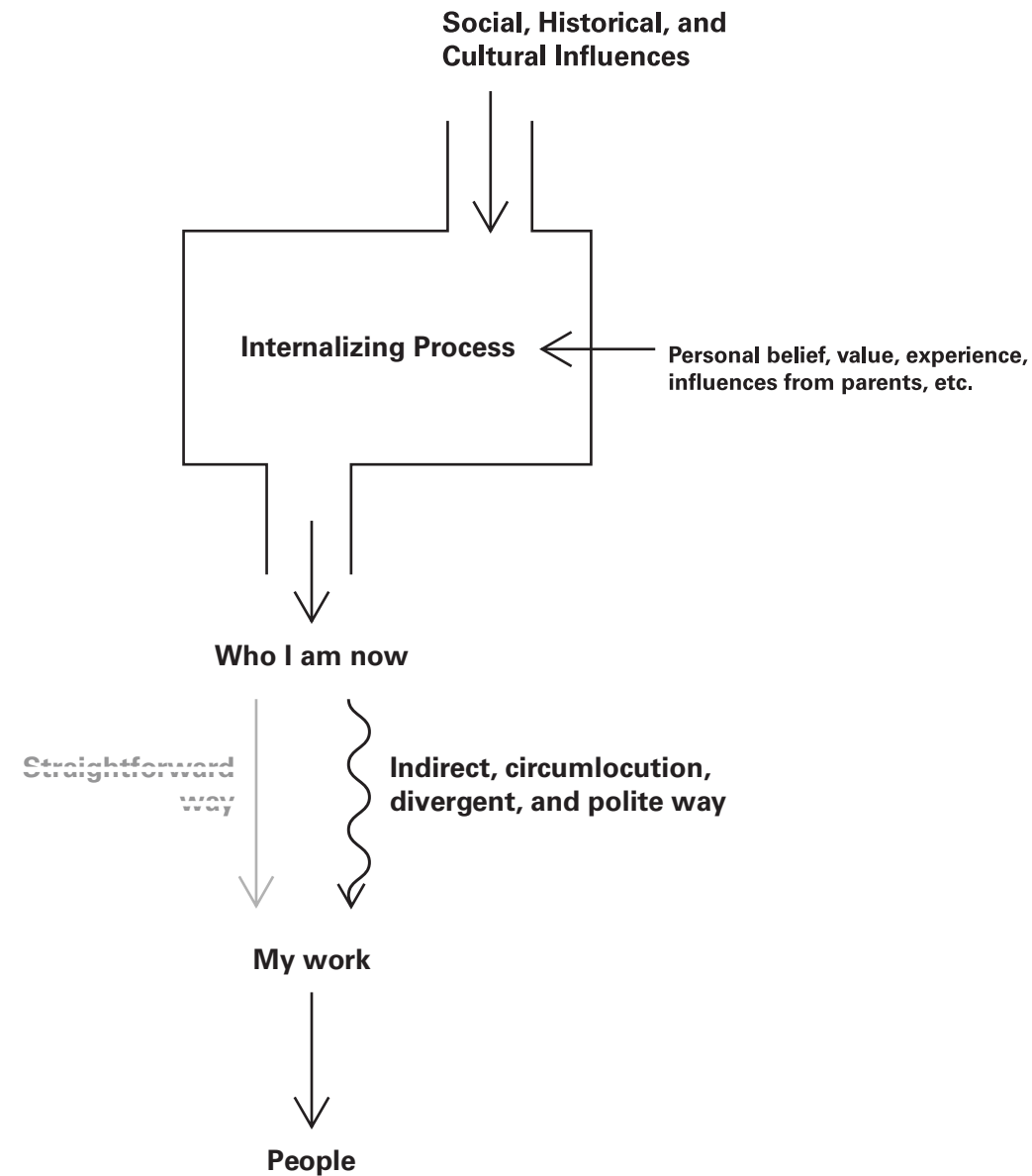


## Objects, language, and memory

Heesung Kim



A diagram for representing process of the shaping identity, Heesung Kim, 2016

This project centers around the use of indirect, or euphemistic, visual language and circumlocution, in combination with everyday personal objects. I am interested in using indirect visual language as a way of representing my personal history, and as a means for self-discovery. For me, social expectations of women, Confucianism, and Korea's honorific language and social hierarchy all served to encourage a quiet, restrained, or even submissive form of communication at an early age. As I grew up, I internalized these social attitudes. But at the same time, I wondered — was this introversion an explicit choice, or something forced upon me?

