Homage to Everyday People

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Homage to Everyday People

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Film at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Influenced by an ever-growing sense of alienation with my homeland, I have been determined to discover through my art practice an ability to challenge conventional notions of home, identity, communication and miscommunication. Exploring these themes, I became increasingly aware of the parallels between everyday life and art practice. By creatively connecting with a diverse amount of local people and their communities, I fulfilled desires to discover a sense of belonging and generated opportunities for others to break through traditional social boundaries and roles.
This is not a coincidence. This is an instance of synchronicity. If not, it is fate. I think.

My grandparents were forced to emigrate from Korea to Japan before World War II, during their early teenage years. They had no education, learned Japanese by hearing it spoken, and had no written skills beyond basic proper nouns pertaining to the family itself.

My grandpa always told me to do three things:

1. Study hard
2. Make friends
3. Brush your teeth

He said that these things are life’s great fortunes that no one can take away. Back then, and even now, the Japanese government didn’t treat Korean-Japanese people very well. Immigrants from Korea were not allowed to speak their native language in public or use their original Korean names. The Korean nationality was a fact to be suppressed, hidden even. Yet, Korean-Japanese people were not granted Japanese nationality, which remains the case to this day. Korean-Japanese adopted Japanese names—aliases—that reflected their individual histories. My grandpa changed his Japanese name a couple of times in his life. My name, Naoko (尚子), is a Japanese name. My grandpa gave me, “Nao” (尚) this character is picked from my grandpa’s home address in Korea. “Ko” (子) is a common symbol of a girl in Japan. Hence, my name is Naoko.

When I was a little kid, I spent hours looking through old photo albums whenever I visited my grandparents’ house. I enjoyed a vicarious feeling of nostalgia, guessing which face was young grandpa and which was young grandma in many different group portraits. They had a full bookshelf of photo albums. When I asked why they have so many of them, my grandpa responded, “Because that is what Japanese people do!” It was one method they used to merge with Japanese culture. The photo albums were evidence of their efforts and history of making themselves at home. The group portrait format of photography is a fascination that has endured to this day.
To Whom It May Concern,

My Korean name is Sang Ja Chun.
My grandparents emigrated from Korea to Japan about 80 years ago.
I was born and raised as a citizen of Japan but my passport is
Korean. Though I’ve visited for but 3 days, my nationality is Korean.
This is complicated.

I am writing this letter because when I renewed my passport this
summer, I found out that I had a home address in Korea, which is
the address to which I am sending this letter.
I am curious what is at this address? Is it a home?
If so, who lives there? Who are you?

Currently, I live in the U.S. and study Photography / Media / Film.
I am developing a project based on this "home address", which I
never knew and have never visited. I hope to find out more about
“my home”.

If it is at all possible to respond with something, whether it be
impressions or pictures, it would be wonderful.
I have a fantasy. It is of me in the home. I need your help in
completing this imagination of what "my home" looks like.

I’ve attached my contact info.
I hope you understand my proposal and you will respond kindly.
Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

P.S. I don’t speak Korean, so I have to ask someone to translate this
letter. My apologies.

Sincerely

A letter to my Korean address (figure 1)
In summer 2010, I had to re-new my Korean passport. I went to the Korean Embassy in Tokyo. In the lobby, the receptionist spoke to me in Korean. I apologized and told her that I didn't speak Korean. Unsurprised, she seemed to be used to dealing with Korean-Japanese people who don’t speak Korean. She explained how to re-new my Korean passport in broken Japanese. I looked at the application, written in Korean. I told the receptionist that I don’t know what to do, where to put my name, anything. She passed me a sheet with Japanese instructions and I was able to fill in the application, take the requisite photograph in the booth, pay the cost for renewal, obtain a copy of my family register, and finally, bring it back to the counter. Meanwhile, the room was a-chatter in Japanese, many Korean-Japanese struggling with the bureaucracy at the embassy.

