When growing up decisions present themselves everyday. We are blank pages that are going to be filled by the choices we make. The only defining traits that are imprinted on us are our ethnicity, our gender, age and the area where we were born and live. Myself, I am a half Chinese, half white Canadian female, born into an upper middle class family residing in Toronto. Yet how much of that speaks to my identity, or how does that explain who I am? These problems seem to be the cause of anxiety and confusion for much adolescences each day. How can they represent who they are, if they themselves do not know? If I look at how people get grouped together, I can possibly say it is our likes and dislikes that define us, and determine whom we associate with. But fleeting things such as likes and dislikes seem to point out that identity is in constant flux during our growth. Artist, Nikki S. Lee, creates works that speak directly to this idea of the identity and belonging through her series, Projects (1997-2001) consisting of: The Punk Project (1997), The Lesbian Project (1997), Young Japanese (East Village) Project (1997), The Tourist Project (1997), The Hispanic Project (1998), The Yuppie Project (1998), The Ohio Project (1999), The Swingers Project (1999), The Seniors Project (1999), The Exotic Dancers Project (2000), The Schoolgirls Project (2000), The Skateboarders Project (2000), The Hip Hop Project (2001), and Part (2003). (Olufson)

Before beginning the discussion on Lee’s works, I feel it is necessary to talk about the ideas of happy objects and orientation, in relation to Sara Ahmed’s writings, Promise of Happiness, 2010 and Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others, 2006. From Promise of Happiness, Ahmed discusses reasons behind
why we become happy, and what can potentially create a feeling of happiness. She simply puts in as “we are made happy by different things, we find different things delightful.” (Ahmed, Promise of Happiness 31) Which is to say that we are affected by what is around is, and those things that made us happy are those that affect us in a positive way. I can then elaborate that different people have positive affects towards different objects. So then not every person is the same. Thus, as Ahmed states, our likes “might even establish what we are like.” (Ahmed, Promise of Happiness 32) We then direct ourselves to our likes, and keep away from our dislikes, which in turn direct people to those with similar likes. These objects are what Ahmed deems happy objects. The objects that make us happy, and that lead us in the direction to become happy.

This can also be said the other way around. It is our dislikes that can create negative affects, not only for us but those around us. Ahmed explains this occurrence as affect aliens. Such examples are the feminist killjoy, the angry black woman, the unhappy queer, and the melancholic migrant. Each one of these “aliens” goes against the accepted happy objects. Some examples Ahmed uses are that the feminist killjoy will argue against what someone else says, thus creating an uncomfortable atmosphere for many around her. Is it better for the feminist killjoy to keep her thoughts to herself, so as to maintain the comfort for the majority? The angry black woman is in the same category as the feminist killjoy: Ahmed uses the example of Ata Aidoo’s prose poem, Our Sister Killjoy, whose narrator is a black woman trying to maintain comfort for others. She puts her happiness aside to not
create awkwardness for others. The unhappy queer is a different affect alien. As Ahmed explains that “unhappiness is not so much expressed as being unhappy about the child being queer, but about being unhappy about the child being unhappy.” (Ahmed, Promise of Happiness 42) These feelings as spurred by the fact that some parents to queer children believe to be happy is to have a husband or a wife, get married and have children. All those possibilities are taken away by the fact that the child is queer. In their minds, the queer child can no longer have these things, and therefore will never be happy, and that makes the parents unhappy. Lastly there is the melancholic migrant who “is the one who is not only stubbornly attached to difference, but who insists on speaking about racism” (Ahmed, Promise of Happiness 48). What connects all these affect aliens is their debate between making themselves happy, or maintaining the happiness for those around them.

What I find highly interesting is the connections made between the ideas of happy objects and orientation. From Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others, Ahmed states that “to be orientated is also to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us to find our way.” (Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others 1) This seems a more general comment towards objects that hold our attention, yet happy objects can add to this discussion. Therefore in terms of happy objects we can rephrase Ahmed’s statement to say that, “certain objects help us to find our way” (Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others 1) to happiness. Now perhaps is a good time to rethink the idea of identity. Stated above, identity was based on basic information such as
race, gender, and geographical location of home, and then it was based on likes and dislikes. Adding Ahmed’s thoughts, we can now say our identity is based and shaped on how we are affected by things, and allow them to direct us through space. Through this understanding, it is possible to look at the seemingly amateur work of Nikki S. Lee as being in direct conversation about identity, and the constant movement of where our happy objects direct us.

Beginning with Lee’s Projects series, we can begin to understand how happy objects became very vital in her ability to inhabit these social groups. Her works consisted of a very thorough research of her chosen groups. When walking into a gallery and gazing at Lee’s photographs displayed on the wall, lined up beside one another, or else, flipping through her book, Projects, the first reaction as a viewer entails an underwhelming feeling towards these amateur snapshots. The photographs are not done with a high-end camera, nor are they framed, lighted or focused properly. But the more the works are studied; a recurring figure starts to become noticeable. One woman. Lee, blends herself into these groups of people. All bound together by their common likes. Whatever it is that the group finds appealing or as happy objects has drawn them together, altered their orientation to guide them to each other. This recurring character is Nikki S. Lee.

