

# Historicizing the Work of UFOlab Artist Collective Around Transnational Adoption

## I samme serie

- 01 Mustafa Dikeç, *Æstetik og skabelsen af fælles verdener*, 2021
- 02 Bojana Kunst, *Feministisk omsorgspolitik og nærheden mellem kunst og liv*, 2021
- 03 Cecilia Sjöholm, *Virkelighedssans: Hannah Arendt om Kant og æstetik*, 2021
- 04 Nishant Shah, *Falske fremtider: Morgendagen gennem computernetværkets filtre*, 2022
- 05 Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter, *Crisis Computing*, 2022
- 06 Nora Sternfeld, *I det postrepræsentative museum*, 2022
- 07 Emma Sofie Brogaard, Mathias Overgaard, Frederik Tygstrup, *Fremtrædelsens æstetik og politik*, 2022
- 08 Solveig Daugaard og Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt, *Vi skriver sammen*, 2022
- 09 Josefine Wikström, *Kan det strukturalistiske subjekt danse?*, 2023
- 10 Siegfried Zielinski, *Varianter af fælles handling i kunsten*, 2023
- 11 Kristoffer Gansing, *Hjemmedyrket, outsourcet, organiseret*, 2023
- 12 Shannon Mattern, *Reparationsmanualer*, 2023
- 13 David Lloyd, *Repræsentationens endeligt og kunstkritikkens almene subjekt*, 2024
- 14 Shannon Jackson, *Økologisk tid i tidsbaseret mediekunst*, 2024
- 15 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *At pynte på Madalenas tråde*, 2024
- 16 UFOLab, *Historicizing the Work of UFOLab Artist Collective Around Transnational Adoption*, 2024

UFOlab: Charlotte Kim Boed, Anna Jin Hwa Borstam, Trine  
Mee Sook Glerup, Skye Jin, and Jane Jin Kaisen  
*Historicizing the Work of UFOlab Artist Collective Around  
Transnational Adoption*

© UFOlab

Preface by Solveig Daugaard, Anna Meera Gaonkar, and  
Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt

Introduction 'Unidentified Foreign Objects' by Lene Myong

Edited by Solveig Daugaard, Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt, and UFOlab

© Kunsten som Forum, Københavns Universitet 2024

© Billedkunstskolernes Forlag, Det Kongelige

Danske Kunstakademi 2024

Layout og omslag: Eckardt ApS, 21221281.dk

Tryk: Tarm Bogtryk a/s

Sat med Arnhem

Papir: FSC mærket Munken Lynx, 100g/240g



ISBN: 978-87-7945-082-0

1. udgave, 1. oplag

Printed in Denmark 2024

**NY  
CARLSBERG  
FONDET**  
NEW CARLSBERG FOUNDATION

**K:**  
Statens  
Kunstfond

Kunsten som Forum er støttet af Ny Carlsbergfondet

Kunsten som Forum på tryk er støttet af Statens Kunstfond

**UFOlab:  
Charlotte Kim Boed,  
Anna Jin Hwa Borstam  
Trine Mee Sook Glerup  
Skye Jin  
Jane Jin Kaisen**

# **Historicizing the Work of UFOlab Artist Collective Around Transnational Adoption**

**Billedkunstskolernes Forlag  
Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi 2024**

## Preface

It is a special honor to publish this text by UFOlab – Anna Jin Hwa Borstam, Skye Jin (was Jette Hye Jin Mortensen), Trine Mee Sook Gleerup, Charlotte Kim Boed, and Jane Jin Kaisen. The members of the artist collective UFOlab which split in 2010, agreed to do a lecture in our Forum Lecture Program at the New Carlsberg Foundation research center Art as Forum in March 2023. The invitation from our side was to historicize the collective's artistic work with transnational adoption in the years 2004-2010.

Presenting UFOlab's performances and activist assemblies in our teaching at university, we have referred to UFOlab as – to our knowledge – the first separatist BIPOC artist collective in Denmark, collaboratively starting to carve out the racism and patriarchal extractivism connected to transnational adoption between South Korea and Denmark 20 years ago. A generation before separatist collectives active today such as the decolonial feminists in Marronage and the BIPOC artists' and cultural worker's union, The Union. Looking back at UFOlab's politically eye-opening, aesthetically disturbing, and collectively reparative work, we tend to celebrate UFOlab seen from the perspective of our historical

present. However, at their lecture, we got to understand that revisiting the material for the UFOlab-members themselves, and remembering the resistance UFOlab met, a less linear and simple story of artistic endeavors was unlocked. A story of, amongst other things, racial loneliness of the adoptee and about symbolic violence and cancellations from peers, teachers, and from the art world – pierced by a silencing of the adoptee in the Danish public sphere.

When inviting, we were aware that looking back and remembering the early critical work with transnational adoption in a Danish context is a demanding work. Therefore, our promise was also to, as the least, offer our resources and editorial support to archive what UFOlab presented. This is the only issue in Art as Forum's print publication series *Kunsten som Forum på tryk* which appears in English, since the working language of Danish-Swedish-Korean UFOlab is English, which is also the shared language of its wished-for readership: the collective's friends and peers in the circles of the Korean adopted diaspora transgressing any single national reading public.

This book is the result of the effort of the collective's remembering and a very lovely, collaborative editing process. A shared wish of both UFOlab and ourselves, is to have UFOlab's work introduced thoroughly by the collective's friend, professor in Gender Studies at the University of Stavanger, Lene Myong. Lene's research offers a fundamental repertoire for approaching transnational adoption, racism, racialization, and whiteness in a Danish context.

We are so grateful that you, Lene, have accepted the invitation. And, dear Anna Jin Hwa, Charlotte, