HOW DO I LOOK: IDENTITY AND PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE WORK OF NIKKI S. LEE

by

MATTHEW R. MCKINNEY

(Under the Direction of Isabelle Wallace)

ABSTRACT

Often associated with self-revelation and truth, the self portraits of contemporary Korean photographer Nikki S. Lee sit uncomfortably within this genre and raise several interesting questions: What is a performance and what is real? If Lee is acting, what about the other participants in these snapshots? And most urgently, who *is* Nikki Lee? Throughout the entirety of Lee's oeuvre, a body of work which includes both the *Projects* and *Parts* series as well as her upcoming film *a.k.a. Nikki S. Lee*, Lee destabilizes any preconceptions of a fixed self by appearing camouflaged, shifting her costume, mannerisms and props to assimilate to each subculture. This thesis, by providing a comprehensive account of Nikki Lee's photography, will examine Lee's fascination with the constructed nature of identity, and will consider how her work also prompts an interrogation of photography and its conventional association with truth and authenticity.

INDEX WORDS: Nikki S. Lee, Photography, Snapshot, Identity, Masquerade, *Projects* Series, *Parts* Series

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family. Without their unconditional love, constant encouragement, and unwavering support this thesis would never have been completed.

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Introduction

Three elderly women stand under the covered area of the transit stop at East 14th and Avenue A in New York. One woman leans forward, her stockings bunched at the tops of her orthopedic shoes. She peers through her oversized glasses, anticipating the arrival of the next bus. Although she is bundled in a heavy overcoat and scarf, the date stamp in the lower left hand corner reveals that June is but a couple days away. (Fig.1)

Inside the expansive space of an indoor skate park, two young skaters stand in front of a long wall of brightly lit vending machines, each selling Pepsi, Mountain Dew or Aquafina. Wearing knee and elbow pads, a petite Asian female with bleached dreadlocks kicks up her board; her companion, holding his helmet, positions his hand on her shoulder. On the far wall above them, a series of seven enlarged photos demonstrates the successful completion of a six step tail grind off a concrete ledge. (Fig.2)

Standing amongst the crowded streets of Time Square, an Asian female wearing a New York t-shirt, stops to converse with a man in ripped jeans and worn boots. Holding a city guide in her free hand, the woman, equipped with backpack, camera bag and fanny pack, points out a destination on a map as the man beside her looks on. In the distant background, an oversized billboard promoting Ellen Tracy's clothing line shares advertisement space with two Broadway plays: *Beauty and the Beast* and *Smokey Joe's Café*. (Fig.3)

Two women in their early thirties, dressed in thick black and brown coats, stand outside an upscale department store in Manhattan. Each carries shopping bags from Tiffany's or Barney's; each has shoulder-length haircuts with light brown highlights. In a gloved hand, one woman holds the leash of a lapdog. Fluffy and white, it has captured the attention of the other kneeling woman as all three, dog included, smile out at the unseen camera. (Fig.4)

Elderly women at a bus stop, a couple of teenagers in a San Francisco skate park, an Asian tourist at Times Square, Yuppies shopping in Manhattan: these four images appear to lack a common subject, and as such they purposefully beg a question. What is it that ties these photos together? The answer: all are photographs by and *pictures of* a contemporary Korean photographer: Nikki S. Lee. Only on second passing do these photographs cohere as snapshots: the old lady wearing gloves and a thick brown overcoat is Nikki Lee, the petite skater outfitted in padding and DC shoes is Nikki Lee, the Wall Street yuppie holding the leash of her lapdog is Nikki Lee, and, even though she is a resident of Manhattan, the stereotypical Asian tourist in her newly bought New York t-shirt is Nikki Lee, as well. Often associated with self-revelation and truth, the self portrait in Nikki Lee's work thus sits uncomfortably within this genre and raises several interesting questions: What is a performance and what is real? If Lee is acting, what about the other participants in these snapshots? And most urgently, who *is* Nikki Lee?[1]

[1] To date, there have been two monographs (*Projects* and *Parts*) and a number of articles published on Nikki Lee. However, most of the articles consist of one-to-two page reviews which only provide superficial interpretations of Lee's photography. Although these sources were helpful for gathering factual information, I believe that, due to the complexity of both *Projects* and *Parts*, Nikki Lee's work deserved a more thorough analysis.

Working primarily in Manhattan, Lee, who holds a Master's degree in photography from New York University, is typically labeled a photographer, even though her process makes this description highly problematic. While it is true that all of Lee's artistic products are photographs, her presence is not behind the camera but in front of the lens. Throughout the entirety of Lee's oeuvre, a body of work which includes both the *Projects* and *Parts* series as well as her upcoming film *a.k.a. Nikki S. Lee*, Lee destabilizes any preconceptions of a fixed self. She appears camouflaged, shifting costumes, mannerisms and props to assimilate to each chosen subculture. This thesis, by providing a comprehensive account of Nikki Lee's photography, will examine Lee's fascination with the constructed nature of identity, and will consider how her work also prompts an interrogation of photography and its conventional association with truth and authenticity.

Created between 1997 and 2001, Lee's *Projects* series, a body of work which established Lee's reputation in the art community, appears at first to be an extension of photographic series by artists such as August Sander and Nan Goldin, both of whom chronicled a vast array of people in their respective countries. Yet, for one to evaluate Lee's work as merely the continuation of this tradition would be to overlook the performative aspect of her work, a facet which often elicits comparisons with Cindy Sherman. At the same time, to try and label the *Projects* series as mere performance would be equally problematic, since her work *does* document something of the subculture she records. Indeed, Lee's method suggests her commitment to two seemingly incompatible modes: performance *and* documentation. After identifying a subculture whose customs she'd like to explore in more detail, Lee befriends various members of

this group, having already assumed the costumes, dialect and mannerisms that characterize them. From the outset, Lee reveals her intentions as an artist; however, since Lee presents herself in the attire of each subculture at her initial point of contact, the impact of this revelation is questionable. Once accepted into the group, friends or bystanders photograph Lee over a period of weeks or months, providing concrete evidence of her assimilation into the group. According to her, no photograph is preplanned, and the other people in the photographs are not intentionally positioned in any way. Once Lee feels that she has enough images for a series, a process that can last anywhere from several weeks to months, she then exits the group to begin preparation for her next project.[2] From the hundreds of photographs documenting each project, Lee selects for exhibition a handful which best capture her artistic intent. Once on display, the photographs, all roughly 30 by 40 inches, are not kept within their respective *Projects*, but are intermingled in their arrangement.

By selecting photography as her medium, Lee elicits our trust. From its conception to present day, photography has been associated with truth, a way to record and preserve a moment in time. August Sander, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank are just three examples of documentary photographers who made a career chronicling their respective eras. And though we have come to look on these photographs as constructions, there is no doubt that more than any other medium, photography comes with the promise of the real. Moreover, within the medium of photography, it is surely

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[2] Russell Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," in Nikki S. Lee: Projects, ed. Lesley A. Martin (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001), 7. When asked if she keeps in touch with anyone from previous *Projects* series, Lee responded, "It can be hard to maintain friendships afterward – for example, I did The Swingers Project after Punk, and people could really see a difference. But also, my own personality has something to do with that. I'm not the type of person who loves to just 'hang out.'" See Gilbert Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee," in Nikki S. Lee: Projects, ed. Lesley A. Martin (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2001): 102.

the pedestrian snapshot that most carries the stamp of authenticity – hence its interest to Nikki Lee who knows from personal experience that fine art photography and fashion is fraught with constructed fantasy. In contrast, the snapshot, precisely because of its presumed spontaneity and lack of artifice, can be found in photo albums, in frames on our desks, attached to our refrigerators by magnets; we take them as honest mementos of our loved ones, of vacations, of landmark events in our lives. They are the form of documentation that most likely chronicles our past, backing up our fallible memory.

But exactly how much faith can we place in these snapshots? This question lies at the heart of Nikki Lee's work, as does the related question of appearance and its equally problematic relation to identity. In fact, it could be said that Lee's entire oeuvre is full of questions without answers, as the artist herself remains somewhat elusive in commenting about her work. Concerning the reviews of the *Projects* series, Lee states, "Changing myself is a part of my identity…My work is really simple, actually…I always feel like I have a lot of different characters inside and I was curious to understand these things. I wanted to see some sort of evidence that I could be all those different things."[3] While Lee's interpretation is somewhat simplistic, her work contains multiple complex layers which demand a more thorough reading. With that in mind though, the purpose of this thesis is not to proffer a definitive explanation of Nikki Lee's photography, but rather to reveal the intentional ambiguity that encompasses all of her work. By doing so, I intend to examine the fluid, constructed nature of identity and the misattribution of authenticity established in the snapshot, both of which are key components to understanding the photography of Nikki S. Lee.

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[3] Ibid., 100.

Chapter One: Performing Gender: Transvestism and the Masquerade in the *Projects* Series

In daily life types of men and women are constantly met with who, while mainly heterosexual in their development, plainly display strong features of the other sex… Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it…[4]

- Joan Riviere -

John Berger, in Chapter Three of his book Ways of Seeing, describes the societal double standard in which a woman's presence differs from that of a man. For Berger, masculine presence has always been centered on action, defined by numerous internal traits which, as a collective whole, reflect "the promise of power which he embodies."[5] These internal traits, which immediately associate man with mind and intellect, relegate woman to the purely physical, sensual realm – her presence delineated solely by how she appears. Berger is straightforward in stating, "Men *act*, and women *appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves."[6] Berger's evaluation places the woman in a unique position; not only is she being watched by men, she must also constantly survey herself in anticipation of being seen. Due to this dynamic, it is inevitable that the female self is, as Berger says, "split into two…She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself."[7] In accordance with Berger's theory, the active process by which art is made has traditionally been a male undertaking, while the female, having to fracture her persona in anticipation of being

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[4] Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in Formations of Fantasy, eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (New York: Methuen, 1986): 35,38.
[5] John Berger, Ways of Seeing (New York: Penguin Books, 1972): 45.
[6] Ibid., 47.
[7] Ibid., 46.

seen, remains aligned with appearance and the image, as the ideal object of the masculine gaze.[8] Despite the number of paintings and sculptures which feature female bodies, the female artist is comparatively rare in the history of the visual arts since, for a woman to be an artist, she must take on both the active, masculine role of creator as well as the feminine role of object, a task that would require a further fracturing and a potential falsifying of the female's self.

Coinciding with a rise in feminist theory during the latter half of the twentieth century though, female performance artists such as Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, and Valie Export, began *using* the to-be-looked-at-ness of femininity precisely to *disrupt* the to-be-looked-at-ness of femininity. All of these artists manipulated their outward image; they took control of how they were to be seen and, by doing so, acquired some critical distance *from* the image rather than just *being* the image. Called an act of transvestism by Mary Ann Doane, this assumption of the male role for the purpose of problematizing women's passive alignment with the seen image relates plainly to the work of Nikki Lee who purposefully occupies both positions through the entirety of the *Projects* series. Moreover, in light of the subject of her very first project, it is possible to imagine Lee's self-conscious engagement with these ideas. Indeed as we shall see, the *Dragqueen Project* can be interpreted as an incredibly rich meditation on the relation of gender to art.

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[8] In her seminal 1971 article "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," Linda Nochlin offers the explanation that "art is not a free, autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual, 'influenced' by previous artists, and, more vaguely and superficially, by 'social forces,' but rather, that the total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they are academies, systems of patronage, mythologies of the divine creator, artist as he-man or social outcast." See "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Artnews 69, no. 9 (January 1971): 32.

As she was still finishing up her Master's degree in photography from NYU, Nikki Lee first began *The Dragqueen Project* in 1997 (Fig.5). Compared to her later *Projects*, the photographs from this series are somewhat difficult to access,[9] yet they are a critical collection of images which thematize the idea of disrupting and constructing identity – a concept that will prove fundamental to Lee's career. In one selection from the series, the diminutive Lee can be seen posing amongst three towering dragqueens. From the interior of a Manhattan drag club, every subject can be seen outfitted in an evening dress and stiletto heels. On the head of each clearly sits a wig, with Lee herself now transformed into a platinum blonde, or, given her surroundings, maybe even a man pretending to be a platinum blonde. Starting off with *The Dragqueen Project*, Nikki Lee immediately sets up multiple levels of ambiguity which disrupt the body as a record of identity. While the height differential between Lee and the three transvestite companions prompts a level of disbelief that all three are men, her similar appearance, not to mention her mere presence in the club, does force the viewer to at least question her sex. Adding this extra layer of complexity further complicates one's initial reading of the snapshot as either, quite naively, all women, or, more accurately, all dragqueens.

Not only do these photographs thematize disrupting identity, they also thematize the idea that one's gender changes given one's relation to the camera – in front of the lens even men are feminine; behind the lens women can be masculine. It can be deduced that, for Lee to select this particular subculture as her first foray into the *Projects* series, she had to be aware acutely of the multiple levels of transvestism involved in the images. Choosing a role where she, as a woman, pretends to be a man who, in turn, pretends to be

[9] *The Dragqueen Project* is only one of two series not included in the *Projects* monograph. Out of the numerous photographs that were made for this project, I could only locate two examples via websites.

a woman, mirrors the complex dynamic of the female artist. Though female, Lee is the artist associated with the act of taking the photograph, a masculine role; however, she is at the same time the feminine object of the photograph as well. By means of this example from *The Dragqueen Project*, which takes as its subject a woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman, we get a gendered illustration of what it is for a woman to take the active role in relation to her constructed identity. On Mary Ann Doane's account, all females are as Nikki Lee has presented herself here: women assuming the privilege of the masculine in order to problematize expectations of femininity.

