(in)Equality.

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(in)Equality.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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Abstract:

*(in)Equality.* centers around my experiences as a transnational person and those around me who have affected my current concept of equality and cultural histories. My visual methodologies cover digital photography and editing, inkjet printing, and laser engraving: multimedia in a process of new discovery, translation between analog and digital, and rearticulation. The exhibition includes portraits peering down from above, illuminated by projected patterns and manipulated messages from Nike’s *“Equality.”* (2017). The purpose of this thesis paper is to describe the elements of identity, marginalization, and personal reaction to advertising, as well as the and theories which have shaped this project. The exhibition features various portraits of underrepresented populations due to their sociocultural identities, such as age, class, (dis)ability, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexual orientation in the gallery area, as a parody of the Nike’s problematic *Equality.* campaign and to hold a conversation about power dynamics since the most recent presidential election in the United States of America.

The exhibition seeks to showcase the voice of people who are undervalued or misrepresented. I am influenced by artists/designers Virgil Abloh’s ethos of street wear, Do Ho Suh’s sense of no home, and CJ Hendry’s hyper-realistic reproductions and ownership. Furthermore, I draw inspiration from theoretical writings of Walter Benjamin about mechanical reproduction, Byung-Chul Han’s discussion of digital communication and destruction of political engagement, Laura U. Marks’ rearticulation of history, K. W. Crenshaw’s idea of intersectionality, and colonial wounds by Walter D. Mignolo. By acknowledging how the concept of equality is narrated, the show questions the re-presentation of equality in mass media, Western history, and the stereotypes in the U.S. society, in the age of mechanical-digital technology and reproduction.
The “Equality.” campaign, capitalizes on the idea of equality as a marketing strategy and a consumer tool by using public figures of color and LGBTQIA+ professional athletes. From the perspective of a transnational artist, this exhibition retranslates and parodies advertisements and media by Nike’s promotional campaign. (in)Equality is about repetition: utilizing and borrowing the corporate media and products throughout the campaign direction into another form of presentation and representation of the people—the idea of equality suggested as hopeful interpretation versus multiple experiences of marginalization that speak to otherwise. Through a conscientious parody, the project calls out the discomfort or complacency of the viewer in an uncanny reality: unveiling intersected systems of oppression.
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Personal Background:

I was born in the Republic of Korea, and I remember almost every circumstance around organizations and systems was highly reliant on Western influences, especially the United States of America. My experience as a young soldier in the Korean army and learning about the history of colonization felt unbelievable, especially when considering American military domination. As I grew older, I realized my trauma when I saw a generation participating in required military duty since the division of the Korean country. I have always felt lucky that the citizens of South Korea were protected by the United States, and I am still grateful to the American soldiers who sacrificed their time to the Korean people. But there was and still is an unveiled agenda. While learning and listening about the experience of people of color and queer people in America, my understanding of the idea of race and sexual orientation is complex and bittersweet. The inescapable reality is continuous disenfranchisement. The Western-situated classification of ethnicity and identity provided me a gradual understanding of the most powerful culture. This also led me to seek out myself and unveil myself. The process of revealing myself gave me a feeling of guilt and feeling vulnerable in a circulating system. I am in between two spectrums and stuck inbetween.
Background and Positionality:

A cup of coffee, it comes from poverty.
The small hands that should reach out for dreams while holding a paper plane or a pencil.
Are actually filled with coffee-flavored sweat, thank you, little barista.
I say this reality hurts my heart but I need caffeine so go ahead and add another shot.
It’s a circulatory system of an evil cycle.
My consumption is a leech.

A person’s poverty becomes another person’s luxury, the people who made the shoes that I wear far away.
Probably are barefoot at the moment and even the warmth that wraps my body
Its origin is a pit bull of blood and bones as well.
To make myself look like I’ve got some.
It makes people who have nothing shed tears.
Everyone says it’s better not to know because its awareness became a sickness in this world.
Origin. If beauty comes from ugliness, is it beauty? Tell me.

