

Teaching

Nikki S. Lee

ARTIST

Nikki S. LEE

(nik-key s. lee)

이승희



Nikki S. Lee

BORN

1970, Kye-Chang, South Korea

LIVES & WORKS

Seoul

THEMES

**Community
Identity**

ART MEDIUMS

**Photography
Performance**

“The work I do always needs to involve others, and that’s mainly because of my views about my own identity. I realized I couldn’t understand who I am without the people around me. I believe that it is only through my relationships with others that I can see myself.”¹

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

Nikki S. Lee grew up Lee Seung-Hee in the small village of Kye-Chang, South Korea, where she learned about foreign cultures through television, magazines, and music. As a child, Lee dreamed of being a movie actress. She developed an interest in filmmaking, but her parents encouraged her to pursue photography instead. Lee received a BFA from Chung-Ang University in Seoul in 1993. She moved to New York City in 1994 and changed her name based on a list of names a friend compiled from that month’s issue of *Vogue*. In New York, Lee studied fashion and commercial photography and worked as an assistant to fashion photographer David LaChapelle.

One of her earliest works is perhaps her most famous. In *Projects* (1997–2001), a series Lee started while she was completing her master’s degree at New York University, she transformed herself through clothing, makeup, gesture, and posture into an individual from various social communities and ethnic groups. The first project in the series was *The Drag Queen Project*, and after that she completed *The Punk Project*, and *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project*. In some cases, such as *The Seniors Project*, Lee worked with a professional makeup artist to transform her face and body, and in other cases, such as *The Skateboarders Project*, she had to learn new skills to adapt to the selected group. In making the series, Lee acted as part sociologist and part performance artist, with ties to other contemporary artists such

as photographer Cindy Sherman, who also explores the constructed nature of identity and representation by transforming herself into different personas.

With each new *Project*, Lee began by observing people, noting how they presented themselves and behaved. She then introduced herself as an artist and spent several weeks with each group. A friend or member of the group took photos with a simple snapshot camera to achieve a low-tech rather than professional look. Lee intentionally made these choices to raise questions about assimilation, cultural identity, and social behavior. She believes that individual personalities are fluid and that her explorations of other identities are extensions of herself. She noted, “Essentially life itself is a performance. When we change our clothes to alter our appearance, the real act is the transformation of our way of expression—the outward expression of our psyche.”²

1 “Photographer Nikki S. Lee Can Turn Into Anyone,” *The Creators Project*, July 21, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol8xpJltPVI>.

2 “Lee Can Turn Into Anyone.”

View and Discuss



Nikki S. Lee, *The Punk Project (6)*, 1997. Thermal dye transfer print, 76.8 × 102.2 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Marsha Lynn Gordon 2001.3

→ Look at photograph *The Punk Project (6)* (1997). For this series, Lee observed self-identifying communities then transformed herself into a member of it through dress, makeup, and behavior. She hung out with the group and had others take photos of her with them.

How would you describe the group in this photograph? What has she done in order to appear like a member of it?



Nikki S. Lee, *The Tourists Project* (9), 1997. Thermal dye transfer print, 40 × 59.7 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Danielle and David Ganek 2003.95



Nikki S. Lee, *The Seniors Project* (14), 1999. Thermal dye transfer print, 59.7 × 40 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Danielle and David Ganek 2003.97

→ Look at photographs *The Tourists Project* (9) (1997) and *The Seniors Project* (14) (1999). Born in South Korea, Lee became interested in different groups of American people through magazines, television, and music. One critic noted, “Her work is also unmistakably informed by Asian notions of identity, where identity is not a static set of traits belonging to an individual, but something constantly changing and defined through relationships with other people.”³

→ These photographs were taken by a passerby or group member with an everyday camera rather than professional equipment. Snapshots are casual, quick pictures that often use automatic settings for flash, focus, shutter speeds, and other functions. They predate the iPhone camera.

What is your reaction to this quote? Do you agree with this idea of changing identities for yourself? Why or why not?

What do you notice about the elements in Lee’s photos? One critic said that Lee’s “snapshot aesthetic is partly what convinces us that she belongs—along with her uncanny ability to strike the right pose.”⁴ What do you think of this idea?

Classroom Activities

Debate Identity

For *Projects*, it was important for Lee to have all of the photographs taken by a member of the group that she chose to spend time with for each work. She said, “In Western culture, identity is always ‘me,’ in Eastern culture, the identity is ‘we.’ Identity is awareness of others.”⁵

Challenge students to debate the benefits and pitfalls of identity constructed as an individual versus identity constructed as a collective. How do these two perspectives differ? How might the two perspectives overlap?

Curating Snapshot Photography

With a snapshot or smartphone picture, one click produces the image. These types of photographs are often taken quickly, without much preplanning or setup. Lee’s images look casual and not like those made by a commercial or fashion photographer. She does choose, however, when they will be taken and curates the final images—deciding which ones become final artworks.

For this project, assign students to take at least thirty snapshots with an instant camera or a phone camera. When they are finished, ask students to discuss the elements of these pictures, including cropping, composition, focus, and lighting. Then challenge them to select three photographs to show to the class. Why did they choose those images?

5 William Hamilton, “Shopping With: Nikki S. Lee; Dressing the Part Is Her Art,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/02/style/shopping-with-nikki-s-lee-dressing-the-part-is-her-art.html>.

Classroom Activities

Trying on a New Identity

Trying on a new identity is more than just putting on a costume. Try thinking of yourself in a different way. If you are naturally introverted, try taking on the role of an extrovert. If you love jazz, take a day to be an enthusiastic country music fan. If you have a favorite sports team, try rooting for their opponent. In short, see what it feels like to temporarily change an aspect of your own identity.

Write a short essay about how it felt to take on and truly embrace this change, even if only for a short time.

Taking a Selfie

The proliferation of selfies indicates that we may all want to be able to “try on” a new image and imagine how we would feel as that part of ourselves. The act of taking a selfie allows us to play, to have fun, and even poke fun at ourselves. They can enable a brief adventure into a different aspect of self.

Imagine yourself with a trait that you aspire to have. Take a selfie of what it would not only look like but also feel like to acquire that trait. Examine that photo and consider how it projects this new and expanded sense of self.

Performance Art

Performance art involves an action or series of actions orchestrated by an artist with an established beginning and end. Due to the time-based nature of performance art, works are ephemeral, but documentation of them live on through photos, audio recordings, videos, or artifacts.

As a class, research different examples of performance art and compare the documentation of each piece.

Resources

Websites

- International Center of Photography. <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/constituents/nikki-s-lee?all/all/all/all/0>.
- Museum of Contemporary Photography. <http://www.mocp.org/detail.php?type=related&kv=6722&t=objects>.

Videos

- The Creators Project. “Photographer Nikki S. Lee Can Turn Into Anyone.” July 21, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol8xpJItPVI>.

Books

- Godfrey, Mark. “Nikki S. Lee.” *Frieze Magazine*, May 5, 2000. <https://frieze.com/article/nikki-s-lee>.
- Hamilton, William. “Shopping With: Nikki S. Lee; Dressing the Part Is Her Art.” *New York Times*, December 2, 2001. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/02/style/shopping-with-nikki-s-lee-dressing-the-part-is-her-art.html>.
- O’Sullivan, Michael. “Nikki S. Lee: New Guises, New Gazes.” *Washington Post*, July 16, 2004. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A51828-2004Jul15.html>.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist's surname is capitalized to differentiate it from her given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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