For, The Punk Project (1997), Lee studied the mannerisms, the dress, and all other aspects that she believed to be apart of this persona. She wore the appropriate apparel; she donned the proper hairstyle (bright pink) and, in all pictures,
represented the sullen look to the camera. It is interesting to understand what facet she deems important in her role in encompassing her subculture. For *The Hispanic Project* (1998) Lee dons the big earrings, the flashy jewelry and the skin tone has been altered to try and blend in with her surroundings. Lee even tries to play and blend the ideas of sexual orientation by creating *The Lesbian Project* (1997). It is during this project that Lee has been able to fully portray her idea of how our identity is created. She believes that we form our identity based on those closest to us. She changes her identity from relationship to relationship, having one partner make her feel controlling, or one partner making her feel shy, and dependent. In an interview she did with RoseLee Goldberg, Lee states,

“I realize that my own identity changes depending on whom I'm going out with or who becomes my boyfriend. [...] I would suddenly start to watch baseball. When you love somebody, you really want to understand that person and think about him or think like him. A person's identity can be very fluid from one relationship to the next.” (Goldberg 50)

In *The Lesbian Project* (1997) Lee becomes involved with her partner, takes images of them together in the home, or pictures of them in an intimate embrace. The presence of the photographer is most apparent in this series due to the intimate relationship being documented by an invisible other. Who is this person taking a photograph on top of them making out? It is in this project where the idea of the staged image is most relevant. Then how does this make the viewer feel? *The Lesbian Project* (14) (Image 1) is a private moment shared between a couple that as
a viewer I feel I am intruding on. Yet, the longer I look, the longer I realize this moment has already been intruded upon. There is of course the slightest chance that a tripod has been set up and the camera programed to take a times photograph, yet the situation remains that Lee has decided this moment should be captured. This moment is created with the intention of being shared with the public. Now as a viewer I am allowed to look freely, and with that permission, I can now study the image for what it is.

In continuation with her other projects, I am led to believe that Lee is representing all aspects of what she has studied to be the lesbian lifestyle. All the images represent a “normal” lifestyle. I say normal, because it holds true to societies happy objects. She is cooking with her girlfriend, they are creating a comfortable living space, and they are a seemingly happy. Yet when studied in relation to all her other projects, is it possible for the viewer to believe that Lee is happy, being in this relationship with a different sex than her normal choice? This is when I find it hard to believe in the genuine emotions portrayed in Lee’s work. I believe she has the ability to embody these facades of the groups she chooses, but is it possible for her to be truly happy?

*The Yuppie Project* (2001) is another installment to the series that represents Lee’s disconnect and difference towards her chosen group. In *The Hispanic Project* (1998) and *The Hip-Hop Project* (2001) (Image 2) Lee has been able to subtly change her physical appearance to blend in to the others around her. Yet in *The Yuppie*
Project (2001) Lee’s cultural other is very apparent. Lee surrounds herself with the Wall Street workers, going about their daily lives. She wears the same clothes; she eats the same lunches, yet she is still seen as different. Lee becomes the token Asian in her photographs, except for one image, when she is seen eating lunch with another man of Asian background. Lee is surrounded by, what Maurice Berger calls, “whiteness”, in his article, Picturing Whiteness. As a viewer I begin to reflect into myself, wanting to understand what is it about these pictures that don’t create a happy affect. All I can say to justify my feelings is that Lee does not fit in. I find these scenarios even more staged than those of The Lesbian Project (1997). There is an image of Lee and her, what seems to be, boyfriend, eating dinner at a fancy restaurant, with a tiffany box resting on their table. It all seems so elaborate, and still Lee does not seem to feel completely at ease.

Yet how does it work that Lee can look so comfortable and relaxed in projects, such as those mentioned before, The Hispanic Project (1998) and The Hip-Hop Project (2001), and not in The Lesbian Project (1997) and The Yuppie Project (2001)? I would like to argue here that it would relate to the fact that Lee shares more happy objects, and more negative objects, with Hispanics and the hip-hop community, than she might with a lesbian or with a worker from Wall Street. The Hispanic community is still seen as a cultural other in the United States of America, and in that respects, Lee being a Korean woman, is also seen as “other”. They all feel the surrounding of whiteness during their every day life. It is this sense of other that orients Lee towards these groups. It is also the want to understand the other that
draws Lee towards the whiteness that is Wall Street or even the residents of Ohio. What Lee is attempting to do by integrating herself into these subcultures is exactly what Ahmed suggested to do to end the negative feelings towards multiculturalism which is, “integration based on shared values and loyalties is the only way forward.” (Ahmed, Promise of Happiness 133) Phillips suggest that it is things like football, and other team sports, that can bring multi-cultures together since they are striving for the same things.

Lee states that she begun these projects because she “always feel[s] like [she has] a lot of different characters inside and [she] was curious to understand these things. [She] wanted to see some sort of evidence that [she] could be all those different things.” (Smith 221) She furthers that statement in her interview with RoseLee Goldberg that,

“we all have many different personas and I want people to think about the range that they occupy. There is a persona you present to a school teacher or to your parents or to a new boyfriend […] Each is a personal performance.” (Goldberg 47)

Lee has proved that she can enact these personas and that she can be welcomed into these various groups. Yet what else Lee has been able to evoke is this queer affect in her viewers who are attempting to place themselves into the same situation. The queer affect also comes from the displacement the viewer feels, with the attempt to try and determine which group they fit into. In that respect, I feel it is necessary to try and rethink who
I am. I am a half-white Canadian, half-Chinese woman, who resides in Vancouver, I have a boyfriend, I live with three girls, I am a student, I work at a restaurant, I enjoy dance, art, and theater, and I enjoy spending time with my friends, who students, or co-workers from my job. This is who I am and if Nikki S. Lee was to approach me, these are the interests that she would need to know.
Bibliography