Origin by Tablo (Daniel Armand Lee) from Fever’s End, 2011

The artistic practice I developed since the start of the Masters of Fine Arts program has influenced the current formation of my thesis exhibition and writing. My background was influenced by traditional Western drawing. Markmaking through repetitive hatching to recreate scenes through my eyes and onto a piece of paper is the most primary act of drawing I engaged with from the age of five until after I joined the art institute in South Korea. This repetitive behavior of markmaking, similar to copy-and-paste, is everywhere. From marketing and fashion to academic foundations, it has not changed since I started formal art training. I see this in printmaking and photography, which are the main tools utilized in my current work. It is act of spontaneously adapting and reacting for me that engages the process.

When I started making in the first year of the program, my drawing was a combination of both analog and digital making. I scanned and cropped finished drawings, and I repetitively copied and pasted the crop of scanned images to create another form as a pattern. I began taking process images of the drawing with a digital camera as a tool to operate in various modes of multiplicity. A few of these process images were laser-engraved into plywood to be relief printed on paper. The first semester was highly challenging for me, but I now consider it as my most

valuable moment. I moved from academic probation to a discovery of a new artistic process and incorporating the concept of multiplicity. This back and forth transformation within images still exist in my current artistic practice, and this act of making provided me a new identity: I am not a printmaker nor a sculptor nor a photographer, but I am an image maker. The transition between analog and digital media has culminated into the work in (in)Equality. With the realization of doing the same thing over and over again since the beginning of this program, although the visage of work may look different, the idea of borrowing something that already existed to create something new or another form of translation is my acceptance of style in a remix culture.

During my second year in the program, I pushed to my technical process and personal exploration into survival mode. I aimed reexamine and clarify the understanding of my identity between my Korean heritage and my Westernized appearance and personality. I used past personal photographs as source material, evoking feelings of nostalgia and vulnerability; a photo of myself in the army reminded me of suicidal thoughts during that period. Although I did not mention these details while I was in the degree candidacy year, these mixed feelings of identity complex, an unknown future, the pressure of reality, and the traumatic experience of compulsory military service in South Korea were an impossible mixture. This led me to think about the idea of death, and the work I created functioned as a funeral scene for my Korean identity. This complicated jumble of past sentiments and trauma derived from my complicated experience of identity negotiation, academic struggles, and the current political discourse led me to research further into Otherness.

In transition into the third year, I began to research Otherness through courses in Queer Theory and Decolonial Possibilities in Art and Education. These courses changed my vision and perception of how to see people rather than just to look at people. Through my studies, I gained
more knowledge about discrimination and power—elitism, racism, separatism, sexism, xenophobia—and most importantly, the veiled and uncanny history. All the history I learned was not complete, but biased. It is the story that always has been circulated from the center. I felt like I have been betrayed by this charade of religious righteousness, political misuse, and neglect for other peoples’ stories. I started implanting these lessons into visual work and processes, and I began critiquing visual media and advertisements in my life. With Nike, a promise of equality is more like a product that benefits the brand, profiting off of representation of Otherness. This idea proves the evidence of both my personal and artistic growth. Although I still love this brand as a representation of my everyday lifestyle, I recognize this conflict between materiality, controversial company growth, cultural dynamics, and my personal identity.
The following is the message of Nike’s *Equality* campaign:

*Is this the land history promised?*

*This field of play.*

*Where the dream of fairness and mutual respect lives on.*

*Where you are defined by actions, not your looks and beliefs.*

*For too long these ideals have taken refuge inside these lines.*

*Equality should have no boundaries.*

*The bond between players should exist between people.*

*Opportunity should be indiscriminate.*

*Worth should outshine color.*

*The ball should bounce the same for everyone.*

*If we can be equals here, we can be equals everywhere.*

EQUALITY.