As for the men in her photograph, they are not only transvestites in the literal sense of men who dress as women, but in the cultural sense of being *in* the image as well. By outfitting themselves in women's clothing, they also knowingly position themselves in front of the camera; they are now the ones on display, and self consciously they "wear" this identity as *seen*.[10] The label transvestite itself is a weighted term, since it implies that the male is *falsifying* his gender by adopting a feminine appearance. Judith Butler clarifies this issue by stating, "The transvestite's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations."[11] For Butler, the actions performed by male transvestites comply with what society understands as feminine, thereby declaring that everything is a performance – none more real than the other. However, by no means is Butler implying that male transvestites are biologically female, but that what we connotate as feminine is merely a certain set of actions, a particular look which cannot be described as "real". As Robert Storr, scholar and critic of Modern Art at NYU's Institute

[10] However, while the male transvestite may elect to take on feminine qualities, it is still inescapable that they are in fact men – a factor which further validates the female as object.
[11] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," in The Feminism and Visual Cultural Reader, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003): 398.

of Fine Arts, notes, "Modern sensibilities do not assume that the eyes are windows to the soul, and that the body is a record of identity, but that there is a gap between inside and outside."[12]

If transvestism is the name Mary Ann Doane gives to women who take up the male role of creator, the "masquerade" is the term she uses to describe the self-conscious performance of femininity by women. Discussing the masquerade, Doane states, "To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image."[13] For the female sex, the masquerade is strategic as it produces distance where none is thought to exist.[14] Applicable to any female artist who puts herself before the camera's lens, this concept is in some sense thematized in the work of Nikki Lee whose career consists of establishing distance through outward appearance. No where is this more true than in Lee's *Exotic Dancers Project* – a series centered on catering the feminine look for the male gaze.

Sauntering across the wooden stage of a Hartford, Connecticut strip club, Lee, clad in a hot pink bikini, performs for two paying customers. This example from *The Exotic Dancers Project* (Fig.6) appears at first to adhere to Berger's theory as the two seated men are actively looking at Lee, regarding her as an object of desire. Once again, Lee selects a specific subculture in which constructing gender through performance is highly evident. In fact, the occupation of exotic dancer is built upon Doane's description of the masquerade, enacting a performance in which femininity is flaunted in excess. Throughout this entire series, Lee can be found shopping for clothes, stripping for male

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[12] Cited in Linda Yablonsky, "To Thine Own Selves Be True," Artnews 102, no. 10 (November 2003): 138.
[13] Ibid., 235.
[14] The male transvestite is an extraordinarily complicated instance of the masquerade since, while the man may choose to flaunt being a man being a woman, it is unavoidable that he is still a man. He selects to perform a feminine role yet, for the man, the distance that the masquerade provides is more easily achieved.

clients, and posing with a fellow dancer outside the establishment; however, the one constant that runs through all the photographs is that Lee's face rarely registers any emotion. With the sole intention of seducing cash from the patron's wallet, the exotic dancers are, in fact, manipulating the feminine passive role for their own personal benefit, thereby raising the possibility of the masquerade, a possibility that subverts – either for monetary or cultural gain – Berger's conception of women as passive images.

Holding a hot pink dress, Lee and a fellow dancer are photographed while browsing through a rack of clothing; various styles of six-inch heels and leather outfits provide the backdrop in a store catering to exotic dancers. Instead of the provocative clothing sold by the store though, Lee is dressed in a simple yellow top while her companion has on a white shirt and overalls. This photograph from *The Exotic Dancers Project* (Fig.7) exposes the importance of fashion in the construction of the masquerade, since, without the appropriate apparel, Nikki Lee's performance as a stripper would be ineffective. Although it appears that the exotic dancer clothing was purchased new, Lee adds a further layer of complexity when, in searching for the outfit of each project, she shops at second-hand clothing stores. "I shop at cheap places," Lee reveals. "I go to a lot of thrift shops, like the Salvation Army…"[15] Thus, when Lee puts on a used shirt or skirt, she literalizes the idea that the identities of others can be tried on and borrowed. Furthermore, Lee ties clothing to identity when she emphatically insists, "When I change my clothing for the various performances, it is not meant to merely convey an encyclopedia of style but is an expression of character within my identity."[16]

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[15] Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee," 107.
[16] Gianni Romano, Italian Holiday, Artnet, 1999, http://www.artnet.com/magazine_pre2000/reviews/romano/romano12-14-10.asp, 29 March 2005.

There is no doubt that exploring the boundaries of identity through fashion has been at the heart of Lee's work since her arrival to New York in 1994. In order to pursue a career in commercial fashion photography, Lee left Korea behind and enrolled in the Fashion Institute of Technology. Lee, who took the first part of her new name from fashion model Niki Taylor,[17] not only received her associate's degree, but also had a valuable one-year internship under fashion photographer David LaChapelle, thereby establishing an integral foundation in fashion which would be critical to the success of her *Projects* series. In one section of Sylvia Kolbowski's essay *Playing with Dolls*, Kolbowski states, "Cosmetics and the elaborateness of feminine fashion codes are often regarded as elements of the manipulation of and prescription for a feminine look, or as serving a compensatory function for feminine 'lack.'"[18] For Kolbowski, the masquerade, as well as the superficiality often associated with outward femininity, is key to fashion photography's success. It is implicit in fashion photography that every aspect of the image is constructed in such a way as to induce desire for the item displayed. When we, the consumers, purchase these various articles of clothing, our hope is that we will become as desirable, or as intellectual, or as charismatic, or as successful as the model appears to be in the advertisement. It could be argued that Nikki Lee's strong background in fashion photography laid the groundwork for *Projects*, since the series would have been a complete failure if her outward appearance did not conform to her environment. If Lee had been dressed in her skimpy bikini from *The Exotic Dancers*

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[17] William L. Hamilton, "Dressing the Part is her Art," The New York Times/Sunday Styles, 2 December 2001, 1.

[18] The feminine lack discussed by Kolbowski refers to Mary Ann Doane's definition of the masquerade as "to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image." See "Playing with Dolls," in Overexposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography, ed. Carol Squires (New York: The New Press, 1999): 160-1.

Project, or if she had worn her platinum blonde wig from *The Dragqueen Project*, the financial analysts of *The Yuppie Project* most likely would have given Lee a cold response.

In both *The Dragqueen Project* and *The Exotic Dancers Project*, the constructedness of appearance is thematized; these specific subcultures are founded on rendering theatrical a certain look, a certain attitude. It goes without saying that dragqueens and strippers are enacting a performance either for the paying customer or for their own personal enjoyment. However, we typically do not question the authenticity, for example, of someone we see shopping for groceries – a middle-aged man in a polo shirt, a soccer mom driving a Suburban, a family wearing their Sunday best. Even though these subcultures may appear less theatrical, less performed, they are equally engaged in the construction of identity. In an observation focused solely on the performance of gender, Judith Butler addresses not only the importance of how we dress, but how we perform our identity. She writes, "Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."[19] Thus, the cultural signification of our appearance doesn't end with our gender; our occupations, our socioeconomic status; even our mood for the day is represented by a collection of actions, whether intentional or not, that constitutes our daily performance. Consistently questioning what is inherently real in all of us opens the door for reinterpreting the real of any snapshot we encounter. If identity can be performed by dragqueens and strippers, and if those performances can be captured in "candid" snapshots, then how much faith can we have in any photograph? In the next

[19] Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 392.

chapter, I will focus on addressing this question by examining the role played by photography in establishing the idea of authenticity.

Chapter Two: What is Authentic?
Questioning Originality and Truth in Identity and the Photograph

Seated alone in a gay bar in Manhattan, Nikki Lee stares out, expressionless, past the photographer while holding her cigarette and Amstel Light; behind her, two young women are caught in the midst of quick kiss as they hold each other's hands. Wearing an unbuttoned blue checkered flannel and a taupe undershirt, Lee, her hair cropped short with a swooping curl across her forehead, has taken on a new persona by adopting a specifically "butch" aesthetic (Fig.8). This snapshot from *The Lesbian Project* certainly functions as an example of Lee's seamless adaptation of another subculture but, in her choice of portraying a "butch" lesbian, Lee has assumed the appearance and mannerisms of the opposite sex in a series which is in many ways similar to *The Dragqueen Project.*[20] Instead of the overtly feminine, male dragqueen, Lee has now taken on the look of the masculine, female butch-lesbian.

By adopting traits that have been deemed uncharacteristic of their sex, homosexuals are said merely to copy actions that are inherently found in heterosexuals. In the article *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*, Judith Butler discusses the "homophobic charge" that homosexual personas are purely performative copies of a concrete heterosexual real. Butler concludes that "the entire framework of copy and origin proves radically unstable as each position inverts into the other and confounds the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either term."[21]

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[20] Sue-Ellen Case argues that the butch femme aesthetic is not about participating in natural sex roles, but is part of a conscious masquerade. See Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic" in The Feminism and Visual Cultural Reader, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003): 407.

[21] Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories, ed. Diana Fuss, (New York: Routledge, 1991): 21-22.

For Butler, labeling homosexuality a copy of a heterosexual origin is erroneous in that both need to coexist for the labels to have meaning. Without either sexual preference, the other would only exist as itself – neither as origin, nor as copy. In essence, Butler argues that the concept of homosexuality is based on imitation, a performance, which she defines as "a copy of an origin which is itself the ground of all copies, but which is itself a copy of nothing."[22] Not only is Butler's definition of imitation applicable to identity, and more specifically sexuality, it also relates directly to photography – Nikki Lee's preferred medium.

Although I will examine the authenticity of photography later in the chapter, it is first imperative that I discuss how, by taking on the persona of a "butch" lesbian, Lee underscores that a person's sexual preference is entirely separate from his/her outward appearance. The short hair cut, the absence of makeup, the flannel shirt with brown corduroy slacks; these are all external attributes we deem masculine. Even Lee's seated position, open with her legs positioned apart, is a mannerism that is often accepted, and expected, in males. When Lee, who is admittedly heterosexual, takes on the characteristics of a male, she displays how both masculine and feminine traits can be imitated, raising the possibility that they are always merely imitations. Because one's sexual preference falls under the larger definition of identity, the instability found in the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality can be attributed to identity as a whole. There is no original personality trait as all are merely products of imitation, which, in turn, proves the concept of a true identity to be highly problematic.

The previous statement by Butler regarding imitation shares a common connection with Jacques Derrida's comments on language, be it spoken or written. Both

[22] Ibid., 21-22.

writers propose, on their respective topics, that there is no essential meaning attached to a given sign, whether visual, verbal, or sartorial, with meaning only determined through difference. In his 1971 speech to the Congrès international des sociétés de philosophie de langue française, Jacques Derrida put forth the question, "But are the prerequisites of a context ever absolutely determinable?"[23] Although Derrida was referring to the structure of language, his question can appropriately be applied to identity since the appearance that someone projects could be interpreted as another means of communication. Discussing context, Derrida states:

> This structural possibility of being severed from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) seems to me to make of every mark, even oral, a grapheme in general, that is, as we have seen, the nonpresent *remaining* of a differential mark cut off from its alleged 'production' or origin. And I will extend this law even to all 'experience' in general, it if is granted that there is no experience of *pure* presence, but only chains of differential marks.[24]

Only through the interpretation of the dissimilarities amongst various signs can meaning be located and therefore comprehended. In terms of identity, Derrida's comments are significant in that they deconstruct the idea of an essential individual personality which in turn disrupts the concept of a true identity. Applying Derrida's assertion to the example from *The Lesbian Project*,[25] it can be presumed that Nikki Lee's short hair cut, her omission of makeup, her flannel overshirt with rolled up sleeves, are signs which only have meaning when compared with other signs.

What provides further substance to this argument is Derrida's statement that for "written communication…to function as writing, that is, for it to be legible…it must be

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[23] Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982): 310.
[24] Ibid., 318.
[25] While *The Lesbian Project* is one example that can be applied to Derrida, all of the photographs throughout the entirety of Projects make this point equally.

repeatable."[26] The use of repetition allows for an understanding through familiarity, yet in reference to identity, it is at the root of constructing the various stereotypes found in the work of Nikki Lee. For Lee to be able to integrate herself into the lesbian subculture of Manhattan, she must adopt signs that are both identifiable and repeatable. That she is able to accomplish this successfully is a testament to the fact that these traits are learned, identifiable, repeatable signifiers and thus not necessarily inherent. Acknowledging the existence and comprehension of these diverse, identifiable signifiers prompts the viewer now to reinterpret these stereotypes as a series of performances self-consciously enacted by the artist. By witnessing Nikki Lee's various transformations, we must now question if there is any semblance of originality in our own daily performances.

Though Butler and Derrida both ruminate on the concepts of origin and copy, neither has commented on the relevance of these terms to photography. All photographs are copies; the very nature of photography is to faithfully replicate whatever is in front of the lens. Moreover all are copies of the negative, none more original than the other. Due to the indexicality of the photograph, we automatically assume that the image maintains a level of authenticity. We want to trust that the photograph is a stand-in for its absent subject. However, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin argues that, "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity."[27] As per the imitative nature of photography, it is impossible to appoint one print as the original and, therefore, labeling a photograph authentic becomes

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[26] Ibid., 315.

[27] Although Benjamin was referring to the reproduction of the art object, the idea of an original can also be applied to the medium of photography. See Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968): 222.

problematic. Still, we want to embed truth in the snapshot, attempting to validate this point by locating the subject of the photograph in a specific time frame.

In an attempt to bolster the viewer's belief in the photograph's authenticity, Lee provides us with a date stamp in the lower corner of each photograph enabling us to place the image in context.[28] Any skepticism we may have concerning the authenticity of the photograph depicting Nikki Lee with her towering dragqueen companions is pacified with the *'97 2 8* in the lower left hand corner. By grounding this moment in a specific time, a specific day, we feel that this image is not tied to the fantastical world of advertisements but is firmly rooted in the realm of the real. Discussing Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida, John Tagg writes, "Beyond any encoding of the photograph, there is an existential connection between 'the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens' and the photographic image…What the photograph asserts in the overwhelming truth that 'the thing has been there.'"[29] The date stamp in Lee's photographs begins to concretize this truth, yet as our faith in the authenticity of the photo is bolstered, it dawns on us that perhaps Lee is capable of manipulating these date stamps. Indeed, Nikki Lee often pushes us to this very realization. For example, the date stamp in the lower right-hand corner of the photograph of *The Lesbian Project* previously discussed, does not display the year/month/day found in the majority of her snapshots. Instead, the lower corner impossibly reads *23 13:00*. The date inconsistency is extremely subtle, yet it forces the viewer to question if Nikki Lee's photographs are accurate documents of the real. John Tagg comments that, "We have to see that *every* photograph is the result of

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[28] With the advancements in digital photography, the viewer's perception of the photograph is beginning to shift. Now that the image may be easily manipulated, the "truth" that has historically been linked with photography must now be questioned.

