A Sewing Collaborator Note: Min Gee Yoon[1]

Note 1. The Encounter of the Private with the Public

The clothes that participants handed over to me had their own unique scent. I could tell many things from these garments, such as the brand of the fabric softener they used, or that of the perfume they sprayed. I could also deduce where they worked. I could smell the scent that the seasonal wind brought with it. Moreover, if I examined their clothes a little bit closer, I could understand more things, like habits unique to them. For instance, a slightly worn-out sleeve around the wrist tells me whether the owner was right-handed or left-handed. If I checked whether the hemming line at the bottom of the pants was tilted toward the inside or outside, I could picture the movement of the person's gait. Or the degree of how much the fabric was faded could be a clue telling me how long she'd worn them. In this way, many clothes with subtle traces piled up. While sewing as a collaborator of this project, I witnessed that clothes themselves could be a vehicle for public events. It called attention to the legal provisions by attaching *time-line* labels to one's clothes in a public space, in the exhibition. The use of clothing allows individuals to express themselves anonymously, to express their opinions of the legal codes written on the *time-line* labels, and this extends from the gallery space to another site even after the exhibition ends—such as on the street, or on the subway. I saw my sewing activity lead to creating situations in which individuals' participation can be recontextualized in the public realm. The participants were also placed in situations in which they could see how state codes restrain people.

Note 2. Responses to the legal provisions

We can tell individual preferences by examining the number of the participants who chose a certain provision. In terms of gender ratio, there were more women participants than men. Maybe this is because there are usually more women in the audience than men. The participants chose a provision based on their interests. The archive showed that most people selected "1962 Military Criminal Act's Article 92-6 Homosexual Punishment", and then "2008 ~~Hoju System~~", "2019 Constitutional nonconformity to criminal abortion" followed. The least selected ones are "2019 ~~The Disability Rating System~~", and "1999 ~~Maternal and Child Health Act Enforcement Decree Article 15 - Compulsory Infertility~~." This order shows which provision has been more controversial, or exists without consensus. The selected provisions can represent an individual's interests or beliefs, and such a selection could have been made in hope of inclusion in the community without being criticized or excluded within the bounds of common sense. The experiences that I had at the exhibition led me to draw such a conclusion.

Perhaps the "2008 ~~Hoju System~~" and "2019 ~~The Disability Rating System~~" might have been chosen due to the shorter length of the letters. There was a possibility that, given the format of the exhibition created an unexpected situation—they were surprised to be handing over their clothes—so they happened to select a shorter version of the provisions to minimize frustration. Perhaps they'd planned on removing it soon after leaving the exhibition and wanted to minimize the mark or trace of the *time-line* label. And perhaps they wanted to attach it to an inner seam of their clothing as opposed to a more conspicuous spot. I could tell they might be more concerned that the label would be exposed in public once they stepped out. Therefore, the range of participation cannot be determined only by the participant's active behaviors during the exhibition, because regardless of intention, what might happen outside affects the viewers' attitudes. In this sense, we cannot say that active participation in the exhibit is limited to the wearing of the *time-line band*.

On the other hand, the more the audience members actively understood the exhibition, the more they wanted the label to be left on the outside of their clothes, where it could be seen clearly. As a collaborator, taking various participants' perspectives into account, I personally shared a similar opinion with them. Because I understood that a state's and laws' control is deeply rooted in individuals, whether its presence be visible or hidden, conscious or subconscious. While working as a collaborator and participant, I was able to reconfirm my stance by relating it to their positions.

Note 3. My Life and the "2008 ~~Hoju System~~"[2]

Similarly to most audience members, my understanding of the exhibition was limited, because I'm inclined to interpret it on the basis of my experiences as a Korean citizen, as someone who is not free from the state's control. I wanted to discuss the "2008 ~~Hoju System~~" because I have personal experience with its effects and the process of its abolition. I learned—as a person who witnessed disruptions and changes in my life—that laws are not likely to influence individuals' lives in an inclusive or understanding way.

My father's trace was deeply set in my last name, although he left me when I was only two years old. I was often placed in inevitable situations where the father's authority had to be reconfirmed because of his absence. Being confused by my identities, I learned how a society produces outsiders by employing the rules of inclusion and exclusion. Even when I was too young in the lower grades of primary school to understand the impacts of the laws on individuals, I witnessed the segregation of children from single parent households, and violation of their privacy in support of this system and its blind spots. In one case, in the first week of school, a teacher once naively questioned me in front of the class as to why I'd left out my father's last name on a student personal information sheet.

As the laws acquire universality, or pervasiveness—both within the socio-cultural system as well as people's perceptions—they become common sense. And in turn, the power that the laws endorse have the right to determine which individual is included or excluded. Those whose experience is deemed universal, those who have never been classified as a minority, and those whose gestures are accustomed to inclusion, obtain the power of the majority. In this way, the system justifies this reproduction of othering with little resistance. On the other hand, legal control within the government system contributed to producing this majority, those positioned in a dominant place within the network of society. In such an environment, most people pay little attention to how the laws work to stigmatize minorities. It usually takes more time to clearly see the prejudice behind the legal system than to agitate for the abolishment of unjust regulations. These widespread cultural lag phenomena inhibit societal progress.