The messages of *Equality* presents a positive message, but it is a marketing tool to sell the products and to create a brand image. It also evokes the power of Nike’s capacity to capitalize on the sensitive word “equality”, fronted by professional athletes of color such as LeBron James and of LGBTQIA+ athletes like Megan Rapinoe. This multinational brand has a long history of notorious and controversial marketing from child labor to heroizing a convicted and sexually abusive professional athlete. Incorporating socially controversial issues into the marketing strategy has become an ordinary practice for Nike. Controversy sells; it draws society’s eyes toward the spotlight of the brand. Whether it is well-intentioned or a marketing ploy, the campaign is relevant in the current political and cultural climate. Along with the *Equality* campaign, Nike presented a series of portraits of contracted players. They are not smiling, but look serious and sincere (See Fig.1). These portraits were posted on billboards, subways, television, and the mass media during a divisive time in the United States and selected
nations. I saw this campaign as an unrealistic presentation that disguised “equality”. This brought me to critique the brand messaging and relate this idea of limited equality to the institutions and structures in which I existed.

The theories and writings of Walter D. Mignolo, K. W. Crenshaw, and Stuart Hall have guided me to and through this exhibition. Their thoughts concerning decoloniality, intersectionality, centrism, and the Other have changed my artistic process, worldview, and, most importantly my identity. Through working with these theories, I am still growing in my awareness and their application. I am doing the same process but growing each time as a transnational person. Taking into consideration a methodology that consciously seeks to engage a variety of media, schools of thought, and mutual connections through storytelling, (in)Equality generates the connection between relationships of artistic transformation in terms of process and acknowledgement. Furthermore, this exhibition is a part of my critical reflection and emotional burdens as a person who is still learning stories of people which are veiled by the dominant narratives. I hope to discuss these ideas without taking advantage of people for the sake of art or disrespecting them, but I am taking a risk to present this exhibition to the people because these are concepts that affect myself and those who are important to me. Even though the themes in (in)Equality are already highly sensitive and problematic, I am still learning, realizing, and acknowledging. Furthermore, since the beginning of constructing the work for (in)Equality, I realized that the idea of taking portraits of people, who are underrepresented is a form of objectification. I view myself as a transnational artist able to listen and collect experiences outside of myself and retell stories in a wider perspective than a conventional history.
Theoretical Approach:

*Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom* by Walter D. Mignolo provided to me a way to verbalize the experience of Others by revealing how knowledge exists in the world and is presented as universal, illusionistic, and pervasive. This universal approach from concept of centrism has dominated most educational, institutional, and governmental fields. The ubiquity of Eurocentrism can be partially solved by epistemic disobedience, according to Mignolo: it means to “delink” from the illusion of the zero-point (Europeans) epistemology.\(^2\)

As a transnational artist familiar with the systems of the Western-based education, being able to delink from everything I learned for over twenty years across institutions in the United States and art training in a Westernized society of South Korea sounds vague and conflicting. Acknowledging and utilizing the term “delink” as a decolonial option in art and visual language can be highly challenging. I have been raised in and affected by a colonial system all my life. By acknowledging this, I can continuously practice to create work with an angle of decolonial thinking, with a call to action from the long reign of Westernization. As a transnational artist, I work cross-disciplinary and use the practice of photography to capture portraits of individuals that are marginalized by America. Through a process of digital manipulation, I add layers and patterns on top of the portraits, referencing the processes of multiplicity and metaphorically crating barriers that these individuals struggle to conquer.

While those who are Othered have been marginalized in the creative industry and other institutions, Hall has constantly argued that there has been a lack of cultural settlements. The exhibition can be interpreted in multiple ways or misunderstood as a glorification of

commercialism. My goal is not to appeal to general acceptance of social status quo but to unveil
the views of the experiences of race as continuously complicated. The work presented in the
show interplays between parody and metaphor by using a multinational and centralized
Westernized brand’s advertisement.