When the passport official called my name, she called out “Sang Ja Chun.” Sang Ja Chun is my Korean name, a fact I didn’t know about until I got my first passport, at age 19. I remember opening it for the first time, seeing my photo, and the unfamiliar name. My father explained that it is my real name. I already knew I had two different names Naoko Wowsugi as my formal Japanese name and Naoko Zen as Korean-Japanese name. Now there is one more, that is “real:” Sang Ja Chun.

At the desk, the embassy official explained certain details about my new passport, while looking over the details of my family registration. She noticed that she is from the same town that my passport lists as my address, which confounded me: I had never lived in Korea. How could I have a Korean address? For bureaucratic reasons, non-Japanese nationals residing in Japan must have addresses in their native country.
I came to the U. S. in 2000, at 20 years old. I didn’t speak any English nor did I know a single person. Since then, I have moved approximately 60 times. I came back and forth between America and Japan every couple of years. I lost the sense of being at “home.” Now, I feel like I am missing something important. When I found out about my Korean address. I was fascinated that there was an address designated to me. I was attracted by the fact that I had a home address as my “real home” somewhere I’ve never been, much like I have a “real name” that I’ve never been called.
First, with a bit of difficulty due to not knowing Korean, I researched the address with Google Maps. There were a couple possible images of my home. There was a beautiful family-style house, a shrine (!), and an unusual house on a cliff. I couldn’t specify which was the correct image to correspond to my passport address. I became interested in meeting and talking to the residents of my “real home” or ascertaining the type of building my address points to, whether a city hall, an elementary school, or a business. I was curious.

My possible houses on Google Map (figure 3)

I wrote a letter to the address with the help of a Korean-American student Soo-Hyeun Kwon, at Virginia Commonwealth University, thinking I could send it to my newly discovered home address. As a token of gratitude, I took her to Mama's Kitchen, a Korean restaurant near school. We talked about her Korean-American background and my Korean-Japanese background. I have been to Korea for only three days in my
life. I went to Pusan with my father. My memories of Korea are quiet and foggy, slightly dream-like and foreign. I remember loving Korean food. The student told me that when she goes back to her home country, some Koreans treat her with condescension since she is Korean-American.
A letter to my Korean address in Korean (figure 5)

Sending the letter from USPS (figure 6)
I waited for a reply to my letter for weeks and the reply never came. I emailed the Korean Embassy about my address, which they corrected and spelled out in proper Korean so I could copy and paste it into my Browser on Google Maps. The image that came up was nothing but an empty field of grass—the middle of nowhere. Yet, to me, the home, in its very “nowhereness” filled the emotional void I think of when I think of the notion of my home. I was fascinated by this satellite image and appreciated Google Maps for offering an emotional tool that connects a computer user to a far away place. My home in the middle of nowhere felt perfect. I spent a late night at the studio taking in the image.

In Soseki Natsume’s novel Kusamakura, which translates as “Grass Pillows,” he writes:

However you look at it, the human world is not an easy place to live.
And when its difficulties intensify, you find yourself longing to leave that world and dwell in some easier one – and then, when you understand at least that difficulties will dog you wherever you may live, this is when poetry and art are born...
So if this best of worlds proves a hard one for you, you must simply do your best to settle in and relax as you can, and make this short life of ours, if only briefly, an
easier place in which to make your home. Herein lies the poet’s true calling, the artist’s vocation. We owe our humble gratitude to all practitioners of the arts, for they mellow the harshness of our human world and enrich the human heart.¹

To me, Natsume encourages us to embrace the world including its difficulties. It is through the vicissitudes of daily experience that poetry and art become true to life. To embrace the world, a work of art should enrich the human heart. His prose evokes an introspective feeling in me that has contributed to my ideas about how to make a work of art about my newly discovered Korean address, wherever I am, and how my artwork can connect to the human world.

I decided to make a work that retains something of an untouched and fragile feeling of finding that one’s home is in the middle of nowhere. As a monument to my real home, and my real name, I made a video. I went to the Virginia countryside and set up a bed and slept there until sunrise. In the video, the sky gradually emerges from the darkness of night, becoming bright to reveal an image of me sleeping under layers and layers of blankets.

