

## Familiar Group Unfamiliar Individuals: Separating Apparatus for Relationships

The title of Yoonkyung Lim's solo exhibition, *Familiar Group, Unfamiliar Individuals* should be read as a re-statement representing the description of 'family' in Korean society. Many people who are accustomed to the patriarchal culture of Korea tend to regard their standardized collective lifestyle as natural. They are used to living as a member of a family group rather than an individual existing within a family. In this sense, they question little why they usually introduce an individual (I) as 'someone's mother', 'someone's father', 'someone's daughter' or 'someone's son'. However, the title of *Familiar Group, Unfamiliar Individuals* implies the following questions that arise from an iterative narrative: "Is family a familiar group or unfamiliar group in the patriarchal system?" And, "Should the members of a family be identified as a part of family or as independent individuals?" Both of Lim's artworks, *Q&A*, and *Name Toss* seem to contribute to these questions.

Although the taxonomy and type of families have evolved over the years in diverse ways, a family form justified upon the standardized childbirth and rearing pattern is still pervasive. That is: heterosexual couples, their children, and relatives constitute a blood-related and sex-normative family. Therefore, Korean society believes that the emergence of various de-standardized families tends to dismantle the family norm. In the face of these circumstances, Lim's questions rest upon the standardized family created by this patriarchal

Inhwan Oh (Contemporary artist)

system, rather than the family itself.

In *Name Toss*, Lim creates a ball game played in the park with her own family members. Viewers easily realize that these are members of a family from the moment that the participants begin using each other's family titles such as 'my son', 'my daughter', 'honey (yeobo)', 'older sister (nuna)' while throwing and catching two balls. The family titles are used to transform an individual into a member of the collective family group, and this helps the viewers envision the vertical and horizontal relationships of the family. As the four people positioned close to one another begin to step backward, they employ their official names such as "Inok Choi", "Chulkyu Lim", "Yoonkyung Lim", or "Wonseok Lim" instead of their family titles. In this moment, 'Mom' can transform to an individual: 'Inok Choi'. In other words, it is necessary to keep distances separating family members to reveal an individual hidden within the family group. To throw a ball in *Name Toss* is to visualize the act of endorsing these titles. Here we should be aware of the importance of the process of accepting the given titles. A family may be an institution that endorses titles and roles for each individual ('mother', 'father', or 'sister') and it can be also an institutional space in which individuals ("Inok Choi", "Chulkyu Lim", or "Yoonkyung Lim") accept such institutionalization in collaboration with one another.

This family game seems to be a device for

Lim to find the distance existing between and among family members. The intimacy within the family can be promoted as the result of maintaining 'unity,' by minimizing or eliminating the distance and disconnecting the ties between and among individuals of the family. That is, patriarchal family ethics emphasizes the 'unity' in which individuals are identified only as members of a family. On the other hand, such intimacy indicates that separation and distance exists between 'I' as an individual and 'I' as a member of a family. It is an illusion that a family can exist as a united body where neither separation nor distance exist between or among individuals, although exemplary family members attempt to minimize the distance.

While *Name Toss* represents the patriarchal family, *Q&A* focuses on women's identities and their roles to show the possibility of family reframed by women. In *Q&A*, the interview participants are women: former domestic workers hired by Korean families, the daughter of one of the foreign housekeepers whose mother left her behind in her home country when she came to work in South Korea, a Korean female employer who hired a foreign domestic worker, and this employer's Korean daughter. As interview subjects, they are invited to take turns at one-on-one conversations. Domestic labor contributed to the initiation and formation of their relationships.

It is notable that there are differences of language, nationality, and generation between and among the women featured in *Q&A*, let alone their social positions in terms of employment. The differences create the

space in which the artist can explore, and the intimacy that is successfully developed through the intervention and communication of multi-layered women's relationships. The two monitors displayed in the distance enable viewers to visualize the artist's intention of intervening and exploring the differences between the two women on the screens. The setting — arranged as a pair of women reciprocally carrying out a set of dialogues on separate screens — can be viewed as the artist's intervention as well. This design of reciprocal contact in dialogues aims not only to provide introspection upon the two women's relationships, but also to explore a home that is accustomed to the standardization of women's domestic labor. For example, even though the foreign housekeeper mentioned that her own daughter and the daughter in her care cannot be the same, she confessed during her monitor interview that she poured all of her compassion into her young charge in lieu of her own daughter. Another foreign housekeeper speaks with the daughter of another housekeeper, explaining to her that she had no choice but to work for another family in another country, having left her own daughter behind in order to support her financially. On the other hand, the Korean employer's daughter remembers her caretaker as both a migrant worker and as one of her family members. In contrast, the housekeeper's own daughter identifies a foreign housekeeper as a migrant worker responsible for looking after another family — instead of a mother caring for her own child. Lim sets this reciprocal manner for dialogues, allowing the audience to witness the manifestations of these overlapping relationship intersections laid between the employer and employee,

or between the mother and daughter. By doing so, *Q&A* emphasizes the gaps between participants, thus building new relationships between women, and suggesting the possibility of collaborations arising from the differences that emerge when deviating from standardized identities and roles for women. These collaborations are possible through a variety of women's domestic labors, which occur in and out of home: a mother's role without blood ties; the emergence of a two-mother family.

Through the process of industrialization in Asian countries, it is common to observe women who have to leave their home in order to support their families financially. In this way, Southeast Asian women leave their home affairs behind — the same way that Korean women did in the past. However, they continue working within the home, but in the home of another — and in a foreign country. These women contribute to both disrupting and extending modern gender roles and their dichotomy, which divides labor between men (responsible for economic activities outside of the home) and women (who are in charge of domestic affairs inside of the home). Furthermore, these women's relationships — formed by domestic labor — are not limited to those between employers and employees, but instead cast multi-layered questions regarding domestic labor at home and its inherent patriarchal system: Should a family be a kin-group? Can a family welcome heterogenous members? Is it possible for a family absent of sex-normative family relationships to be a "real family?" Should a family be a form that requires persistent bonding? To these questions, *Q&A* answers

that family does not necessarily need to be a kin-group, heterogenous family members can be welcomed, sex-normativity is not a prerequisite of being a family, and a family can be a bonded union but also a form of separation — and these are already practiced by women.

Lim's work does not categorically deny women's otherness, something the patriarchal system accommodates, or their labor. Rather, it suggests possibilities in nonvisualized differences inherent to a family or patriarchal system — that otherized women and their labor can change the patriarchal system which renders standard their identities and roles. A cliché of family narratives exists because it serves to replicate the family ideology of unity and bonding. It is, in fact, a familiar reality in Korean society and the field of art: we discuss the various economic and political changes, but never initiate a debate about changing patriarchal culture. I see this situation strangely, and the reason I pay attention to Lim's work is that it deals with the reality of women and family in a patriarchal system — and its change through an apparatus of separation.