiflex print. Courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow Artworks and Projects and the artist.

of the picture. This forces the viewer into a state of oscillation; on the one hand, Lee's clothes and the background scene position her within a specific world far removed from the gallery contexts in which her works are almost always viewed. On the other, the image of the artist is blown up to such an extent that she presumes to be a part of the viewer's immediate, physical world. The presumption is far less overt than it would have been if the image of Lee's face and torso had replicated the actual dimensions of the artist.

Yet the presumption is strengthened by the presence of acceleration compelled by the sudden magnification of the artist's image vis-à-vis the background. Part of her head is cut off by the photograph's frame, which implies that she belongs to a world outside the photograph. The unidentified man on the far right is also an excerpt, but this image clearly belongs to the world within the photograph on the basis of its inevitability of scale; that is, the image of the man coincides with the viewer's expectations concerning scale within the field of the photograph. Perceiving the interplay of foliage and sky in the far background, the viewer progresses to the bystanders milling about. Some appear to be bigger than others, but all coincide with the viewer's expectations of scale. The viewer next perceives the figure of the man, which,

though somewhat of a jump from the tiny figures of the background, denotes a certain slowness in the pace of magnification. One expects a larger image in the foreground, but these expectations come to an abrupt halt as one perceives the image of Lee, front and center. Adorned with flashing gold jewelry, a bright green, low-cut dress, and a tiny rose tattoo, the image of Lee is not too far away from the colorful spectacles of David LaChapelle, for whom Lee once worked as an intern. The image immediately yanks the viewer into the world constructed by the images seen within the photograph.

It is this inseparability between the worlds of the viewer and the work that seems to make interpretation of *Projects* an almost absurdly facile task. Clearly one enters into the interpretation via the image of the artist. The apparent collapse of the viewer's world and that of the artist allows the viewer to read the work as a contemporaneous, mimetic part of his or her own world.

Or so the symbiosis of Lee's masquerade and the ecology of forms would have one believe. The exceptional centripetality of Lee's image and the connoisseurial eye for personal physical appearance make it the prime object of interpretation, yet it is remarkable how so many viewers structure their ensuing interpretations around the Asianness of Lee's physical features. Many perceive the figure of Lee as evidence of either the Asian immigrant body and its supposed capacity for unlimited malleability or the Asian body's inexorable foreignness. For some, the artist's appropriation of such cues triggers a definition of hybridity as physical and psychological malleability. As the curator Thomas Finkelpearl contends in an appropriately titled essay, "The Western Mirror," Lee enacts East-West self-portraits indicative of her integration into mainstream American society.[22] By blending into so many various fragmented social contexts, the artist, in Finkelpearl's view, implicitly conceives of the Asian body as a malleable object subsumed into the fabric of American society.

Others insist on the foreignness of the Asian body, itself betraying an inability to trouble one's own systems of ordering. Often the language used to describe the work is tinged with insinuations of deception, pathology, and even criminality, as words such as *undetected* and phrases such as "her Asian features almost always give her away" are constantly used to describe her work.[23] Even well-intentioned critics fall into this quagmire; in his otherwise thoughtful short essay on the claims of whiteness to invisibility and uniqueness, as dissected by Lee in *The Yuppie Project*, the critic Maurice Berger writes: "Though she masquerades in the fashions, make-up, and body language of white yuppies her Asianness and her visceral discomfort read as distinctly as their whiteness."[24] He categorically excludes other, more supportable readings

(Was Lee trying to fit into her own assumptions regarding the mental or emotional states of those in finance-related jobs? Was she trying to set herself apart from the other bankers and corporate law types despite a similar banality in dress?) of Lee's rigid posture and lack of facial expression in favor of one that positions her as a misfit.

The urge to describe Lee as a fugitive or deviant of sorts reveals the extent to which the perceivably non-Western artist in the Euro-American environment is constantly reconfigured into the binary of East versus West. This is arguably done so that the viewer can obtain psychological relief, for in uncovering Lee in her multiple performances he or she puts Lee back into her place, so to speak, and preserves the integrity of the system of ordering through which the viewer makes the external world personally legible. Intensified to the point where the only logical point of entry into the work is the body of Lee, the trope of exceptional centripetality deceives the viewer through the least evident means possible.

But the political utility of Lee's work is also based on another premise, one not so happily coincidental with the notion of the autonomous Asian American artist. Another look at the formal structure through which Lee deploys her masquerades reveals a vampiric kind of siphoning at work. Other participants exist almost as props in comparison with the artist, who, gazing directly at the viewer, almost always occupies the foreground and the center of every photograph's frame. Based on the compression of cultural difference into surface imagery, Lee's *Projects* suggest that tangible individuality can only be possible when the individual in question is juxtaposed against others. The artist states: "I always feel like I have a lot of different characters inside and I was curious to understand these things."[25] Or "I am interested in identity, but not identity politics. In dressing up as a Japanese living in the East Village or a yuppie, I become reacquainted with different parts of my own self."[26] But her most important statement is the question that recurs in each work of the *Projects* series: at what cost to other selves do I reaffirm my own?