Grass Pillows, 35:00, Video, 2011 (figure 8)

An Alien’s Journey

Being an alien is part of my identity, whether in Korea, Japan, or in America. My alien-ness is a form I use in my work in photography and video, mediums I use to study communication and miscommunication in social interactions. In the US, meeting people and integrating myself into American culture feels adventurous. My art practice and daily life in America merge with one another in a way that is echoed in the writings of Susan Sontag. In her seminal essay On Photography, Sontag explains that even American photographers are foreigners in their own country:

*Faced with the awesome spread and alienness of a newly settled continent, people wielded cameras as a way of taking possession of the places they visited... American photographers are often on the road, overcome with disrespectful wonder at what their country offers in the way of surreal surprises. Moralists and conscienceless despoilers, children and foreigners in their own land, they will get something down that is disappearing – and, often, hasten its disappearance by photographing it...*  

Being a photographer in America, regardless of nationality, implies being a foreigner at the same time. This makes my mixed identity even stronger, therefore I feel comfortable being in the role of foreigner and a photographer here. Similarly, Robert Frank, the well-known photographer from Switzerland, exemplifies the notion of the foreigner wielding a camera. In his influential photo book, *The Americans*, he documents his journey through America by taking photographs of the characters and inhabitants he meets on the road in the 1950s with his own point of view. He photographs what he sees and projects his experiences and emotions on his journey in America. In *Photography after Frank*, former *New York Times* writer and picture editor Phillip Gefter writes, “Frank’s influence extends beyond the road trip documentation of America, though, to the kind of personal documentation of

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relationship and families infused with autobiography and intimacy.”3 Robert Frank, as the photographer-as-foreigner, brought a third point of view—a personal one—to photography and America.

My journey is meeting people. My work is discovering how I communicate with these people. Through photography, video and performance, I create forms of communication with people. I play many different roles and embrace several personae in order to engage with the various walks of life I encounter on my journey. I make an effort, through performance, to fit into a new realm based on the parameters set by a new individual or group of individuals. Most of the time, it is a folly—an awkward yet earnest attempt to assimilate myself into a particular social group. I have to be open to every awkward situation in search of these precious surprises. I find an authenticity in the awkwardness of just meeting people, in finding the things that make a person different. By understanding and underscoring these differences, I come closer to finding that they too feel like an outsider, much like I do. These differences, these anomalies that we all have are what hold us apart, but at the same time, they are what make us humble, human, and vulnerable.

By making art with people, my works attempt to capture the experience of a moment which reflects the authenticity of relationships exposing naturally occurring social roles and power dynamics. The works that make up my Video Portrait Series portray a humorous diary of my relationships with each person I am engaging with. I try to connect with people in myriad ways, depending on what their personal idiosyncrasies may be. In the process, we set up a plot based on interpretation of our relationship. Then we improvise embellished performance of ourselves in front of the camera.

Using time based and visual media as my art form, I try to understand others beyond verbal language. A recent triptych work, Silent Study, I featured my friend, Jennifer

Lauren Smith, who uses American Sign Language to communicate. In the video, we are conversing in the library, in front of a sign reading “No Conversation.” The situation is silly and sarcastic. Using formal sign language and crude gestures we tell each other “I don’t understand what you are talking about” repeatedly until we understand what we are trying to say to each other. The piece intends to represent through exaggeration the difficulties of truly expressing one’s intentions and feelings to another individual.

In *You are Weird*, I worked with a Bulgarian colleague, Georgi Ivanov. We observed each other in a drawing session. We both learned English as second language and have difficulty with verbal communication due to strong accents, grammatical errors and limited vocabulary. We understand the world more visually than verbally. Our appearance is the same, we each have extremely long dark hair with black outfits. As we trace each other onto a canvas, we stare harder creating a simmering tension. Our body language shows exchange and intercommunication between us. As if, each of us is thinking “you are weird.” The truth is, that we both are.