[29] John Tagg, The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988): 1.

specific and, in every sense, significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic and raise the question of the determining level of the material apparatus and of the social practices within which photography takes place."[30] Although Tagg wrote this statement a decade before the *Projects* series, it could be applied to the photography of Nikki Lee in that she distorts how we view her photographs. By manipulating her appearance, as well as by changing the date stamp, she reveals that photography as well as the concept of identity, two entities that we automatically associate with truth and the real, are already consistently compromised.

Of course, Lee's alteration of the date stamp is only a minor fabrication of reality when compared to the performative nature of the pose. Whether it is with the family at Christmas or with one's friends at a bar on a Saturday night, all are guilty of posing, a mini-performance enacted so that we can dictate how the camera (real or imagined) will immortalize us. In an interview from 2004, Lee, commenting on her artistic intentions, said, "I try to make my pictures look less constructed…My photographs are like holiday snapshots. Of course you go to friend's house, birthday party, whatever, you take a picture of your friends and pose in front of the camera. That moment is also structured, right?"[31] When we avert our attention away from Nikki Lee and focus on the other subjects in her photographs, we start to become aware of, not only her performance, but the impromptu performances of her various acquaintances. In one particularly suggestive example from *The Hispanic Project* (Fig.9), the acknowledgement of the photographer, and the subsequent performative gestures, leads to questions about the authenticity of the snapshot itself. Set against the backdrop of a crowded public beach, Lee, outfitted in a

[30] Ibid., 2.
[31] Shane Waltener, "The Real Nikki," Modern Painters 17, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 69.

lime green bikini top and jean cut-offs, poses between two young shirtless Latino males. With one man propped on the railing with his portable radio and a second man grasping Lee's raised leg, the snapshot could be interpreted as both males proudly holding, and somewhat displaying, their personal possessions. Clutching his "woman," the man, outfitted in his Yankee's cap and grim reaper tattoo, is projecting his masculinity, his machismo, as he poses for the camera. Because of the wide grin of the man and the somewhat awkward stance of his woman, it's difficult to believe that we are experiencing a candid look into these three lives but, instead, a recorded, momentary performance prompted by the presence of the camera.

In a similar image, Lee takes on the persona of a "white trash" housewife in a photo from *The Ohio Project* (Fig.10). Donning a white tube top trimmed in hot pink, the bleached blond Lee looks perfectly at home in the living room of a rural household. Resting on the arm of her "man's" chair, the seemingly apathetic Lee stares out at the camera as she obediently takes her place by the male's side. As if seated on his personal throne, Lee's shifty-eyed companion undoubtedly aims to assert the power that Berger spoke of by holding his rifle at a provocative angle. Although the man tries to maintain this dominant masculinity, his illusion begins to unravel around him as the dainty curtains and crocheted doilies mark this environment as feminine. In response, the man has presumably hung a confederate flag, stitched with the phrase "*I Ain't Coming Down*", across one wall.[32] In this photo, the presence of the man is established less through the fact of his being there, and more through his manipulation of his appearance and context. Just as the Latino male held Lee's thigh in the previous photo, the flag and rifle of the

[32] At first, the confederate flag in the home of an Ohio family seems out of place. Today, however, the confederate flag is not only a representative of the old Southern states; it is also a symbol which represents a separatist ideology.

Ohio man become constructed symbols carefully chosen to project a masculine image to the viewer, even as his domestic feminine surroundings suggests that these acts are always in dialogue with other performances and assertions of other, potentially contradicting identities.

Whether it is the grinning Latino male or the Ohio redneck with his shotgun and boots, there is a common trend running through almost all of Lee's photographs. In some sense, each and every person is fully aware of the camera's presence and therefore is posing for the photographer. As Roland Barthes writes in Camera Lucida, "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing', I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."[33] What the work of Nikki Lee reveals is that such posing spans all subcultures, all age groups, all races, and all social classes. From the elderly ladies eating lunch in a diner to the punks hanging out in a Manhattan dive, all groups of people pose in such a way that the camera can capture their desired persona. When Lee is questioned about how these various groups respond to being photographed, she comments, "I found people to be natural in front of the camera – I mean, whatever natural is! You go to a bar with your friends and take a snapshot. You still pose, but it's you and your friends."[34] Lee's words clarify the reality of the situation in that, even though her relation to the subculture is contrived – an aspect of *Projects* that has often been seen as

[33] Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981): 10.
[34] Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee," 102.

unethical[35] - she is, in the moment of the snapshot, just one of many affecting a pose for the camera.

No longer can the viewer disregard Lee as a fraud since she is not the only one participating in the act. If we realize the complexity of the performance in the *Projects* series, we can no longer separate ourselves from Nikki Lee, since we are as invested in the performance as she is. Barthes writes, "I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality…"[36] Barthes is not alone when he confesses he knowingly and willingly poses. We are all guilty of this action, and yet, like Barthes, we too want to believe that we preserve our individual essence. Although Barthes refers to his presence in front of the camera, it must be asked if this performative social game ever truly ends. When the camera is put away, there is still a performative element to our actions which calls into question the concept of some unchanging essentialist quality that we all presumably possess.[37]

If there is an unconscious performative nature to us all, what happens when a person's persona is defined by a profession grounded in posing and performing? In the controversial and contested realms of both pornography and exotic dancing, the goal is not to disguise the performative nature of femininity but to cater this performance to an

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[35] For some critics, the *Projects* series is thought to border on the unethical because Lee is infiltrating and documenting already established subcultures. Critic Katie Clifford from Artnews wrote, "What's troubling is her use of real people as props. Her expert mimicry comes dangerously close to mockery of those she involves, as if cultural identity were nothing more than a costume change away." See Katie Clifford, "Nikki S. Lee," Artnews 101, no. 3 (March 2002): 121.

[36] Barthes, Camera Lucida, 13.

[37] However, in the world captured by Nikki Lee's photography, the camera never is put away; it remains in effect, capturing, and at the same time, deforming reality.

expectant male audience.[38] Discussed briefly in Chapter One, *The Exotic Dancers Project* centers on Lee's employment at the Gold Club, an establishment in Connecticut where Lee performed as a stripper for roughly two months.[39] Lounging backstage, Lee shifts her eyes toward the photographer with a confrontational stare (Fig.11). Piled on, under, and around the counter supporting Lee's propped-up feet, bags of clothes and cosmetic products underscore the performative aspects of the dancer's job. At first reading, this image stands out from the others in this series, since this photograph promises us a private glimpse into an authentic moment of a stripper's life. No longer on stage, Nikki Lee lulls us into thinking that she has taken a break from performing the fake persona she must adopt in order to please her customers. In this photograph, she has ostensibly let her guard down to reveal the real person behind the act. Could Lee really be exhausted as she appears in this shot, or is this yet another example of Lee performing a role, this time of a bored backstage stripper? If this photograph were found stored away in a photo album, reading this image would seem simple; a stripper caught taking a break in between dances. However, when placed in the context of fine art, there is a clear connection between Lee's reclining pose and the pose of the traditional female nude throughout art's history. In this context, Lee has taken an image which would typically

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[38] For anti-pornography activists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, male power, which Berger discussed in Ways of Seeing as crucial to defining the masculine role, is at the heart of the reasoning behind pornography. In the book Pornography: Men Possessing Women, Dworkin writes, "The valuation of women in pornography is a secondary theme in that the degradation of women exists in order to postulate, exercise, and celebrate male power." Although I would be remised to exclude this important argument, I believe pornography is not an overriding concern in Nikki Lee's work. In *The Exotic Dancers Project*, the only *Project* where a discussion of pornography would be applicable, I believe Lee is not addressing the Dworkin/MacKinnon stance, but is stressing her agency in a place where the viewer would least expect it. See Andrea Dworkin, Pornography: Men Possessing Women (New York: Dutton, 1981): 25.

[39] Even though Nikki Lee worked as a stripper, she did not accept any payment from the customers. See Rebecca Sonkin, "The 13 Faces of Nikki," Elle 16, no. 12 (August 2001): 63.

be interpreted as a candid look at the true life of a stripper, only to expose the backstage persona of the dancer as just another performative act.

Although Lee's photographs may complicate the to-be-looked-at-ness of the female body in *The Exotic Dancers Project*, there is still an erotic element to the photographs simply by the nature of the environment in which they were taken. In the appropriately named *The Seniors Project* (Fig.12) though, Lee is successful in shifting the masquerade from a highly sexualized body to a female body that is culturally defined by this inability to compel the male gaze.[40] Resting on the stoop outside of a retirement community, a grey haired Lee peers through her oversized thick glasses with a somewhat confused, even senile, expression on her face.[41] Throughout this particular series, Lee uses prosthetics in order to successfully achieve her desired subterfuge – a fact which at first seems to differentiate this series from the other *Projects*. Yet in a way, prosthetics are merely another form of makeup, another costume used by Lee in her performance.[42] In the following chapter, I will continue to discuss the performative nature of Nikki Lee's *Projects* series by placing her work within the context of two prominent female photographers, Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin, artists whose vastly different oeuvres address concerns that are also central to Nikki Lee's career.

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[40] Even though the aging process is inevitable, recent technology such as cosmetic surgery and botox has allowed for the *appearance* of aging to be reversible.

[41] Lee's inclusion into this group of elderly ladies is so convincing that several women absolutely refused to believe that she was in fact a young artist in costume, instead believing that she could possibly be approaching the beginning stages of senility. (Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 13.)

[42] Contemporary Japanese photographer Yasumasa Morimura also utilizes prosthetics to include himself in various Old Master paintings. There are a number of traits in the work of Morimura (Asian-ness, self portraiture, and identity) that are found in Nikki Lee's photography. See Yasumasa Morimura, Daughter of Art History: Photographs by Yasumasa Morimura (New York: Aperture, 2003): 121-3.

Chapter Three: Sherman vs. Lee: The Masquerade in Context

Almost twenty years prior to the creation of the *Projects* series, Cindy Sherman, playing on the tropes of 1950s black and white cinema, manipulated the concept of the masquerade through self-portraiture in her photographic series *The Untitled Film Stills*.[43] Due to the conceptual similarities between Sherman's early work and the *Projects* series, Nikki Lee's photography is rarely discussed without some mention of Cindy Sherman, and it would be difficult to argue that the comparison is without merit. By viewing the respective covers of Nikki Lee's *Projects* (Fig. 13) and Cindy Sherman's *The Complete Untitled Film Stills* (Fig.14), two highly important monographs in each artist's oeuvre, one can quickly spot the strong connection Lee's work has with Sherman's. Two photographs, each revealing a young woman situated along the streets of Manhattan, are cropped in order to feature the female's face gazing off into the distance, leaving the viewer to construct his or her own private narrative. Manipulating the concept of identity through the vehicle of self representation is at the heart of both artists' work, yet there are some key differences that often are omitted from discussion. While both women address the performative aspect of identity through costume, cosmetics, and gesture, the level of theatricality and voyeurism is elevated in the *Untitled Film Stills*, which in turn reveals the opposing aims of Lee and Sherman.

Created between 1977 and 1980, Cindy Sherman's series of *Untitled Film Stills* consists of sixty-nine black and white photographs, all depicting Sherman playing out various cinematic stereotypes found in classic Hollywood films of the 1950s. In each

[43] It must be noted that this is only one interpretation of her work, an interpretation that has never been publicly confirmed by Cindy Sherman.

frame, there is only Cindy Sherman; she assumes the appearance of everything from an innocent blonde schoolgirl reshelving a book to a disheveled brunette standing in the corner of a lower-class apartment corridor. Since all of Sherman's film stills depict only Cindy Sherman, her photography, at first, appears to belong to the genre of self-portraiture.[44] However, as the title of this series makes clear, these photographs do not depict Cindy Sherman; rather, they depict a female stereotype as performed by Sherman. Grounded in the performative, Sherman's clichéd female personas force the viewer to question what is real and what is an act, thus creating a divide between one's self and one's appearance.[45] Concerned with feminine roles, Sherman's photography lends itself well to the discussion of Lee's *Projects* series. Yet, there is still a key difference between the two, as Nikki Lee focuses not on cinematic conventions but on the banal existence of day to day life. By doing so, Lee seems to ground her photography in the "real," moving away from the dated, artificial quality of Sherman's film stills. Opting instead to situate her photography in the now, she thereby brings a contemporaneous, "real," quality to her images.

By titling this series *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman immediately announces to the viewer that her photographs are not founded on reality but on cinematic fantasy, calling on past characterizations effectively to create easily identifiable and, subsequently, easily relatable personas. Yet, traditionally a film still is not an actual scene from a film, but a constructed photograph that merely alludes to an authentic film. Just as our assurance

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[44] The preconceived idea that self portraiture reveals something about the artist embeds Sherman's photographs with a certain amount of truth, only for this to be disrupted by the film still label.

[45] Jones states, "She reiterates femininity with a twist, opening the formerly sutured gap between its conventional codes and the bodies these codes are designed to fix as 'female.'" This essay by Amelia Jones provides the foundation for my reading of Sherman's photographs in this paragraph. See "Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman," in Cindy Sherman: Retrospective (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997): 38.

and trust of the snapshot as authentic are equally disrupted in Lee's various *Projects*, the label *Untitled Film Stills* effectively complicates any sense of authenticity in Sherman's series. We want to believe Sherman's clichéd cinematic scenarios are referential, and in the respect that they allude in a general way to the look of 1950s cinema, they are. Yet, the word '*Untitled'* only underscores that they do not actually reference an existing film or film still but are instead merely the contrived image of these representational forms. With the mounting uncertainty in the title alone, one would immediately have to question the authenticity of the female stereotype Sherman provides with every image. Not only were Sherman's film stills shot in a controlled setting, similar to the set of a movie, but they were also dated to a past era, rendering her performances less identifiable to the viewer. As she integrates into the contemporary life of existing cliques, Nikki Lee removes herself from the controlled setting of Sherman and allows for the unpredictable everyday to factor into the final product. In doing so, Lee more effectively blurs the line between what is real and what is performed.