It has been more than 13 years since the Hoju system was abolished, and I changed my surname 8 years ago following my maternal surname, but I can attest that the Hoju system is still widely considered as common sense. I was the one who organized my father's funeral, even though I never once met him after he abandoned us. After finishing the funeral, I had to submit a death certificate to get an official excuse for missing school using a document called a Family Relations Certificate, which shows I use a different last name from his. To persuade the majority, I had to explain why my last name did not match with my father's. Just like an elephant reluctant to cut its own tether even when able, once we are tamed it is unlikely that we free ourselves from our accustomed ways. It is evident that social discipline controls individuals' minds. I attempted to speak with other audience members around me to initiate discussions, hoping to awaken them from the indifference that has been a pervasive phenomenon throughout our society and culture.

Note 4. Standardized Clothes

[1] I participated in *Time-line: State Control Code (Black Ribbon Band)* as a sewing collaborator in the exhibition, *One's Position* in 2020 and at Geumcheon Art Residency Open Studio in 2019.

[2] 'Hoju system' refers to a system that controls the official documentation of family members' birth, marriage and death under the name of their household according to the Article 4 of the Civil Code. Korea is the only nation that imposed it, and this imbued all of Korean society with gender discrimination as it applied to household succession order, family register documentation, and the inheritance of a family surname. In addition, since it follows paternal lineage, it received criticism that it contributed to fostering a kind of master-slave relationship. Given the concurrent increase in the number of divorced or remarried couples, it accomplished little toward embracing various types of family configurations. This led to the amendment of the civil code and the abolishment of the household system. In the years of 1977, 1990 and 2002 it was modified partially; and later in 2005, the abolition of the household system was announced. (Source: National Archives)

Participants were provided with clothes prepared at the site while waiting for the collaborators' sewing on their own clothes. The clothes labels show standardized sizes (XS, S, M, L, XL, XXL) that are designed to fit Korean people. They remind me of the frame of the legal regulations that classifies individuals according to the established regulations. As national standards can vary according to different methods of measuring sizes, so does the system of laws. While observing participants changing into the standard-sized clothes prepared, I could confirm once again the limitations of legal provisions developed through sometimes-fallacious statistics. If participants look closely at the results of the sewing work, they'd notice that almost all of the labels are sewn along lines of the seams. The embodiment of the state control attached to the seam line, showing the inseparable relationships between the individual and their body, sparks public debates.

Note 5. Sewing: An Act of Collaboration

Sewing workers' collaboration shares a common goal at the workstation: they discuss how to distribute roles, practice empathy, and carry out the given tasks with a communal character. In this process, I question where 'one's position' could be. I doubt that groups and individuals exist in relationships consisting of isolated entities; instead their relationships take a position among boundaries that constantly intrude and extrude one another. As a collaborator, it was easy to distinguish others' stitches from mine, but from an audience's point of view, I might be seen as a part of the collective. We are identified as members of the group when a certain requirement is given, but isn't it possible to be meaningful even when classified by membership? To me, this is similar to the registration numbers that have been imposed since the "1968 Enforcement Decree of the Resident Registration Act[3]" in South Korea.

We mostly sew the clothes by hand, rather than with a sewing machine. Although it was less efficient, it helps to create an intimate relationship between the worker and the audience, and between and among the workers. While turning over the photos in the album, the images of all the participants' clothes with *time-line* ribbons seem to me to resemble a large quilt blanket. A number of different individuals who participated in the work with their own stories contributed to presenting the artwork in the exhibition.

Note 6. My Closet after the Show

Taking these possibilities into consideration, the exhibition's journey is still ongoing. Looking for the clothes with the label[Fig.1] in my closet as the seasons change, I remind myself that these contested laws are still in control of my life. If I happen to meet one of the participants again, I would be eager to know whether or not they've kept the ribbons on. If not, I want to hear their stories about when, how and why they happened to remove it, because those voices together will provide answers to the questions raised when considering the exhibition's trajectory. Is it possible for laws and states to take every individual's position into account ? How do we conceptualize and perceive one's position in society? In order to not be blind in a familiar environment, we should look for unfamiliarity to question the boundaries established to alienate or control others. I look forward to the new season when I'll be able to meet more people who are open to talking about one's position within the state's control.

그림1. 〈나의 옷장에서 다시 읽히는 타임–라인 라벨〉, 2021
Fig.1, My jacket with the *time-line* label in the closet, 2021

[3] When the Resident Registration Act was amended by the government in 1970, its purpose was clarified as follows. The human resource management of people is crucial for national prosperity. As long as self defense is the national goal, all citizens must serve military duty for national defense and, to unite them, more efficient human resource management is required. (Wu Gwang-seon, 1970)