By exploring visual and physical communication, I got a renewed sense of that body language is authentic. In YOGA, I worked with my friend Catherine Brooks, who is a yoga instructor. I learned how to do yoga poses by watching her movements. I view poses as a symbol of body language. The similarities and differences between her poses and my attempts to copy her echo the successes and failures in our spoken communication. Communication and miscommunication is an interactive series of feedback between each person where the connection is always “almost there but not quite.”

Being in the US, and using English as a new language, the moment of transforming and translating language creates a distance between various situations and my consciousness. I become an audience of my life and watching the movie of my
everyday engagement with people. Looking at the world through this lens inspires my art practice. Documenting my observations in this video series allows me to study the way I navigate everyday life and how I interact with people. Japanese photographer Nobuyoshi Araki writes,

> Whether it is an advertisement or anything else, creation must start with documentation. To document is to get to the heart of a human being. A documentary is an intense gaze at the world, a discovery, a sensation.4

Video Portrait Series is an observation and study of relationships I have with friends and acquaintances through exploitations of the awkwardness and absurd misunderstandings of these relationships. I find the most pure truths lie in these awkward moments. By highlighting the absurdity of miscommunications, vulnerabilities and insecurities, I delve into the complexities of what forges or prevents a relationship with another human.

You are Weird, 03:09, Video, 2010 (figure 10)

YOGA, 00:57, Video, 2010 (figure 11)
Community Service

In a live, roving performance work that I have continued for over 8 years, entitled “Amber Wolf’s Hair Salon Feel so Fine,” I borrow the role of the hair stylist.5 With a simple cardboard placard, apron, and scissors, I offer free hair cuts to a group of people. I set up my booth in a variety of locations such as a bar, a concert hall, gallery openings, and comedy clubs. I give terrific haircuts to walk-in clients who don’t otherwise expect barber services. When a new client sits down in my chair, we build a quick feeling of trust which is challenging and fun. I do my best to create the haircut described by the client, and meanwhile, the client becomes part of a larger community of people whose hair I have cut. The communication and interactions I

5 “Amber Wolf” is an American name that I have given to myself.
have with these people become a form of awkward intimacy, while they have placed themselves in a vulnerable position by allowing me, an untrained stylist to cut their hair. Some take charge by telling me the type and style of hair, while others passively let me do whatever I wish. The haircut becomes a stand in for intimacy, and our conversations sometimes become very personal, and other times remain completely silent, perhaps mimicking the type of relationship I might have with each individual, given the chance. This is a highlight of my art practice: the connection of real people in real life and becoming part of a community.

To experience a thing as beautiful means: to experience it necessary wrongly.6

In a similar vein, I developed a piece in which I created an awkward experience with a small group of straight young men. In Beautiful Boys, I invited them into my studio for a makeover. I ask them if they would prefer to be “cute” or “sexy.” This unexpected treatment disrupts their social boundaries. By allowing only those two choices, I force them into a stereotypically, female role. My role plays on the stereotype of a knowledgeable Asian make-up artist. I don’t say much and set to work with confidence and purpose, letting the boys trust me despite their initial discomfort. In the end, I reveal their reflections to them in a mirror and they admire their feminine alter egos. I believe it also mimes intimate relationships by allowing the mirror to reveal their vulnerability.

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In *I Read Your Horoscope*, I assume the guise of a telemarketer, spiritual guide and advice columnist. Without notice, I call people, with whom I have lost touch via computer telephone software (Skype). Using this new communication tool, I read their horoscopes from found articles that advise on how to improve communications with others. Although I am an “anonymous” caller, my accent makes my identity obvious. Some people listen, some are offended. When they speak back to me, I hang up abruptly. Giving unusual experiences as service and manipulating social roles, I play with boundaries and expectation. I strive to freshen our interactive experiences and emphasize the notion of the everyday as a playground. The effects that these innocuous and often over-generalized horoscopes have (once specifically targeted at my own personal relationships) highlight the perceived problems in these relationships, both by myself and by the person at the other end of the conversation. For example, in *Horoscope for Taurus*, I read an article for my friend whom I haven’t talked to in a while. I read,
“Relationships are not a one-way street. In order to make progress or get attention from that special someone, it is important to have a mutual understanding that interaction goes both ways...” Additionally by recognizing my voice, the person I am speaking to assume I am telling her/him in earnest, what my likes and faults are with her/him. These writings are supposed to be for everyone, yet it is the extent to which they seem tailored for each relationship that makes them at one time true yet harsh and at others loving and special. I find this irony a complex study of the universal emotion in relationship that we all share, yet believe to be reserved for only ourselves.