What further separates the work of Nikki Lee from that of Sherman is that, unlike the secluded heroines of *The Untitled Film Stills*, Lee consistently locates herself within the context of a group. Lee states, "People are always talking about Cindy Sherman and me because we are women, using our bodies, doing portraits and changing ourselves. But I don't think there is a real connection. She's just using herself, changing herself on her own, but I'm more into identity within a relationship, identity within the context of others."[46] In terms of establishing identity within the context of a group atmosphere, Lee's photography is a departure from Sherman's. Instead of wholly developing a single scene, Lee establishes herself as a participant in the everyday activities of each

[46] Waltener, "The Real Nikki," 68.

documented subculture. In the majority of Lee's photographs, the subjects are posed in public spaces with the participants fully aware of the photographer's presence. While Sherman excludes everyone but herself from each shot, Lee consistently poses with others as she attempts to establish identity as a direct corollary to the group as a whole.

By assimilating into various subcultures, Lee relies on those around her to aid in the success of the *Projects* series. Contrasting the group atmosphere found in Lee's photography, the only person found in *The Untitled Film Stills* is Cindy Sherman, who in each shot relies on the viewer to supply his or her own narrative. In *Film Still 14* from 1978 (Fig.15), Sherman situates herself within a tight interior space; yet, even here the image is cropped to elicit a sense of isolation and physical entrapment. Sherman, donning a brunette wig and simple black dress, stands erect with her hand drawn close to her turned head, the expression on her face registering uncertainty or fear toward an unseen party in the room. From the reflection in the mirror, the viewer is denied the image of the other person yet, with the glass and coat, is given an indication of his presence. Through her facial expression, Sherman has set up a dynamic that almost forces the viewer to craft his/her own narrative which explains the scenario at hand. Removing any physical trace of the second occupant of the room leads us to assume that maybe we are the one intruding into Sherman's psychologically-charged space.

Her eyes shift to the side, her shoulders tensed with fear, the packed space closes in on her; all indications suggest that the endangered female presence in Sherman's *Film Still 14* fears for her safety. In her seminal article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey offers up an explanation for this cinematic cliché. Discussing film theory from a feminist perspective, Mulvey attempts to understand the traditional role of women

in film as the passive object of the male gaze. Grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis[47], Mulvey's theory states, "In psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure."[48] Within classical Hollywood cinema, and film noir paradigmatically, this anxiety, according to Mulvey, is resolved in one of two ways: sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia. On the subject of voyeurism, Mulvey writes that "The sadistic side fits in well with narrative. Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end."[49] As Mulvey notes, film noir, a genre built on punishing ruthless femme fatales, provides a nice application of this theory. Fetishistic scopophilia, on the other hand, arrests the narrative, focusing in on the feminine lead as an object of sexual desire. During this time, the progress of the film's narrative comes to a halt as the camera closes in on the female character – here, the convention of the female close up – changing her into a passive fetishized object.

Turning to Nikki Lee, we might say that the photograph acts in a similar fashion by freezing whatever action is occurring. Typically a snapshot does not capture a slice of everyday reality. Instead it arrests the moment, requiring its photographic subjects to cease whatever action they are engaged in so that they can stage a moment while posing

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[47] For Freud, the fear of castration, key to voyeurism, is not immediately understood by young males who are at first disinterested in the female's lack of a penis. Indifference soon turns to fear though as the Freudian boy unconsciously reinterprets the feminine lack as evidence of castration, which in turn establishes a temporal gap between the knowledge of a lack and the belief in castration. This distance between knowledge and belief provides, for men, the foundation for future voyeuristic, as in turn fetishistic, practices. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality, ed. Mandy Merck (New York: Routledge, 1992): 29.

[48] Ibid., 29.

[49] Ibid., 29.

for the camera. When we comply with this request, we stop all action, allowing the presence of the camera to align us automatically with the feminine role, yet, as previously discussed, the position of photographer – the *creator* of the image – is a decidedly masculine role. This last statement reveals that, when Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach to film is applied to photography, the unstable gender roles exemplified by Lee's photographs become even more complex.

In Nikki Lee's work, instability is not only discussed in terms of identity but through the medium of photography itself. As Walter Benjamin asserts, "From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic print' makes no sense."[50] Without an "authentic print," photography becomes a medium of copies without an original. When Cindy Sherman selects the fictitious film stills as her theme, she equally produces a copy without an original, a still that refers to no single identifiable film but which remains identifiable all the same. For both Sherman and Lee, the concept of the original-less copy refers not only to their mediums (film and photography), but can be applied to their commentaries on identity as well. In the *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman, photographing only herself, confuses our understanding of the original and the copy by making it explicit that she is *acting*, however, because of the temporal gap, these performances are not completely relatable to the viewer. Instead of representing various feminine personas in a staged photo shoot, Lee further complicates the issue of the original-less copy by immersing herself as each new character into an everyday existence that lasts for up to three months.

In *A Note on Photography and the Simulacral*, Rosalind Krauss, discussing Cindy Sherman as both artist and model, writes, "With this total collapse of difference, this

[50] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 226.

radical implosion, one finds oneself entering the world of the simulacrum – a world where, as in Plato's cave, the possibility of distinguishing between reality and phantasm, between the actual and the simulated, is denied."[51] Although Krauss is discussing Cindy Sherman, her comments are equally applicable to Lee's snapshots where we question not only the reality of Lee's performances but the performances of her acquaintances as well. How can we decidedly call a certain persona, a certain look, a certain attitude unique to a specific individual when both Sherman and Lee can easily incorporate and perform numerous personalities? From childhood on, our personalities, appearances, and beliefs are constantly in a state of transition where daily occurrences shape how we choose to see ourselves and, more importantly, how we want *others* to see us. In her discussion of the performative nature of gender, Judith Butler claims, "It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way."[52] For Butler, gender is a key concern, but as discussed previously, it is not just gender, but all aspects of identity which are confirmed through action. Not only are there particular actions that "are usually interpreted as expression of a *gender* core," there are performative gestures which are generally understood to represent all aspects of identity. And in some way, we all act in a way that either conforms to or contests traditional roles, all in an effort to mold our identity. Whether they are pierced punks, well groomed yuppies, or flamboyant dragqueens, the subjects of Nikki Lee's photography are all performing in a way that conforms to their respective subculture, all the while acknowledging the presence of the camera.

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[51] Rosalind Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," in Overexposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography, ed. Carol Squires (New York: The New Press, 1999): 177.
[52] Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 398.

Throughout *The Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman averts her eyes from the lens, choosing either to look away towards an unknown presence or to gaze off into the distance. In *Film Still 48* (Fig.16) from 1979, Sherman constructs a situation in which the photographed subject appears completely unaware of any secondary presence, both on or off screen. Wholesomely dressed in a knee-length, pleated, plaid skirt, the young woman, with her suitcase just a few feet away, peers down a deserted road as if she is anticipating a passing car. As darkness has begun to fall, the viewer is keenly aware of his own looming presence over the potentially vulnerable young lady. Thus, even though this photo was taken in a public area, Sherman's decision to isolate this woman on a nondescript desolate road instills the same sense of endangerment as an interior photograph, for example, *Film Still 2* from 1977 (Fig.17). By avoiding direct eye contact with the camera, Sherman retains the cinematic fourth wall, thereby maintaining the boundary between actress and audience, object and subject. Despite Sherman's absolute over proximity to the image (she is both artist and artwork), she is still preserving for her viewer the distance required to maintain the voyeuristic quality of the cinematic experience.[53]

Because of Lee's constant acknowledgment of the camera, a level of voyeurism, found in the film stills of Sherman, has been removed in the *Projects* series. Instead of participating in a world of cinematic fantasy, Lee pretends to ground her work in reality not only by giving the viewer a definitive time, provided by the date stamp, but by situating herself in a public environment. In fact, there are only a handful of images from the *Projects* series that are not shot either outdoors or in a public setting. One such image

[53] With the masquerade, Sherman does in fact insert some distance between herself and her outward appearance.

from *The Lesbian Project* (Fig.18) reveals Lee and her partner locked in an intimate kiss as they lie clothed on their bed. Without prior understanding of Lee's intentions, it would be difficult to interpret this kiss as a performance. However, when the photograph is placed along side other images from the *Projects* series, it becomes a work which documents the performance of both Lee and her partner. With eyes closed, both women appear caught up in the moment of their embrace, yet the unnatural overhead positioning of the shot disrupts the sense of voyeurism, the feeling that we are intruding in their privacy. About this series, Lee states, "The pictures of intimacy with my fake girlfriend – she knew what I was doing, so she really participated in the work…We were both performing."[54] By Lee and her partner both performing, they are also playing the same "actress" role as Cindy Sherman, yet they deny the viewer a cinematic, voyeuristic experience. Capturing the moment of an "intimate" kiss with a "fake" girlfriend, Lee has shown that not only can our daily fashion and mannerisms be altered, but even what we would like to think are our most unguarded actions are indeed performed.

When Nan Goldin created *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, her signature slide show turned monograph from the early 1980s, she photographed some of the seedier aspects of New York in an attempt to document her life through a "narrative thread."[55] In reference to her entire body of work, Goldin states, "I don't choose people in order to photograph them; I take photos straight from my life. These photos come from relationships, not from observation."[56] After taking up residence in Manhattan's Lower

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[54] Carly Berwick, "Extreme Makeover," Artnews 105, no. 3 (March 2006): 112.
[55] Nan Goldin, David Armstrong and Hans Werner Holzwarth, eds., I'll Be Your Mirror (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1996): 141.
[56] Ibid., 321.
On page 25, Elisabeth Sussman provides a nice description which summarizes Nan Goldin's work. Sussman writes, "Her camera freezes the comings and goings of the social experience of desire: love and

East Side, Nan Goldin turned her camera toward some of her closest friends, many of whom were drug addicts and dragqueens. As a result, Goldin's oeuvre consists of photographs documenting transvestites not only in full dress but also in various stages of preparation. From this collection, one of the more well-known photographs, *Joey at the Love Ball, NYC* (Fig.19), exemplifies the flamboyant persona often associated with the dragqueen. Standing against a blurry city backdrop, Joey confidently poses for Goldin; his face caked in makeup, his dress reminiscent of an eighteenth-century style ball gown, his wig adorned with jewels and ringlet curls. Without some prior understanding of either Goldin or Lee's intentions, one could assume that this photograph is merely a predecessor to Lee's *Dragqueen Project*. In the example from this series discussed in the previous chapter, the three transvestites surrounding Lee, while not as extravagantly outfitted as Joey, still maintain a level of glamour as their wigs and makeup are carefully constructed so as to exude a theatrical rendering of the feminine.

Sitting in a dingy bathtub in Berlin, Joey is photographed from behind as he leans forward, glancing over his left shoulder. In the snapshot, *Joey in my Tub, Berlin* (Fig.20), Goldin has captured her friend, with his wet hair falling over his eyes, during a presumably candid bathing moment. For Goldin, the bathroom is frequently the location of her photos as they immediately establish the moment as private and unguarded. Gone are the layers of makeup, the wig, the elaborate costumes, and, most importantly, the confident pose, leaving Joey naked, his bare body signifying the unaffected truth. Still, has Joey completely let his guard down knowing there is a camera behind him, immortalizing this moment? Or is Joey performing this vulnerability because it is a trait

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hate in intimate relationships; moments of isolation, self-revelation, and adoration; the presentation of the sexual self freed from the constraints of biological destiny."

typically tied to femininity, a trait perhaps desired by this transvestite? Perhaps the answer lies in a quotation earlier referenced in the previous chapter, in which Roland Barthes states, "Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image."[57] Regardless of how comfortable Joey felt in his private surroundings, his knowledge of Goldin's camera could have acted as a catalyst for an impromptu performance. In fact, when we place the image of Joey in the tub along side Nikki Lee's exhausted backstage stripper, attributing truth to the moment becomes even more problematic.

Because she attempts to provide the viewer with a candid, unabashed look at her personal relationships, Nan Goldin, at first, seems worlds apart from the performance based photography seen in the work of both Sherman and Lee. When Nikki Lee was questioned why she doesn't delve deeper into these various subcultures, her response was, "It's not about Nan Goldin's work, you know, going from bathroom to bedroom. Go to your house and look at your snapshot album. You don't have pictures of sex scenes."[58] The intimate kiss of *The Lesbian Project* not withstanding, Lee's photographs do utilize a more public atmosphere which could partially be attributed to her refusal to become too consumed by the group. While Lee might remain active within a subculture for up to three months, she insists on returning to her own apartment alone each night. Although Lee states that "…it is emotional, because I do have an attachment to those people," her face in the photographs does not register, nor does it elicit from the viewer, the same empathy linked to Goldin's work. If Goldin seems to capture raw emotion with

[57] Barthes, Camera Lucida, 10.
[58] Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 103.

her camera, after Nikki Lee one must begin to question the performative nature of the men and women immortalized by Goldin.

Due to the way Lee and Goldin are perceived, they are often discussed as having separate interests; Goldin's work is frequently described as a gritty intimate record documenting the most personal moments of the artist and her close social circle while Lee is grouped along side Cindy Sherman, both linked to the performative aspect of identity.[59] However, both Lee and Goldin are equally invested in the exploration of identity within the context of a group. Although Goldin's two photographs of Joey are single-subject images, the group dynamic is undeniable in her work. Transvestites, drug addicts, struggling actresses, they were all close friends of Goldin and her photography is an attempt not only to chronicle the lives of these people, but to show how they all had an effect on her life as well. In essence, Goldin's photography suggests how our identity is formed and altered by those who surround us. For Nikki Lee, the influence of a group dynamic on one's identity is evident in that the entire premise of the *Projects* series involves Lee's integration into a preexisting group. The following chapter will cover Lee's interest in the influential presence of a group on identity – a factor that can be traced back to her Korean upbringing – and ask how race, and specifically Asian stereotypes, play out in her work.