**Influence: Sampling & Borrowing / Displacement**

My creative process is highly influenced by a critical investigation of the re-appropriation
and reinterpretation, commercial industry practice and intellectual property, actuality and
nostalgia from displacement. African American fashion designer and art director Virgil Abloh
engages with, contests, and critiques ideas about how people of color’s visual communication
has been marginalized and underrepresented from the Eurocentric perspective. His ethos on
streetwear and reinterpretting and reimagining methodology can productively be read with a lens
of decoloniality. Abloh’s work argues that the difference between high-fashion’s brand value and
street culture is the accessibility. The theme of his brand *Off-White* is meant to react to the white-
dominant fashion critics who enforce specific rules to create fashion. According to the author of
*Close-Up: John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective: Monad, Database, Remix:
Manners of Unfolding in The Last Angel of History*, Laura U. Marks explains about what is
Afrofuturism as, “They (Africans) have done so by assembling futures from fragments of the
past, preferring to disdain the present that accords them less than human status or, at best, offers
‘inclusion’ in a humanity not of their design, and using technology and art to invent when
historical research fails to yield anything useful.”

3 Like Abloh’s own views on streetwear, his
approach to design and decision making are about remixing references in his own way and

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revealing issues of equality and inclusion in his art. In this sense, as history has shown us about cultural appropriation from the majority to the minority, Abloh is reinterpreting and reimagining by referencing others’ work, mostly from iconic or religious images and role models that have been created in a white-dominant world.

Similar to Abloh’s interest in remix culture, CJ Hendry works with ideas of ownership and intellectual property. Her hyper-realistic drawings are sourced from commercial products, and the entanglement of copyright issues with Richard Prince add another layer of nuance to the concept of authorship. This demonstrates a blurring of power between real and replica, consumer product and fine art. In my art production, I collect images sourced from pre-existent media in the digital landscape surrounding me such as movies, music, and publication. These industries deal with mass marketing and entertainment separate from the sphere of high-art. Like Hendry, my work travels between digital and analog media, high culture and mass market. These ideas around remix culture reinforce the theme of multiplicity and authorship.

Conceptually, Do Ho Suh questions a sense of leaving home and familiarity. With changing architectural spaces and limited resources, the erased history of Suh’s experiences as Korean challenges the idea of opportunity in the United States. The landmarks of his home no longer exist. I relate to Suh’s personal story, as it reflects my personal background and artistic growth. While I am always conscious about a lack of home, this concept often has been blurred since living in this country for a long time. This realization of no home, meaning I am stuck in the middle, is almost unbearable. This feeling of displacement, “a dependency that structures projects of both assimilation and resistance”⁴, that is prevalent in Suh’s work is similar to my personal experience. Because I am formally South Korean citizen with a student visa yet have

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adjusted to American lifestyle, I feel I do not belong to anywhere or to a specific nationality. Like Clifford mentions, I experience feelings of separation from a sense of belonging and desiring another place nostalgic but unfamiliar.

**Intersectionality, Race, and Cultural Settlements:**

People of class, gender, race, ability, and sexuality are rooted far from the eyes of the dominating power structure. Systems of oppression shape and sustain the interlocking relationships between different forms of injustice, such as racism, sexism, xenophobia and heteronormativity. The interlocking systems of oppression impact our perspectives, everyday routines, relationships with other people, and understandings of the world. Hegemonic ideologies create norms where one might not be welcomed, accepted, or valued.

*(in)Equality.* cannot be discussed without intersectionality and acknowledging that those who are most marginalized in the globalized society do not fit within constructed standards and norms. Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, stems from a branch of feminism asserting how all aspects of social and political identities such as gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, etc. are not binary. It is the intersection of multiple subordinate social identities that creates distinct forms of oppressive experiences and burdens. The purpose of intersectionality is to identify various forms of discrimination with each other to work towards promoting social and political equity. The work in the exhibition includes participants of color, an alternatively abled person, and LGBTQIA+ people. As I spoke with individuals who

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participated in *(in)Equality*, they demonstrated different points of view on equality. Their multilayered experiences of oppression by systems of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, ableism, and xenophobia, to name a few, create distinct understandings of *(in)Equality*. The purpose of mentioning intersectionality is one of the most crucial and also most sensitive approaches. The exhibition is to identify intersectional forms of discrimination. It also criticizes the outdated and dualistic concept of equality that does not consider intersectionality. A subversion of Nike’s “*Equality.*” campaign in the show highlights the unrealistic flaws with their marketing messaging.