I read your horoscope, 02:47, Video, 2010 (figure 14)
Homage to Everyday People

Making art of people, including myself, is personal and a creative challenge. This has developed into a process of getting a sense of people and getting them to open up. I have found that the process is not something that only pertains to my art, but also occurs in my daily interactions. This exchange is about building a relationship. By realizing the parallel between my art process and the processes of my daily life, I have become fascinated by everyday events and the ways certain moments team with cinematic potential. Making art and sharing a solid moment with people—even in an instant—builds a sense of grounding to me. For my thesis exhibition, I created two projects that pay homage to everyday people.

Contact Improvisation

In my fantasy, somewhere in town, common people are living ordinary lives: a father and a daughter playing in a backyard, a guy buying a coffee as his routine to a coffee shop where a girl works there everyday, a teacher and a student in a class and dance partners for 25 years about starting their daily practice. Spontaneously four couples start dancing in some magic-time. Four different cameras capture their dance and monitors display four different type of dance. By Contact Improvisation, they are celebrating their day-to-day engagement with a partner who may or may not know or love. After a 10-minute magic-time, they finish dancing and go back to their everyday. Most of them have never done the contact improvisation and their dance is a bit clumsy. This clumsiness brings the rawnness of the performance into the project. A connection is fragile, Contact Improvisation shows their relationship through body language, also figuring out each other, feel each other, caring each other and learning each other, like we do everyday.
Contact Improvisation is an interpretive dance in which two people keep at least one body part in contact while continuing movement. Through physical communication, the dancers sense each other’s movement and respond to stimuli with new movement, continuing until a sense of completion is mutually concurred. The dance also reflects the emotional relationships between the two dancers: success in the dance relies on confidence, security, and trust through physical movement.

My videos show how people navigate the tensions of physical boundaries and intimacy. I set up four relationships and scenes for the video shoot. I set the video camera in such a way, so as create a voyeuristic observation of the characters as in poetic cinema. Also, each relationship in the work has a symbolic meaning in my personal life. The relationships are surrogates to my own.

I. A Customer and Server at a Café
A Starbucks customer, Jeff, who visits the café at least twice a day is joined by the server, Janelle. Their over-the-counter familiarity is endearing: every time she sees him, she says, “Grande iced coffee with room for cream, unsweetened.” In my video, they break the social barrier of customer and clerk, leaving formality of the counter and register to engage each other in this intimate dance. The piece represents relationships in which we often use a person as a means to an end rather than an end in themselves. The dance makes one acknowledge the other as an individual that must be faced and directly acknowledged rather than overlooked in our rushed daily personal interactions.

II. A Father and Daughter in a Backyard
A father, Christopher and his only daughter, Aya, who is 9 years old perform in the second video. To me, a father and daughter relationship is one of the most sentimental and cinematic of relationships. Aya and Christopher perform a trusting and cheerful dance, evoking the heartwarming and poetic feeling I was looking to
produce in this work. My mother passed away when I was 6 years old, leaving my dad to raise me alone, his only daughter. My father never talked about his feelings, future plans or his past. We are only connected in the present. This is our only way of communication. Watching Aya and Christopher has a personal weight for me—I watch them and feel for a moment a fulfillment of lost kinship.

III. A Teacher and Student in a Classroom
In my absence of communication with my parents during my childhood, the adults I communicated with most were my teachers. When I became a teacher myself, I took on the role of a leader and a person who offers guidance and knowledge to students. For the video, I set up a situation between a student, Harrison and myself. We awkwardly bridge a teacher-student gap of physical connection in the school’s computer lab.