[59] Lee's relationship with both of her predecessors can be interpreted as another example of an original-less copy. While it is undeniable that Lee borrows elements from both Sherman (identity as a performance) as well as Goldin (recording her daily life through photography), it is erroneous to claim that Sherman or Goldin were the originators of these two interests in photography.

Chapter Four: Redefining Asian-ness as a Western Concept: Ethnicity and Race in the Projects Series

Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. (2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.

- Article 9 of the current Japanese Constitution

Under the watchful eye of General Douglas MacArthur, the Japanese Constitution, drafted on November 3, 1946, was constructed to serve as a peace constitution in which the nation of Japan would be denied any significant military capability. Limiting the military might of the Japanese, the United States established a dynamic in which they were obligated to play the role of protector for the Japanese – a role that would have significant consequences for Japanese cultural identity in the postwar period. As the prominent Japanese artist Takashi Murakami states, "[The Japanese Constitution] cast Japan in the role of a 'child' obliged to follow America's 'adult' guidance, and the nation willingly complied."[60] MacArthur's own comment that "measured by the standards of modern civilization [the Japanese were] like a boy of 12,"[61] only substantiates Murakami's relegation of postwar Japan to an adolescent role.

In the aftermath of MacArthur's intervention, a shallow childlike sensibility has arguably pervaded Japanese pop culture where *kawaii*, a culture of cuteness, has established its dominance by integrating itself into all aspects of everyday living.[62] Of the numerous popular *kawaii* icons, Hello Kitty is arguably the most recognizable

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[60] Takashi Murakami, ed., Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005): 22.
[61] Arthur Lubow, "The Murakami Method," The New York Times Magazine (3 April 2005): 54.
[62] Murakami, Little Boy, 100.

representation of the cute culture that has quickly spread from Japan to other parts of the world. With an emotionless expression and non-existent mouth, Hello Kitty has been rendered voiceless, a blank slate onto which a new history can be imposed.[63] As Daniel Harris states, "Something becomes cute not necessarily because of a quality it has but because of a quality it lacks, a certain neediness and inability to stand alone…"[64] By disabling the might of the Japanese army and destroying the infrastructure of some of their key cities, the United States crippled Japan, forcing it to depend on the West for protection. Now that Japan has financially recovered from the war, what continues to perpetuate the cuteness that is so synonymous with contemporary Japan? The parental nature of the United States relationship with Japan could be one possible explanation. Harris writes, "The imitative nature of cuteness can also be seen in the relation of the aesthetic to precocity. One of the things we find cutest in the behavior of our children is their persistence in mimicking us…"[65] Through the assistance of the United States, Japan recovered from the devastation of war to become one of the world's most progressive nations, yet, for some, they have been unable to step out of the cultural shadow of America.

Directly addressing the destruction of Japan after World War II was something that, according to Murakami, was avoided by established Japanese artists who, instead, submersed themselves into a fantasy world of cartoon characters.[66] Murakami, who first coined the term Superflat to label his work, claims to critique the shallowness of consumer culture in Japan by utilizing the flattened imagery of graphic design and

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[63] Ibid., 44.
[64] Daniel Harris, Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism (New York: Basic Books, 2000): 4.
[65] Ibid., 12-3.
[66] Lubow, "The Murakami Method," 50.

animation in his work. Although the roots of his style lie in traditional Japanese painting, aesthetically characterized by outlines and flat areas of color, his use of a popular animation style also owes a great deal to the cartoon creations which originated in the United States.[67] Alexandra Munroe, organizer of the exhibition Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture at the Japan Society in New York, comments that, "The modernization of Japan was oriented toward learning from and imitating the West, yet the country is situated in Asia and has firmly maintained its traditional culture." Munroe concludes, "The ambiguous orientation of Japan…resulted in its isolation from other Asian nations not only politically but also socially and culturally."[68] Later in the chapter, I will continue the discussion of childlike cuteness as associated with Asian masculinity, but first it is important that I discuss the historical conflict between Japan and Korea, and the danger in using "Asians" as a uniform label.

The somewhat tumultuous history between Japan and other Asian nations has created a divide between the Japanese and their neighbors. Yet, many Westerners perpetuate the practice of grouping all Asian countries into one uniform mass. Unbeknownst to a large portion of the American public, there is a complex history between Korea and Japan – one that changed significantly at the end of World War II. Recounting the conflict between the two countries, Jae-Ryung Roe writes, "In 1910 Japan formally annexed Korea and assumed rule of the country. Japanese Army troops shut down the local newspapers and political organizations and took control of the educational

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[67] Murakami states, "I decided to express the uncertainty of creating artwork in Japan by working on the paradox of making artwork itself, knowing that there's no system for properly evaluating it. That is why my work references Japanese animation culture, which itself began as an imitation of imported American animation." See Amada Cruz, Midori Matsui, Dana Friis-Hansen, eds., Takashi Murakami : The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning (New York: Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College in association with H.N. Abrams, 1999): 27.

[68] Murakami, Little Boy, 257.

system."[69] It was only after the allied forces defeated Japan in 1945 that colonialism ended in Korea, yet since that time, the country itself has been divided over the appropriate government for the Korean people.[70]

In her series *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project* (Fig.21), Nikki Lee, a native Korean living in New York, integrates herself into the hip cliquey subculture of Japanese youth in lower Manhattan. Without prior knowledge of Lee's Korean decent, the typical Western viewer would have a difficult time ascertaining why Lee is an outsider to the group. As Ana Honigman writes, "Her work…speaks to racist assumptions about…Asian's physical and historical uniformity."[71] Although it is unknown as to whether or not this was Lee's intention, *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project* does have the potential to expose the Western tendency to categorize Asians as a unified group since many Westerners are less adept at reading national differences between Asians. Yet, when one understands the tumultuous past of Korea and Japan, Lee's *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project* becomes much more politically charged. Most provocatively, the complex history of Korean-Japanese relations makes it possible to read this series as a commentary on the forced assimilation of the Korean people under Japanese rule during the early 1900s.[72] Roe writes, "Under

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[69] Jae-Ryung Roe, "International Abstraction in a National Context: Abstract Painting in Korea, 1910-1965," in Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History, ed. Kymberly N. Pinder (New York: Routledge, 2002): 353.

[70] The conflict between North and South Korea continued to escalate until, in June of 1950, the North Korean invasion of South Korea sparked a war between the United Nations supported forces of the South and the Communist supported forces of the North. For three years, the United States military occupied South Korea in an effort to eliminate the threat of the North Korean army, which also included both Soviet and Chinese troops. Post Korean War, the country continues to be divided, disrupting the idea of a solidified national identity.

[71] Ana Honigman, "Nikki S. Lee," Flash Art 35, no. 222 (January-February 2002): 94.

[72] The tension between these two countries is still a prevalent issue as discrimination towards Koreans still exists in Japan today. In her essay "The Meaning of Murakami's Nonsense About 'Japan' Itself," Dana Friis-Hansen states, "Writing in The Japan Times, African-American columnist Karen Hill Anton explains, "Discrimination, and its cousins, prejudice and racial chauvinism, course through every level of Japanese

colonialism Koreans were required to adopt the Japanese language, the Shinto religion, and Japanese names."[73] Three significant characteristics which define a nation's tradition and history were suppressed for almost 50 years, effectively disrupting a national Korean identity for over two generations. Although Lee was born in 1970, almost a quarter of a century after Japanese occupation, her interest in identity as a construct, as well as the ease with which she assimilates into various subcultures are undoubtedly related to her upbringing in a country where national identity is yet to be reestablished.[74]

As I previously stated, it is highly problematic to categorize all Asian nations into one cohesive group. Yet, there are a number of Western stereotypes that are applied to Asian culture as a whole. One of which, the childlike stigma previously discussed by Murakami, is reflective not of just the Japanese, but of Eastern cultures more broadly. In a photograph from *The Schoolgirls Project* (Fig.22), three young females, appearing to be in their early teens, take a break from shopping to pose for the camera. Not only are all the girls wearing matching school uniforms, they are situated in an environment of plush toys and multicolored trinkets. Though Lee is in her early thirties, she easily passes for just another teenage schoolgirl spending an afternoon with her friends in a Korean variety store filled with the *kawaii* culture analyzed by Murakami. High on the shelf above Lee's head is a stuffed Picachu, a popular character in the Pokémon series that visually shares a

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society, and are alive and thriving in this island country." Bu the situation is not limited to black foreigners, she continues, as "generations of ethnic Koreans, Ainu, Burakumin, and others who have been excluded from the socioeconomic prosperity of the mainstream can affirm its existence." See Amada Cruz, Midori Matsui, Dana Friis-Hansen, eds., Takashi Murakami : The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning (New York: Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College in association with H.N. Abrams, 1999): 37.

[73] Roe, "International Abstraction in a National Context," 353.

[74] Korea and Japan, like any two countries in close proximity, have experienced cross-cultural influences as well as political conflict. Japan had been under Korean influence since the 6th century. Indeed, Buddhism was introduced to Japan by Koreans who, fleeing vanquished lands at home, established feudal fiefdoms there. In the 20th century, Japan's colonization of Korea had a stifling effect on modernity in Korea and delayed the development of an autogenous culture. See Yongwoo Lee, Information & Reality: Korean Contemporary Art (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 1995): 16.

number of traits with the iconic Hello Kitty figure. Both Japanese creations are outfitted with impossibly short limbs, large endearing eyes, and either a small or absent mouth, all of which are traits of a cute harmless individual – a description that could be said to exemplify the prevalent American image of Asian culture as a whole.

For contemporary Japanese artist Noi Sawaragi, the cuteness label often tied to Japan can be attributed to the postwar Emperor Hirohito who was often described as a cute old man; a trait that Sawaragi believes Hirohito used to his advantage in retaining political power.[75] For Sawaragi and Murakami to acknowledge that a stigma of cuteness is now attached to the Japanese male provides evidence that this stereotype has been internalized in the perception of both Westerners, and, more importantly, Japanese men. Regardless of his intentions, Hirohito's persona of a harmless little man exemplifies not only the Western view of the Japanese man, but the Western view of all Asian males.[76] This view of the Japanese man as cute and harmless, in effect, de-masculinizes the Asian male by effectually eliminating any power he could potentially possess. A section of dialogue from the 1988 play, *M. Butterfly*, best summarizes the subservient Asian role. The passage reads, "The West thinks of itself as masculine – big guns, big industry, big money – so the East is feminine – weak, delicate, poor…The West believes the East, deep down, *wants* to be dominated."[77] In one photograph from *The Yuppie Project*, the only example which features an Asian male, Nikki Lee captures the East/West ideology as put forth in *M. Butterfly*.

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[75] Sawaragi associates Hirohito's tactic with 'a feminine way of controlling'…See Amada Cruz, Midori Matsui, Dana Friis-Hansen, eds., Takashi Murakami : The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning (New York: Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College in association with H.N. Abrams, 1999): 18.
[76] Norman Bryson, "Morimura's Olympia," in Field Work: Sites in Literary and Cultural Studies, eds. Marjorie Garber, Paul B. Franklin, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge Publishers, 1996): 177.
[77] *M. Butterfly*, Act 3, Scene 1, quoted in Norman Bryson, "Morimura's Olympia," 178.

Throughout *The Yuppie Project*, a series arguably devoted to wealth and consumerism, Lee surrounds herself with young Wall Street professionals as she takes up the dress code of a financial analyst. Although an insatiable consumerist appetite is a cliché typically attributed to Asian culture, Lee's otherness stands out as her social circle is almost exclusively comprised of white colleagues. In one photograph, however, we see Lee and a male Asian companion out for a meal at an upscale dining establishment (Fig.23). Unlike the two white men who join Lee for a quick lunch break (Fig.24), an event documented by another photograph in the series, this man does not stare confidently out at the camera, choosing instead to shift his eyes downward toward his meal.[78] The man's body language is closed off; without the large toothy grin of his white counterparts, his face doesn't register the confidence of the other so-called yuppies.

In a more obvious example, contemporary Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura exploits the effeminacy attributed to the Asian male in *Portrait (Futago)* (Fig.25), his own rendition of Manet's *Olympia*. In this staged and digitally manipulated photograph, Morimura situates himself in front of an elaborate backdrop while taking on the roles of both Olympia and her black maid-servant. Substituting himself for a white female prostitute, Morimura aligns the image of an Asian man with a Caucasian woman.[79] Commenting on the original *Olympia*, Morimura states, "Upon close inspection, the body of Olympia in Manet's masterpiece of the same name seems strangely masculine. I was surprised by how similar her body is to my own."[80] While Morimura is correct in that Manet's *Olympia* does have a masculine body, her physique is not the bulky muscular

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[78] This comparison was first made by Maurice Berger in "Picturing Whiteness: Nikki S. Lee's Yuppie *Project*." See "Picturing Whiteness: Nikki S. Lee's *Yuppie Project*," Art Journal 60, no.4 (Winter 2001): 56.
[79] Norman Bryson, "Morimura: 3 Readings," Art & Text 52 (September 1995): 75-6.
[80] Morimura, Daughter of Art History: Photographs by Yasumasa Morimura, 119.

look of a fully grown man, but the lean frame of an adolescent boy. Morimura's decision to appropriate Manet's masterpiece not only enforces the feminization of the Asian male, but it equally delineates him as the child to the parental West. Representing Asian masculinity as both childlike and feminine mirrors the American occupation of Japan, where, by requiring the Japanese government to renounce all forms of offensive military, MacArthur effectively rendered the Japanese people impotent.