While my studio practice and I have been in constant discovery through the theories and concepts related to this exhibition, the material and aesthetic background of the work has been a long process of development in the realization of who I am as a transnational artist.

**Creating *(in)Equality.***

Photographing marginalized people created a fear of adding other layers of stereotypes. As I spoke to the participants in this project, I realized that they all have incomparable and unhealed wounds. According to Walter D. Mignolo, colonial wounds are created by social classifications such as racism and sexism by institutions that manipulate knowledge and hold the power to classify other people who are subjected to the power rather than being frees. As Mignolo suggested, there is an option, called the “decolonial option.” It is the singular connector of a diversity of colonials.9 The decolonial option is critiquing Western-based institutions and putting them in scope with the cultures from which mainstream took as subject matter. Utilizing this option as an approach with decolonial thinking to the Other in the events of coloniality, I am

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simply trying to react to the work with the definitive rejection of what we have been told and what are familiar representations of who we are. I am retelling who they are through a reductive process of photography, revealing in my own style another narrative of their identities, which have been veiled by mainstream thought for a long time. I hope to balance photography’s early use to document marginalized populations as the exotic with images of people with whom I have conversations and learn about their nuanced experiences. Their identities have been racially, historically, and incorrectly hidden and devalued from the self-serving interests of Western-based ideas. The white frames surrounding the portraits represent the grid system that perpetuates and promotes hierarchy of practices that allow a person to achieve higher status. The purpose of the decolonial approach is unmasking their silence and revealing reality.

Assumedly, there will be a conflict of interpretations in regards to various cultures, beliefs, and emotions. This exhibition is not about what is right or wrong, but hopes to reveal how chaotic the environment we are in actually is. It is about questioning and critiquing a postmodern and colonial systemic foundation. I seek to possibly change the conversation, at least a little, by showing these works and making space for the discussion. As long as these ideas have stemmed from and have been veiled in the North American-Eurocentric world, people who experience Otherness also have been silenced.

**Process: Digital Media & Presentation**

The materials and methodologies of *(in)Equality.* contain digital and technological processes. Digital media is much more separated in practice compared to the real, hand craftsmanship of analog media. This separation has a sense of uniformity in portrayal that leads to destroy what is the original content and value. In a digital era, reproduced images have more symbolic impact than the what is considered as the real. According to Byung-Chul Han,
authenticity is demolished by the quick access to digital platforms where information is controlled and reinterpreted.\textsuperscript{10} In my perspective, Nike is manipulating this accessibility by recollecting consumers’ interests and recreating the company’s image under the “Equality.” campaign. For instance, the Nike “swoosh” logomark is more iconic and memorable than the actual sculpture the Goddess of Victory/Winged Victory of Samothrace. I use digital media as a way of reconstructing an image of Otherness to represent the disappearance of the voices. The process of utilizing the language of digital media—digital photography and editing, inkjet printing, laser engraving, and CNC routing—is intentional. This is a part of the decolonial option in its democratizing process and global currency. With widespread digital media, the representations of people decentralize and delink from the situated notion of what is beautiful or what is known to be beautiful. Making images by merging patterns from Nike products, personal tattoos, clothing, and portrait snapshots imparts a fuller representation of the incomparable wounds of each person. It is inescapable to create another layer of stereotypes within a lens of digital camera. In the process of taking a portrait or a photo, I control what is shown and what is hidden. Digital manipulation of the images alters the already exposed people, yet conversation reveals another side of their reality. With each person’s approval, I photographed, edited, and shared prints with them. Printed patterns behind and in front of portraits represent blurring barriers and repetitive stereotypes that obscure the individuals. Furthermore, these patterns also describe everyday struggles and barriers. Laser engraving on the prints act as scars or colonial wounds that one has to continuously bear.