IV. Dance Partners at a Dance Studio
Pioneers of contact improvisation dance, Cheryl and Robbie have been dance partners for 25 years. A life-long relationship, especially marriage, is unknown territory and an enormous curiosity to me. Through their 25 years of dancing, their movements are very casual and natural, like a perfect harmonization in a beautiful dance studio.
Contact Improvisation, 10:00, 4-channel video, 2011 (figure 15)
Group Portrait Journey

In this project, I take portrait photographs of groups of people connected by some social, cultural, or educational tissue. From one group I ask a person to take me to another group to which he or she belongs. It becomes a relay. If there is a dead end, I go back to the same person and ask them to take me to a different group again.

Group Portrait Journey starts from the VCU graduate Photography and Film department, and from this group, I followed my professor Heide Trepanier to the University of Richmond where she also teaches. The project expanded from there. Since the outset, I have met eighteen groups of people including young punk rock people, a bike gang, a community of Muslims, suburban housewives, Girl Scouts, exotic dancers, an anonymous company, and members of a Baptist church.

This project was fueled by the kindness and generosity of the participants and navigated by communication with a group stationed in front of my camera lens. The manner of communication was shaped by different circumstances such as the occasion or the compositional backdrop of the photograph. The experience of being photographed in the group affected the person I chose to lead me to the next group. Often that person kept the experience of group portraiture in mind when thinking of another group to involve in the project.

The large format photography also brings a tension and formality to the photo shoot. People are mystified by the “traditional” camera and if affects their behavior; they become more formal for the camera. When I ask the subjects to be still for the camera for the time it takes to meter the light for the correct exposure, load film, and release the shutter, the tension turns into exhaustion. Photo shoots like mine are physical experiences. This project has a performance element as well. I appreciate how this
experience brings an instant togetherness and sense of accomplishment once the shots are taken.

Photography’s evolution – along with its progression to cinema, television, video, and ultimately, cyberspace – has given us the ability to review almost every aspect of our lives instantaneously, if we want, and with exacting detail.7

Through this project, I traveled from group to group engaging with many different lives that we come across in everyday. To connect with them, I apply all my abilities to communicate. As my grandparents did, I came to another country, learned a new language by hearing it spoken, and used photography to meet people and build a relationship with the surrounding community. This is not a coincidence. This is an instance of synchronicity. If not, it is fate. I think.

Robert Frank’s credo: “There is one thing the photograph must contain, the humanity of the moment.”

Robert Frank came to America from Switzerland and challenged his humanity through the act of photography. His was a journey and photography offered a balance between art and life. For this thesis paper, I too hoped to strike such a balance.

Over a period of six months I took advantage of the counseling services offered by the University, meeting once a week with psychologist Jinhee Kang. In considering an artist’s and a psychologist’s role, there are great parallels. We observe people and spend special time and place with others. Initially, I was hoping to learn how a psychologist approaches promoting trust in a session. The initial plan to treat this purely as an art project turned into a normal counseling experience. We spent time talking about my confusion between art and life. In the last session, I asked Ms. Kang how she deals with her professional relationship with clients outside of this special room once the appointment is over. This question applies to myself as an artist and her client. She said that she is honored to see her clients’ internal lives through this special and artificial relationship. She learns a lot in this sacred time. It is a great reward for her as therapist. Once a session is finished, she just wraps it up in a special place and carries on with her daily life.

Photography, video and performance are all somewhat ephemeral but also aim for a way to hold onto a moment. As an alien, an artist or sometimes a hairstylist, I put weight on my process and each moment to challenge my humanity. Through my art practice I have met many people and have woven a connection between my daily life and art, all the while creating a home for myself.

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WORKS CITED


VITA

Naoko Wowsugi was born 1980 in Aichi, Japan and was raised as Korean-Japanese. She owns two other official names, Sang Ja Chun and Naoko Zen. She received her BFA from both Osaka University of the Art, Japan in 2003 and the Kansas City Art Institute in 2004. Naoko earned her Masters of Fine Arts in 2011 from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Group Portrait, 44x56 in, ink jet print, 2010 (figure 17)