Writing about the perceived femininity of Morimura, Paul B. Franklin makes an interesting comparison between the Asian male and photography. In his discussion of Morimura's *Portrait (Futago)*, Franklin interprets the left hand of his Olympia figure as a gesture "toward the phenomena of masculine lack and the lack of masculinity historically assigned in the West to Asian male bodies of any and every orientation. Under the racialized regime of white masculinity, Asian men often fall desperately short: they, like photographs, are pitiful imitations of an original."[81] What is interesting to note is that Franklin not only connects Asian-ness to photography but also aligns the idea of Asian-ness with the copy. Although Franklin's assessment is not associated in any way with Lee, or Asian women for that matter, it does focus on how the photograph, as well as identity, are inherently both copies – two ideas important in Nikki Lee's work. As our identity is constantly shifting to fit our mood, the situation we are in, the people we associate with, it has to be assumed that the qualities that we elect to exhibit are not solely unique to us, but they are a collection of learned behavioral traits that we have

[81] Prior to Franklin's interpretation, he also acknowledges the critical response to Manet's Olympia when it was first exhibited in 1865. This reading interprets Olympia's hand as a symbol reinforcing her overt sexuality as a common prostitute. Her African servant further emphasizes this point as the view of all Africans during this time was of a unusually high sexual nature. See Paul B. Franklin, "Orienting the Asian Male Body in the Photography of Yasumasa Morimura." In The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire, ed. Deborah Bright (New York: Routledge Publishers, 1998): 237-8.

incorporated over the years. Yet, this cycle of imitation is without origin; every quality of our identity must be interpreted as a copy within a copy. Not only does photography reinforce the unoriginality of identity, but as seen in Franklin's quote, Nikki Lee's Asian-ness equally brings up connotations of the copy.

While Lee constantly affirms, "I don't think about race or nationality,"[82] one must question if racial stereotyping isn't key to *The Yuppie Project*.[83] Why would Nikki Lee, who has final approval over which snapshots are included as art, select the photograph of the unconfident Asian male over one with the man smiling for the camera? And why do all the white professionals exude a carefree feeling of privilege? Perhaps it is more important to question why, in the entirety of *The Yuppie Project*, there is no sign of any African American or Hispanic members. And, although Lee does stand out in an all white crowd, why do they seem at ease with her enough to accept her into their social circle? The answer potentially can be found in the parental relationship discussed in earlier in the chapter. Paul B. Franklin writes, "White America has granted Asians the privileged status of 'honorary white people' precisely because they act as well behaved children; they are law abiding, dutiful, quiet, passive and respectful."[84] Yet, if Franklin's statement is accurate, then it does little to explain why Lee is so readily embraced by the African American community in *The Hip Hop Project*. Completed for the Bronx Museum of the Arts in 2001, *The Hip Hop Project* is comprised of multiple snapshots of a dark skinned Lee – a feet accomplished through multiple trips to the tanning bed – in a

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[82] Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 13.
[83] In the William L. Hamilton article, he discusses Lee's preparation for *The Yuppie Project*. Hamilton writes, "For the Yuppie Project in 1998, M. Lee compiled a list of New York stores – including Max Mara, Tods, Hermes, Coach, Berdorf Goodman, Takashimaya, Jimmy Choo, Miu Miu and Kate Spade – that were popular with Korean friends in New York whom she categorized as 'Asian yuppies.'" Lee's categorization of 'Asian yuppies' establishes that, although Lee says otherwise, race is integral to this project. (Hamilton, "Dressing the Part is her Art," 8.)
[84] Franklin, "Orienting the Asian Male Body in the Photography of Yasumasa Morimura," 240.

crowd of young African Americans, one of which is the rapper Prodigy from the group Mobb Deep.[85] Lee not only steps out of her stuffy business suit, she discards the bland restricted attitude of *The Yuppie Project* in favor of a confident assured b-girl with braided extensions falling over her shoulders (Fig.26). A confident Lee, her hands on her hips challenging the viewer with her cold stare makes this photograph a drastic departure from how we are accustomed to seeing an Asian woman.

Unlike the childlike Lee of *The Schoolgirls Project* or the reserved Lee of *The Yuppie Project*, the brash Nikki Lee in *The Hip Hop Project* inverts the stereotype of the passive Asian female propagated by mass media. For the viewer, the appeal of *The Hip Hop Project* could be that Lee's hip hop persona challenges our concept of an Asian woman, representing a cultural transgression of what we typically see. One could argue that Lee, by breaking away from the traditional passive female role, disrupts the stereotype of the Asian woman. Yet, recognition of this transgression reveals that we equally buy into the racial stereotypes found in popular culture. In order for Lee's work to be deemed a success, viewers must understand racial stereotyping so that, when these stereotypes are disrupted, they can recognize the inversion. This, in turn, reinforces the fact that stereotypes do exist. However, if Asians can transcend racial boundaries as Franklin claims, why did Lee feel it necessary to darken her skin for both *The Hip Hop Project* and *The Hispanic Project*? Throughout Lee's oeuvre, there are certain stereotypes attached to her, such as her Asian-ness or her femininity, which are inescapable. In the alteration of her skin tone, Lee only reinforces her Asian-ness since, regardless of the hue

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[85] Bill Anthes, Nikki S. Lee: Projects, exh. cat. (Memphis, TN: Clough-Hanson Gallery, Rhodes College, 2002) and Jon Caramanica, "Hip-Hop Don't Stop," Village Voice 47, no.2 (January 15, 2002): 57.

of her skin, there are other, more permanent aspects of her appearance that disclose her race.

While some may single out Japan as a more progressive nation, traditional culture has been significantly altered throughout the entirety of Asia as American-based corporations have permeated metropolitan areas. Another image from *The Schoolgirls Project* (Fig.27) locates Lee and two acquaintances at a local fast food restaurant, seated in a booth while eating their somewhat identical lunches. Although the establishment is not an American-based chain, the layout, color scheme, and packaging all resemble a McDonalds or Burger King. The cultural landscape of Korea, once synonymous with maintaining tradition, has now been altered through globalization with American cinema and corporate conglomerates now providing the backdrop for a new generation of Korean youth. Lee, commenting on the integration of Western culture into Asian society, states, "Kids in Korea grow up watching Hollywood movies, listening to foreign pop songs and eating McDonald's hamburgers. I never feel uncomfortable or embarrassed when in an exotic atmosphere since I feel like I grew up in a foreign culture myself."[86] For Lee, an artist who is so deeply invested in disrupting our understanding of the original, feeling the loss of traditional Korean culture not only provided an interest in her exploration of determining originality, but also Lee's disinterest in a "natural" or "real" context.

Although the fast food establishment is ample evidence of the West's influence on Korea, the photograph's most significant indicator of the Westernization of Korea can, without question, be found in the store's Christmas decorations and the uniform Santa hats of the employees. While the three girls are still wearing their school outfits, the date

[86] Catherine Gibson, "Nikki S. Lee," in International 2002: Liverpool Biennial, ed. Lewis Biggs (Liverpool: Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, 2002): 74.

stamp confirms that it is the day before Christmas, a recognized national holiday in Korea. In fact, since the introduction of Catholicism in 1784, followed by the arrival of Protestant missionaries in 1884, Christianity has continued to become, after Buddhism, the largest religion in the country. Today about one third of South Korea's 45 million people are Catholics and Protestants.[87] The successful integration of Christianity into a country with a rich Buddhist tradition serves as evidence that Korea, like Japan, has equally been transformed by Western culture.

By the time Christianity was first introduced into Korean culture, the Western world had already established a preconceived ideology of the Orient as a mystical and otherworldly land. In Linda Nochlin's influential article *The Imaginary Orient*, she utilizes a number of works by Jean-Léon Gérôme to illustrate how the artists and writers who claimed to have documented North Africa and the Near East erroneously reflected the nineteenth-century European concept of the Orient. Drawing on Edward Said's Orientalism,[88] Nochlin's article first dissects the image on the cover of Said's 1978 book: Gérôme's *Snake Charmer* (Fig.28) from the late 1860s. The central figure in the painting, a young nude, positioned on an ornate rug and holding a large snake, performs before a crowd of Middle-Eastern spectators slumped against an elaborately patterned wall. Although it is generally understood that the snake charmer is a boy, confirmation of his sex is withheld which, for Nochlin, serves to feminize the boy, diminishing his potency. For Gérôme's European audience, the young nude, childlike and powerless, was the

[87] Mary E. Connor, The Koreas: A Global Studies Handbook (Denver, CO: ABC-CLIO, 2002): 186-7.
[88] In Orientalism, Edward Said writes, "One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away. I myself believe that Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is a veridic discourse about the Orient …" See Orientalism (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978): 6.

Orient personified. Nochlin argues that, within this image, Gérôme has also stereotyped the Orient as a place of mystery, lacking the progress of Western industrialization. Religious difference frequently plays a part in this Eurocentric discrimination as artists like Gérôme create worlds of tranquility within the interiors of Islamic mosques (Fig.29). Nochlin writes, "Gérôme suggests that this Oriental world is a world without change, a world of timeless, atemporal customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were 'afflicting' or 'improving' but, at any rate, drastically altering Western societies at that time."[89] Instead of actively working to advance their culture, Gérôme's subjects are idle; they can only be found at rest through religion or while in the process of indulging in earthly pleasures. When the Oriental paintings of Gérôme were introduced into Occidental society, Parisians accepted these works as fact – visual proof of life in a mysterious distant land – instead of the imaginary constructs that they truly were.

Now, in the age of photography, everyone can participate in documenting foreign cultures while on vacation. Instead of the noticeable absence of the Westerner – once a necessity in Orientalist painting – tourists now desire their presence in the photograph. Susan Sontag describes the photographer as a "supertourist, an extension of the anthropologist, visiting natives and bringing back news of their exotic doings and strange gear."[90] It is commonplace now for travelers to take copious amounts of photographs of themselves on foreign soil in order to display proudly evidence, upon their return home, of their presence in a foreign land. One of Lee's earliest series, *The Tourist Project*, examines the traveler's need to chronicle each and every moment, to the point where obtaining the perfect snapshot begins to shadow, and to some extent replace, the actual

[89] Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient," Art in America 71, no. 5 (May 1983): 122.
[90] Sontag, On Photography, 42.

experience. During a clear day in August on Ellis Island, Lee poses with her fist raised, mimicking the Statue of Liberty, while travel packs and camera bags hang from her torso (Fig.30). Wearing a recently purchased New York t-shirt, Lee enacts the role of the stereotypical Asian tourist, known for wide-eyed interest and fervent camera use, as she stands proudly in front of the most important immigrant landmark in America.[91] Other landmarks visited by Lee include Rockefeller Center, Times Square, and the top of the Empire State Building, yet what is apparent in each photograph is that Lee is never depicted looking at her surroundings, choosing instead to focus on the camera. By recording her presence at every major Manhattan attraction, Lee, as tourist, has chosen and preserved her presence during what are assumed to be the most important moments of her travels. When we now revisit the comparison between the tourist's snapshot and Gérôme's nineteenth-century paintings of the Orient, we see that whereas Gérôme was invested in the West's absence from the Far East, rendering a timeless land of mystery devoid of Western influence, Lee is invested in documenting the East's presence in the Western – a feat she accomplishes by being photographed while standing alongside the major historical landmarks of a foreign country.

Typically, all of the *Projects* series are shot in the United States. But for one, *The Schoolgirls Project*, Lee returned to her native Korea where, as stated earlier, she assimilated into a group of teenage girls. While it might not have been Lee's intention, one photograph within this series offers the ideal, modern antithesis to Gérôme's imagined timeless mystical Orient. The photo depicts Lee and another schoolgirl in the

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[91] In On Photography, Susan Sontag makes an interesting comment that ties back into the chapter's previous discussion of the Japanese occupation of Korea. Sontag writes, "People robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers, at home and abroad." Although Sontag was not directly referring to Asian travelers, her statement can be applied to both Koreans and Japanese; two nationalities whose pasts have been directly altered and controlled by other nations. (Sontag, On Photography, 10.)

midst of a discussion concerning their cell phones as their two companions on either side are engulfed in their own activities (Fig.31). Contradicting the timelessness of Orientalism, the date stamp in the corner provides evidence that the image is firmly cemented in contemporary society. Through the large glass windows behind them, one can see the evidence of a progressive, late-capitalist society, an expansive large high rise with rows of parked cars. Not only is modernity evidenced in the metropolitan backdrop, the numerous shopping bags symbolize a healthy economy, while the cell phones reflect the advancement in technology. No longer is Asia considered mired in its own timeless past, as it is now at the forefront of current innovations and future technologies, one of which, digital photography, further destabilizes the authenticity of the snapshot. For Gérôme's Parisian audience, the photo like quality of his paintings further substantiated the truth of the image. Now, through the use of computer software, any image can be manipulated to create a falsified photograph mimicking the "real" of the common snapshot. In the age of digital photography, seeing is not always believing; and for Nikki Lee, this skepticism translates well into her exploration of identity as a construct.[92]

Though the relationship between Lee's work and Orientalism may not be conscious, the idea of the exotic, as discussed by Lee, is no longer to be associated with a foreign land or culture. Lee states, "Sometimes I find exotic things in my own culture, and sometimes I can't find anything exotic about elements of different cultures. The very

[92] The hi-tech success of Japan has also given rise to an additional Asian stereotype, one that is fixated on the latest technological trends. Another female Korean artist, Lee Bul, directly manipulates this cliché of Asian society as techno obsessed in her *Cyborgs and Monsters* series, a collection of fragmented plastic figures which mediate the issues of race and gender through the link to modern technology. Throughout the series, Bul chooses to fragment the cyborgs, removing the head or limbs which not only disfigures their physical appearance but deconstructs their identity as well. One interpretation of Bul's cyborg sculptures is that they embody the Western view of Asian society; leading the technological movement yet remaining subservient to the parental West. Regardless of their superior construction, the cyborgs are still childlike; unable to impose their own voice, unable to utilize their abilities without the assistance of a guiding force.