Are Lee's *Projects*, then, too successful in inducing the viewer to reveal his or her preconceived notions? More than Pfeiffer's, Lee's brand of visual reconnaissance works exceptionally well as a strategy. It comes at a price, though. At its extreme, the practice of visual reconnaissance reifies a willful tendency within critical discourse on Asian American art to consider the material form of the work as a dependent variable of the artist's presumed intent to enact a specific representation. Such assessments have frequently led to an implicit assumption of the work of art as a strategy, shutting other agentive possibilities

down for the sake of preserving the coherence of a particular message of critique.

To check this tendency, an evaluation of visual reconnaissance must be accompanied by a constant awareness of its basis in the relationships generated by the perceived material form of the work. To do so would offer three advantages. First, it directly challenges the mode of interpretation in which discussion of an artist's work turns on its alleged capacity to act as a direct metaphor for various allegories of racialized experience. Second, it reaffirms the validity of popular culture as a subject for serious critical inquiry on the basis of its visual forms. Looks matter. Third, it broadens the possibilities for critique, but, perhaps most urgently, it doubly serves as a reminder of critique's capacity for suppression when the viewer willingly surrenders his or her conceptual facilities to the enterprise of reactive critique. For visual reconnaissance to really work, it should be understood as a conditional heuristic. Hopefully it will be but one step en route to the moment when critics gladly relinquish programmatic modes of assessing the viewer's encounter with visual works of art or, more specifically, when programmatic modes of assessment are no longer necessary.

Notes

1 Interview with the author, November 23, 1996, New York City.

2 Golden, "Mama said . . . ," 73. "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art" was organized by Golden at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1994. It generated a staggering amount of publicity and criticism from progressive and conservative viewers alike, who objected to what was considered derogatory stereotypes of African Americans.

3 Machida, "Out of Asia," 59.

4 Quoted in Yang, "Asian American Exhibitions Reconsidered," 97. Godzilla was the name of a group of Asian American visual artists and arts professionals based in New York founded by artists Margo Machida, Ken Chu, and Bing Lee in 1990.

5 Kim, "Introduction," 6.

6 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 23.

7 Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 56–57.

8 Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered," 18–19.

9 Kondo, *About Face*, 19–20. Kondo is speaking of theater, but the same concerns are highly applicable to visual art. Indeed, one might argue that the dangers of universalism loom even larger considering the persistent exclusion of contemporary non-Western art from school curriculums and mainstream discussions. This exclusion in the form of omission is at odds with the discrediting

of Enlightenment-style universalism in many academic circles, especially the humanities.

10 Wang, review of *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora*, 274.

11 Kwon, "The Wrong Place."

12 Ibid., 35–36.

13 Electronic mail communication with the author, March 25, 2001, New York City.

14 The notion of "formal ecology," I suggest here, is partly indebted to the seminal art historian Alois Riegl's idea of *strukturprincipien*, which assumes a work to be composed of certain fundamental principles that exist throughout. Riegl's notion, however, emerged from his most famous concept, *kunstwollen*, an ambiguous term for which the best English translation is probably "the will of the work" given Riegl's emphasis on dynamicism as a characteristic of the work of art. Hans Sedlmayr, a key intellectual descendant of Riegl, borrows Edgar Wind's phrase, "a real force," to interpret what Riegl meant by the notion of the kunstwollen. See Sedlmayr's preface to Riegl's *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Sedlmayr, "Preface," xvii–xviii). The preface was originally written in 1927.

15 Quoted in Carr, "Icon Remix," 65.

16 Paul Pfeiffer, interview with the author, March 16, 2001.

17 Pfeiffer, "Quod nomen mihi est?"

18 During his graduate school years in New York in the early 1990s, Pfeiffer was involved in Asian American arts groups such as Godzilla, as well as gay rights groups, but he maintained his ties to Filipino geospatiality through frequent travel and exhibitions.

19 Francia, "Memories of Overdevelopment," 25.

20 Nikki S. Lee, interview with the author, April 30, 2001, New York City.

21 Quoted in Hamilton, "Dressing the Part Is Part of Her Art."

22 Finkelpearl, "The Western Mirror," 164. Thomas Finkelpearl was the curator of the North American section of the Third Gwangju Biennale, entitled "Man + Space," in which Nikki S. Lee was a participant. Her selection caused some controversy among Korean critics and curators, who argued that Lee, a Korean citizen, should have been included in the "Asia" or "Korea" sections of the exhibition.

23 Paul Parcellin comments, "The idea that an Asian woman can blend and go undetected among Hispanics or white rednecks strains credulity" ("In Focus"). The tone assumed is one of *incredulity*, as if it would be an utterly preposterous idea for the "Asian woman" to cross what seems to be impermeable demographic categories. Less problematically, but still evocative of the prevalence of categorization as a conceptual tool, Merrily Kerr writes, "In gesture, makeup and clothing she plays her parts perfectly, but her Asian features give her away every time, resulting in an initially confused reading" ("Li'l Nikki 'N' Friends," 78).

24 Berger, "Picturing Whiteness," 55–56.

25 Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee," 100.

26 Nikki S. Lee, interview with the author.