In my experience as an art student, analog media demands consumption of time and passion, in which is the destination of a finished project is quite unknown. When the finished

\textsuperscript{10} Han, Byung-Chul. “In the Swarm.” MIT Press. (April 2017): 73.
work finally is presented, the history of time, memory, and markmaking is embedded whether visible or not even though (in)Equality’s methodology combines both analog and digital technology. Creating distance between analog and the digital media is complex as the approaches coexist and I am using the accessibility and multiplicity of digital media to debunk what is uncanny and what is “known” to us. It is a sense of creating images more idealistically rather than showing reality. The variance between silver metallic paper and pattern symbolizes the actual self and visage.

This process of multiple layers overlapping is about what is revealed and what is haunted within a white frame (See Fig. 2). These two themes sometimes co-exist, but most of the portraits have separate levels. Revealing is a method of what part is accessible and is much more sensitive than ghosting because of what is seen in public can be easily judged based on the thought of traditional beauty standards. Choosing each pattern for each individual, color scheme, dimensionality, and framing can be controversial. However, reconstructing the snapshot in an open source on the digital screen, the outcome of each image is not planned but improvised.

Haunting is about silence and wounds from pieces of a person’s identity that have been taken away. To clarify, it advances the theme of revealing, a combination between what is already created on the screen and laser engraved on the façade of the image mixed with multiple patterns of the reflective media and silently creating a haptic movement. All the images are situated inside of white IKEA frames, which creates an illusion between the white wall and the frame (See Fig. 3). The white frames are hung thirteen feet high from the ground, against white walls that describe systemic power structure or the idea of the cube and hierarchy (See Fig. 4 & 5). The intentional curation along with utilizing popular commercial frames signify how the experiences of being silenced or secluded can be re-narrated in the space of gallery. This
structure of empty gallery space (See Fig. 6) creates continuous complexities of how people with marginalized sociocultural identities. My goal is to question and imagine different ways to subvert the hierarchical power structure.

**Process: Window Display & Media Catalog**

- Whose history?
- This field of play?
- Where the dream of fairness and mutual respect dies.
- Here you are defined by actions, your looks and beliefs.
- Still these ideals take refuge inside these lines.
- Equality has boundaries.
- The separation between players should not exist between people.
- Opportunity discriminates.
- Color outshines worth.
- Everyone should have the same ball.
- If we are unequal here, we are unequal everywhere.

To fully construct the commercial landscape, the window display presents the gallery front as a consumer space. The CNC routed and laser cut title *(in)Equality.* acts as a façade, presenting hope versus reality (See Fig. 7 and 8). “EQUALITY.” is white-washed and highly visible, while “(in)” is a transparent and requires further attention (See Fig. 9). This presentation relates back to duality between revealing and ghosting. A forty-eight-minute slideshow of images projected on the wall shows all the process of constructing the images in the exhibition alongside text taken from Nike’s marketing campaign (See Fig. 7 and 10). These forty people, the multitude of layers, edited messages, and patterns showcase the physical prints without the
blurred barriers. Furthermore, it is an attempt to visually narrate each of their stories and other
the audience an opportunity to be connected with other people in and beyond the gallery space.
Sources:


Han, Byung-Chul. In the Swarm. MIT Press, April 2017, pp. 73.


Figures:

Figure 1. *Equality*. Campaign in Nike Town NYC. Photo – Dorothy Hong, Satis&fy USA.\(^{11}\)

Figure 2. (in)Equality. (Installation View) 2019. Mixed Media. Dimensions Variable. Photo Anthony Kascak.
Figure 3. *(in)Equality.* (Installation View) 2019. Mixed Media. Dimensions Variable. Photo Anthony Kascak.
Figure 5. *(in)Equality.* (Installation View) 2019. Mixed Media. Dimensions Variable. Photo Anthony Kascak.
Photo Anthony Kascak.