ordinary becomes exotic out of context. It's hard to find anything left that is exotic right now, for me."[93] This last statement by Lee comes as no surprise. Not only was she raised in a Korean culture saturated with Western influence, but she also moved to New York, a city rich in cultural diversity, when she was in her early twenties. The idea that Lee finds the exotic elusive speaks volumes about her photography. For Lee, nothing is foreign, and yet, in the same interview, Lee uses the term Oriental to describe her work. Lee says, "I've adopted really Western images into my work – take *The Ohio Project*. But in all, my real concept is very Oriental."[94] While this might seem an odd statement for someone so invested in exploring identity, the theoretical concept behind Lee's work does center on identity as developed through a group atmosphere. Takashi Murakami explains, "Japan is often said to be a group-oriented society valuing cooperative interdependence over strident independence. The needs of the individual are sublimated for the common good."[95] Although Murakami's quote singles out Japan, the concept of a group-oriented society applies to Asian culture as a whole, as identity is often defined through inclusion in a group. A product of this mentality allows Asians to easily adapt to a certain group as their individual desires prove secondary. Perhaps it is this quality that provides Nikki Lee with the social mobility needed to explore, in such depth, the various subcultures of the *Projects* series. About her photography, Lee is quoted as saying, "My work looks very American – casual and multicultural – although the concept of identity forming in relation to a group is a very Asian one."[96] Certainly it is possible to attribute Lee's method to her Korean background, yet here one wonders: what if Lee is simply

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[93] Vicario, "Conversation with Nikki S. Lee," 106.
[94] Ibid., 104.
[95] Cruz, Matsui, Friis-Hansen, eds., Takashi Murakami : The Meaning of the Nonsense of the Meaning, 38-9.
[96] Sonkin, "The 13 Faces of Nikki Lee," 63.

staging for Western consumption the ultimate stereotype of the Asian as constantly assimilating, invested more in the group dynamic than in an assertion of individuality? Lee herself admits that the concept of forming a group identity is associated with Asian culture but, in accordance with the photographs of *Projects*, we are obligated to question even the motive behind Nikki Lee's assimilation. Is her interest in group identity derived from her Asian heritage, or is there another reason for her foray into this subject matter? Interestingly, Lee's next series abandons the exploration of subcultures found in the *Projects* series, in favor of staged photography in which she carefully oversees every aspect of a preplanned scene. As a follow up to the *Projects* series, *Parts* reflects a definite departure, but, with each photo focusing on the relationship between a man and a woman, the *Parts* series continues Lee's exploration of the development of identity.

Chapter Five: The *Parts* Series: Exploration of Identity Through Absence

A sunny afternoon in Manhattan as a crowd gathers in front of the gothic spires of St. Patrick's Cathedral. A woman, wearing pink and lime pastels, stares off in the distance; her male companion, holding onto a lock of her pigtail, is sliced from the photograph. The brim of his hat and the left arm of a double breasted suit is all that confirms his presence. Behind the couple, an oversized costumed bunny ear raises the possibility that it is Easter Sunday (Fig.32).

A pristine cream colored table cloth is draped over an otherwise empty table. A man in a pinstriped suit relaxes in an opulent Victorian style chair. Only his outstretched arm is in the frame, gesturing across the table, and the woman in a flowing plaid gown and matching shawl refuses to acknowledge his presence. She gazes out the window, as the light pours into the extravagant, yet empty room (Fig.33).[97]

A disheveled woman, wearing a t-shirt with the sleeves crudely cut off, holds a television remote in her left hand. In her right, she moves a cool ranch Dorito, dipped in reduced fat sour cream, toward her mouth. On the coffee table, along side the Doritos, sour cream and soy milk, rests the bare masculine feet of her partner who otherwise is cropped from the shot. She ignores his presence, intently watching the action to her left (Fig.34).

[97] There are three groups of photographs that fall within the *Parts* series, yet they do not have *Part* in the title. These three groups – *Paris*, *The Bourgeois*, and *The Wedding* – were completed after the other photographs from the *Parts* series.

Descriptions of Nikki Lee's latest photographs, these examples from the *Parts* series abandon Lee's impromptu approach to photography, instead opting to meticulously stage various environments and scenarios, ranging from lush opulence to the banal. Although these images still look like snapshots, the production of each is carefully overseen by Lee, who chooses every detail witnessed in the final artistic product. All of the "boyfriends" are actors, all of the props are intentionally selected, all of the locations are hand-picked for the occasion.[98] By electing to control all aspects of the final photograph, she has greatly reduced the element of chance and, to some extent, she has also reduced the level of reality in the photographs. On the production of the *Parts* series, Lee states, "Each photograph is very calculated, because I have an exact composition in mind. I need to have the images look a certain way because of how I cut them, so I really control everything… It's still a snapshot, but a very calculated snapshot."[99] Given this level of calculation, it would at first appear that *Parts* is a vast departure from the *Projects* series. For Lee, an artist who founded her career on working in real time, mostly public environments, this break in process could be viewed as a redirection of interests, a way to explore new concerns through her photography. Yet I would argue that this is not the case. About the *Parts* series, Lee reveals, "I want to show how personal identity is affected by other people, different relationships. Your character changes depending on who you are with."[100] Thus, though her methods may shift, Lee's comments indicate her continued investigation into the fluidity of identity. However, her new focus is not on the influence of a group on identity but how the presence of a significant other can shape the perception, both internal and external, of a person.

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[98] Jessica Dawson, "The Artist's Pare of Lovers," The Washington Post, 8 July 2004, C1-C5.
[99] Goldberg, "Only Part of the Story," 52.
[100] Waltener, "The Real Nikki," 68.

At first sight, it's hard not to assume that these photographs are intended as a reminder of a failed relationship.[101] With the white border occupying three sides of the photograph, Lee makes it abundantly clear that a part of the image is missing – the part consisting of her partner's face. Throughout the series, each photo contains only a trace of her male companion; in some images this may only be a hand or an arm, in others a glimpse of his torso or a sliver of his head can be found. Yet, by always excluding the face of each man, Lee leaves the viewer to focus solely on her character. To label these works as representations of a breakup though would be to overlook the fact that the photographs are not ripped in anger, but divided in two with precision.[102] About the process, Lee comments, "I am interested in the physical activity of cutting the photographs...They are laminated and mounted on aluminum because, once again, it matters to me that I preserve the physical sensation of cutting up a conventional snapshot."[103]

The meaning behind the process of physically cutting the photograph, a step Lee finds so crucial to the finished product, may be more complex than just removing the male subject. As discussed in previous chapters, the *Projects* series deconstructs the photographic snapshot, revealing the staged nature of the pose while exposing the performative nature of the photograph's subjects. For Lee to cut manually the photograph in *Parts*, she is literalizing this idea as process, forcing the viewer to see the snapshot as selectively altered by the hand of the artist. Whereas the *Projects* series is subtle in revealing the selective nature of the artist, *Parts*, with only three of the four

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[101] With the word *Part* in the title of each photograph, these images allude to something being incomplete. And even with all of the "*Parts*," the viewer still cannot produce a coherent whole.
[102] Dawson, "The Artist's Pare of Lovers," C5.
[103] Goldberg, "Only Part of the Story," 52.

white borders typical of snapshot processing, compel the viewer to question what the artist did not want present. In her description of the series, Dayna McLeod writes, "Parts are missing from each image, leaving us to wonder about their absence and the significance of that absence."[104] By electing to remove physically her partner's identity from the picture, Lee has set up a dynamic that demands more questions than answers.

Positioned along the mirrored wall[105] of a lower Manhattan perfume shop, Nikki Lee, wearing a Coach hat, a gold studded revolver dangling from her neck, attentively pierces the ear of an African American male who holds between his ringed fingers a stack of one hundred dollar bills (Fig.35). Within the cramped confines of the store, one must question who is taking the photograph, and if we, the viewers, are intended to be participants in this moment. By avoiding any interaction with the camera, both Lee and her companion never break the cinematic fourth wall – a trait which is highly characteristic of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. Yet, by no means can these photographs be classified as part of a cinematic experience given that, through cropping, Lee carefully maintains the snapshot aesthetic. Still, there is something about these images that prevent them from achieving the look of the typical snapshot. Although there may be some examples from *Parts* where Lee makes direct eye contact with the camera, there never seems to be an instance where Lee is decidedly posing, in the traditional sense of the word, for the camera. Instead, all the images appear to be captured, candid moments where a photographer's presence would be somewhat intrusive. Although these scenarios are meticulously constructed by Lee, they maintain a greater feeling that we are

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[104] Dayna McLeod, "Stretching Identity to Fit: The Many Faces of Nikki S. Lee," CVPhoto 63 (Spring 2004): 24.

[105] The mirrored wall provides a doubling effect for the image. Lee's decision to construct the photograph so that both her and her companion are reflected on the wall could potentially be interpreted as Lee's commentary on identity as an original-less copy.

seeing the "real" person in the image, caught off guard by the voyeuristic camera. Except for the "intimate" encounters in *The Lesbian Project*, this is not the case in the *Projects* series where Nikki Lee and her companions seem to be fully aware that a photograph is being taken thereby eliciting a constructed pose, falsifying the reality of the moment. By typically ignoring the presence of the camera in the *Parts* series, Nikki Lee blurs the distinction between the fictional scenarios she constructs and the "truth" of the common snapshot.

Leaning against the railing of a fire escape as the morning sun falls across her shoulders, Lee, coffee mug in hand, stretches her arm behind her head. Wearing what appear to be cherry patterned pajama shorts, Lee gives a lazy glance toward the camera – a rare occurrence in *Parts* – as her partner, in boxers and a t-shirt, stands to her right (Fig.36). Elizabeth Dunbar, curator at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, proposes that, "Maybe Lee's character found someone else? – her sexy pose on the balcony may have indicated a need that wasn't being fulfilled. Or maybe the male character found someone to replace her – her sexy pose on the balcony may have indicated an attempt on her part to keep him."[106] What is interesting about Dunbar's assessment of the photograph is that both possible scenarios represent a potential unhappiness in the relationship. While Lee has commented that the *Parts* series do not necessarily represent evidence of a breakup, Dunbar still believes "it is difficult not to interpret them as signifiers of loss or, at the very least, of emotional import."[107] While it could be argued that Lee's sullen expression in some of the images could be interpreted as unhappiness, there isn't enough visual evidence to validate Dunbar's interpretation.

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[106] Elizabeth Dunbar, Nikki S. Lee: Parts, exh. cat. (Kansas City, MO: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005).
[107] Ibid.

Lee's utilization of the common snapshot, a medium which immediately evokes a sense of nostalgia, can account for the loss that Dunbar reads in these photos. In the photograph, the moment has passed, thereby relegating the photograph to the realm of nostalgia, resulting in a falsified concept of the recorded moment. Susan Sontag notes, "Photographs turn the past into an object of tender regard, scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past."[108] Yet, the slicing of the photograph alludes to another moment in time; a moment at odds with the first. If the snapshot is a moment capturing the past, then the physical act of cutting is an attempt to return to that moment, not to reminisce but to alter.

As the light filters through the dingy blue curtains of a cramped sparse bedroom, Lee, her knees drawn close to her chest, smokes a cigarette as her male companion, his arm wrapped in cellophane protecting a fresh tattoo, lounges topless on the bed (Fig.37). Without any accompanying text, the viewer is forced to construct a narrative to explain the mood behind the moment. As the strap of her pink bra falls off her shoulder, Lee is caught up in an introspective gaze away from the camera. Is this the aftermath of a fight with her partner? Or is she simply enjoying a cigarette as she watches television? At first glance, and without prior knowledge of the *Parts* series, this image could easily be aligned with the intimate photography of Nan Goldin. The seedy bedroom, both occupants in various states of undress, the desolate, hopeless feel are all traits typically associated with Goldin. Yet, the cropped border brings a unique element to this image. The knowledge that the male figure has been intentionally removed from the frame shifts the personal narrative that the viewer brings to the photograph; the excised face of the reclining man is still a mystery to the viewer. By removing the male figure from the

[108] Sontag, On Photography, 71.

snapshot, Lee forces the viewer to construct a narrative, without all the necessary elements. Not only does the cropped border alter the viewer's narrative of this snapshot, it also brings up the issues of truth and identity previously discussed in the *Projects* series.

At first, Lee's decision to excise the male figure from each photograph seems to coincide with Berger's statement that "men *act*, and women *appear*."[109] Without their identity revealed, Lee's male companions are spared being subjects of the gaze, leaving Nikki Lee as the central object of visual pleasure. At the same time, Lee's decision to physically cut the man from each photograph – a photograph that is already constructed – disrupts the association of women with passivity. Though it is true that Lee is the sole object of the gaze in each example from *Parts*, she is also the creator of the images, and she physically acts upon the completed photograph, visibly placing her in the masculine role of the artist. This dichotomy can not only be found in *Parts*, but also in the *Projects* series where Lee acts as both the passive subject of the photograph as well as the active creator of both her appearance and the artistic product. In regards to how identity is constructed, *Parts* does represent a shift from group to relationship, yet it is evident that Lee is still deeply invested in challenging the validity of gender-specific roles.

As a bodiless outstretched hand of a male figure directs a digital camera at Lee and himself, she is ready for the photograph (Fig.38). Although she refuses to smile, Lee leans in tight with her partner, staring directly into the lens while a fountain supplies the ideal backdrop. In this image, Lee is consciously aware that a camera is present, yet the camera she is aware of is not the one which provides us with the photograph. The inclusion of the small digital camera in the photograph differentiates *Parts* from *Projects*

[109] Berger, Ways of Seeing, 47.

by creating a disconnect between the image that we see and Lee's position as photographer. Now, we are positioned as voyeur, the subjects of the photograph unaware of our presence. The layering effect provided by the second camera does, however, link *Parts* with *Projects* in a more conceptual manner. The display of the digital camera frames a moment that is, as previously discussed, structured, the pose representing a performative act prompted by the presence of the camera. Due to the visibility of the internal camera, the performative aspect of the pose is all the more obvious; however, it is evident that Nikki Lee's central concerns have not changed. In what I view as a transitional body of work, the *Parts* series, while somewhat incoherent, seems to bridge the interests of *Projects* and her most recent work, the film *a.k.a. Nikki S. Lee*. By confounding what we decisively label as authentic, the *Parts* series continues Lee's exploration into the fluid, performative nature of identity and, in turn, it relates identity's instability with the instability of the snapshot.