In graduate school, I've often been told that my work is quite personal and private, which no one ever mentioned when I lived in Korea. While I found this intriguing, I began to doubt that my work could be communicable — even though the graphic designer's role is to deliver messages visually. Korean is my mother tongue, and I learned English later in life. When I told acquaintances and friends in the US that I used to be an introverted and reserved person, they were often surprised because in English, I can seem blunt and straightforward. I realized that the way people see me in Korea and the US differs because of language. In Korean, I rely heavily on imagery and poetic expression in my written and spoken language. Yet in English, I use precise, simple sentences — I am blunt though that form of communication doesn't reflect who I am. I feel more freedom when I speak in Korean, and in truth, I feel more cautious when I speak in English. Thus, two seemingly different personalities and impressions of who I am — reflected through language — became a stepping stone in this project.

In *Beyond Culture* (1976), anthropologist Edward T. Hall describes what he calls high-context and low-context culture. The way Koreans and Americans express themselves and talk is distinguishably different according to Hall. In a high-context culture like Korea's, language does not communicate every message: connotations are often embedded deeply in information, which carries additional meanings. In a low-context culture like that of the United States, it's relatively important for the communicator to be explicit and clear with words to be fully understood. In the US, my inability to communicate articulately in English led to a loss of self-worth and alienation. Yet, ironically, communicating more directly in the English language gave me a new-found clarity, and helped me connect with others.

In this project, I've tried to visualize this idea of direct and indirect communication through photography, by taking both literal and poetic images. In it, I photographed twenty-five everyday objects. These objects, mined from different moments in my life, have helped mold my identity. Some are those I took with me from Korea to the US, and serve as touchstones; they are a means of portraying myself as projected onto objects. I then pair these objects with a visual language that represents the euphemistic verbal language I use in Korea. These two different photograph languages — the literal and the poetic — represent my experience speaking two different languages, Korean and English.

The publication has three chapters and all 25 objects, represented by poetic and literal images. The second publication includes a semiotic study of a single object. The third contains my thesis paper. The publication uses Japanese rice paper: the front side includes a texture with more personality, while the back feels smoother, coated. On the front side of each page I printed the poetic images in black and white; on the back, smoother side, I printed the literal representations in full color. I included content that describes why each object matters to me, and its background: how these objects came into my life, and the kinds of personal stories that are embedded in each. When one opens the publication, the Korean content is revealed first. Yet since most of my audience does not know how to read Korean, the content seems confusing and needs to be decoded. If one looks inside the folded pages, the English content and more literal photographs are revealed. This structure provides a paradox: despite its literal photography and English content, without looking inside the folds of the publication, one might never understand the publication's content — just as truly knowing a person comes from a deeper, less superficial understanding.

In my exhibition, I tried to embody my persona without the use of language. Each visualization shows a different distorted step of the transition from internalization to externalization. Images are distorted (when internalized) and vaguely or strongly visible (when externalized). Of the twenty-five objects I photographed, I chose the paper crane because it contains the strongest personal story.

When I was little, there was a period when my family was not able to make ends meet. At that time a currency-cum-banking crisis, spurred by the IMF (international Monetary Fund), hit South Korea and my family was no exception. My father was a mechanical engineer, and we were in debt. One day a moneylender broke into our house and put red

seizure stickers on almost everything in the house. I remember the day my Mom, who was tired of borrowing money, returned home and walked into a dark room alone and began sobbing quietly. It was a moment that stunned me as a child. My brother and I did not own many toys. We didn't know that we had no money, but we were two happy kids, happily and naively folding origami. The memory of folding paper cranes is not a generic one; it is a nostalgic representation of my childhood, playing and laughing in the hot sun.

I collected personal memories like this for my project. These memories are something I did not want to share, but needed to talk about. Whenever Cheryl asked me, "Why does it matter to you?" it was difficult for me to express. It took two years to share this narrative in my work — yet I would now like to reveal pieces of my story because I am no longer embarrassed or sad. These memories, both good and bad, are a driving force that make me who I am today.

I use light as a metaphor in the exhibition. Light serves as a representation of this range: from a willingness to share personal stories and memories (light on, the object visible) to a reluctance to share these stories (light off, the silhouette is visible). Five laser cut patterns and a large format poster represent unstructured, blurred, and ambiguous thoughts and ideas without language. Here, I've tried to represent my persona through the paper crane, in ways that I'm neither able to express nor define through language.

I'm interested in working with both the parametric and the expressive, the analog and the digital, word and image, the honorific and the direct. I have learned that euphemistic language and circumlocution are important means of communication for me; and that this coded verbal communication is equally present in my design voice. By investigating the metaphorical and subversive nature of communication in this project, I hope to develop a visual language that allows me to both better understand myself within a social and historical context, and communicate and connect with others. And, in so doing, I hope to develop a means of communication that can be used by others who speak indirectly — one that helps others derive meaning and self-worth in times of transformation, and that allows them to speak out and be heard.

The past two years at UIC have been moving and full of self-growth. I would like to thank everyone who has supported me and helped me in so many different ways. Thank you so much.