Postscript

Now, after three years of working on the *Parts* series, Nikki Lee has moved on to a new project which centers around her interest in cinema. Entitled *a.k.a. Nikki S. Lee*, the feature-length film, scheduled for its first screening at the Museum of Modern Art in Fall 2006, focuses on two distinct artists, both of whom are portrayed by Lee.[110] In a recent article, Carly Berwick describes the two characters: "One is an earnest, introverted intellectual who lives in Brooklyn and dresses in all black. The other is an outgoing, vibrant East Village night owl who would not be out of place in a candid shot in a glossy fashion magazine."[111] Although the medium has changed, Lee continues to create art founded on dissolving the boundaries between life and art, between the real and performance, between authentic and staged.[112] When asked about her recent creation, Lee responded by saying, "It's not 100 percent documentary…It's not about my life but about two people, myself and my persona. I made it a mix of reality and unreality, acting and non-acting, so that no one can tell me 'Oh, this is a documentary' or 'It's not a documentary.' That's the way I wanted to make it."[113]

For Nikki Lee, even the label documentary is too limiting, for the word documentary automatically brings up assumptions of truth – a further understanding, a

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[110] The doubling effect, once implicit in *Part (33)*, has now been rendered explicit in Lee's new film as there are now *two* of Nikki Lee.

[111] Berwick, "Extreme Makeover," 110.

[112] Nikki Lee complicates what is real and what is fantasy by hiring two camera men who were instructed to follow her and document her daily life. Most of the events in the film did in fact take place, however Lee films other scenes that are completely staged and intersperses them throughout the film. She also alters her mood or changes her actions for the camera without disclosing the performance to those around her. All of this aids in disrupting what is in fact real and what is performed. See Carol Kino, "Now in Moving Pictures: The Multitude of Nikki S. Lee," The New York Times/Arts and Leisure, 1 October 2006: 26.

[113] Magdalene Perez, The AI Interview: Nikki S. Lee, Artinfo, 2006, http://www.artinfo.com/News/Article.aspx?a=16981, 17 July 2006.

greater comprehension, a new familiarity with whatever the topic. Instead of truth, Lee's work offers only ambiguity, prompting questions without answers. To describe *a.k.a. Nikki S. Lee* as a documentary would be an attempt to categorize the work of an artist who resists categorization. In fact, even the title of photographer, one label that should be relatively indisputable, is precisely refuted by Lee: "People always see me as a photographer because I'm using the medium of photography…I can be a photographer, artist, whatever. I just mention this because I don't consider myself a photographer because…I don't have a camera."[114] Questioning what we all presume to be real, which I find to be the crux of her oeuvre, is the fundamental component, the keystone, of her exploration of identity as constructed through personal relationships. And, in the course of examining Lee's photographs, it is evident that the authenticity of the snapshot must always be questioned just as one's identity can never be fully defined. One quote by Lee provides a nice summation in understanding her overall goal. She states, "I'm already doing The Artist Project. There aren't any pictures of it, but it exists."[115] Maybe this assessment applies to us all, since, in some way, we are all in the process of developing our own individual projects; chronicling our progress in photo albums, home movies, and personal journals so that perhaps we can one day begin to understand the development and performative nature of our own evershifting identities.

[114] Waltener, "The Real Nikki," 68.
[115] Ferguson, "Let's Be Nikki," 17.

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Fig.1. Nikki S. Lee, *The Seniors Project (28)*, 1999

Fig.2. Nikki S. Lee, *The Skateboarders Project (30)*, 2000

Fig.3. Nikki S. Lee, *The Tourist Project (4)*, 1997

Fig.4. Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project (4)*, 1998

Fig.5. Nikki S. Lee, *The Dragqueen Project (5)*, 1997

Fig.6. Nikki S. Lee, *The Exotic Dancers Project (1)*, 2000

Fig.7. Nikki S. Lee, *The Exotic Dancers Project (13)*, 2000

Fig.8. Nikki S. Lee, *The Lesbian Project (11)*, 1997

Fig.9. Nikki S. Lee, *The Hispanic Project (27)*, 1998

Fig.10. Nikki S. Lee, *The Ohio Project (7)*, 1999

Fig.11. Nikki S. Lee, *The Exotic Dancers Project (23)*, 2000

Fig.12. Nikki S. Lee, *The Seniors Project (24)*, 1999

Fig.13. Cover of Nikki S. Lee: Projects

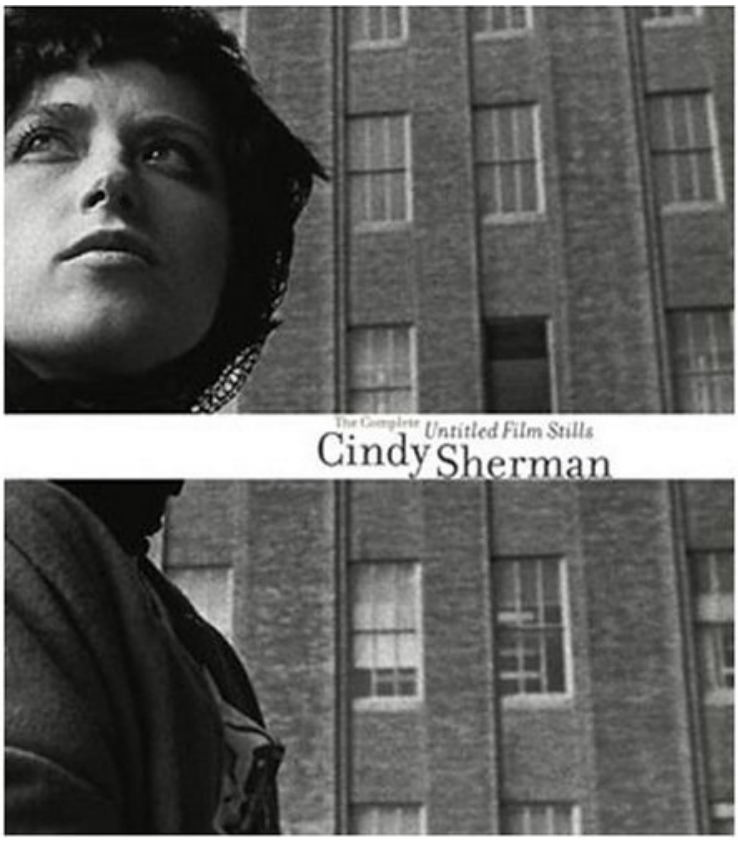

Fig.14. Cover of Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills

Fig.15. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still (14)*, 1978

Fig.16. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still (48)*, 1979

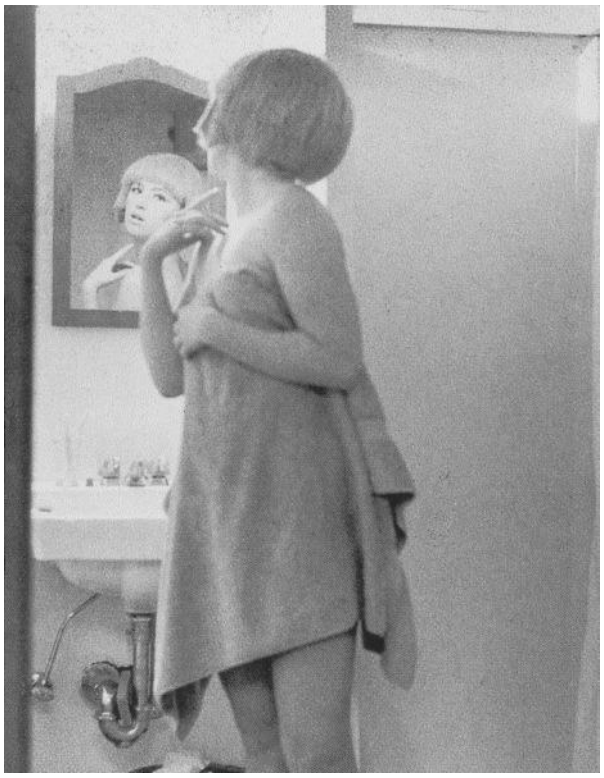

Fig.17. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still (2)*, 1977

Fig.18. Nikki S. Lee, *The Lesbian Project (14)*, 1997

Fig.19. Nan Goldin, *Joey at the Love Ball, NYC*, 1991

Fig.20. Nan Goldin, *Joey in my tub, Berlin*, 1992

Fig.21. Nikki S. Lee, *The Young Japanese (East Village) Project (1)*, 1997

Fig.22. Nikki S. Lee, *The Schoolgirls Project (4)*, 2000

Fig.23. Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project (23)*, 1998

Fig.24. Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project (17)*, 1998

Fig.25. Yasumasa Morimura, *Portrait (Futago)*, 1990

Fig.26. Nikki S. Lee, *The Hip Hop Project (2)*, 2001

Fig.27. Nikki S. Lee, *The Schoolgirls Project (13)*, 2000

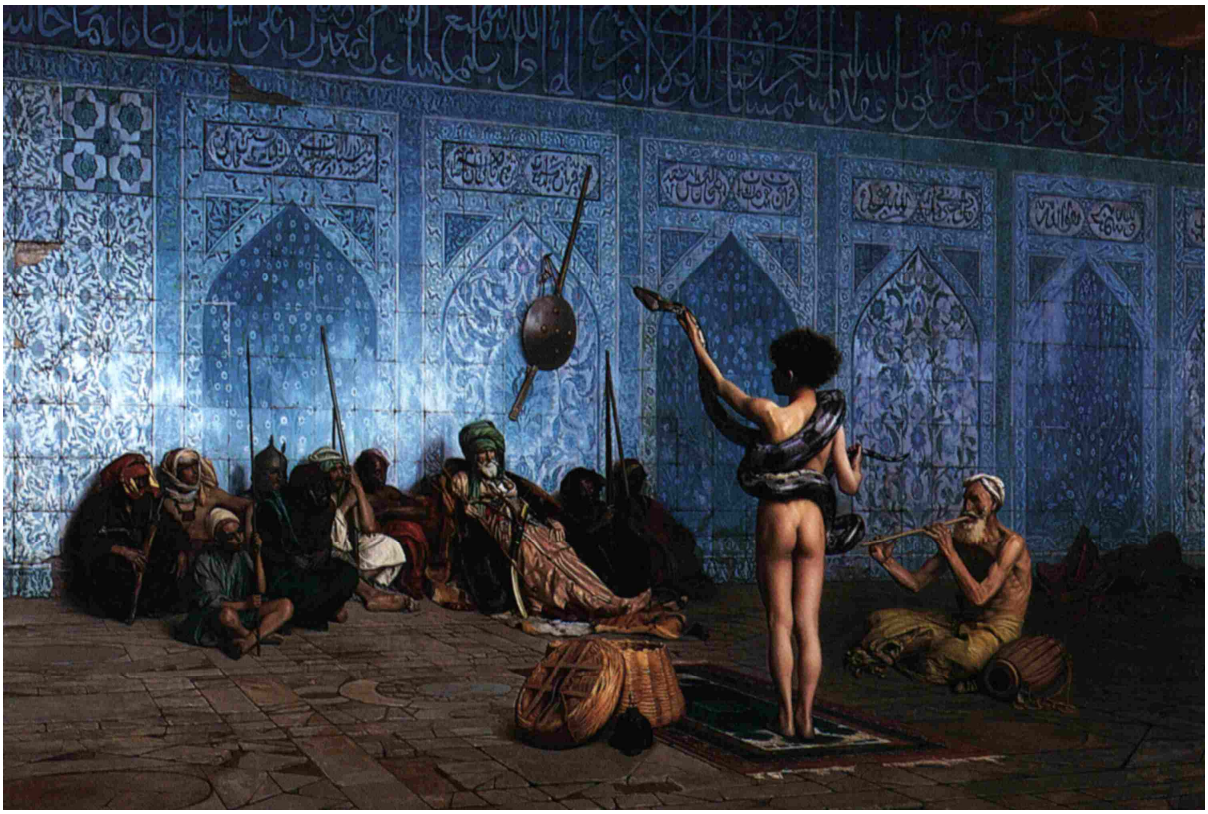

Fig.28. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Snake Charmer*, late 1860s

Fig.29. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Interior of a Mosque*, 1870s

Fig.30. Nikki S. Lee, *The Tourist Project (13)*, 1997

Fig.31. Nikki S. Lee, *The Schoolgirls Project (22)*, 2000

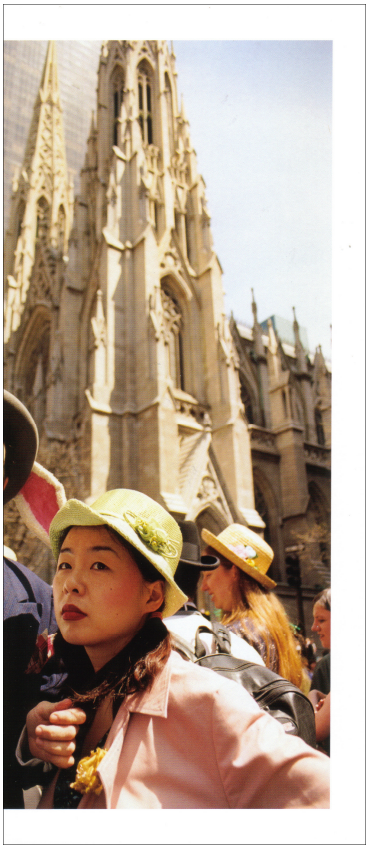

Fig.32. Nikki S. Lee, *Part (31)*, 2002-3

Fig.33. Nikki S. Lee, *Paris (203)*, 2004

Fig.34. Nikki S. Lee, *Part (26)*, 2002-3

Fig.35. Nikki S. Lee, *Part (33)*, 2002-3

Fig.36. Nikki S. Lee, *Part (18)*, 2002-3

Fig.37. Nikki S. Lee, *Part (10)*, 2002-3

Fig.38. Nikki S. Lee, *Part (21)*, 2002-3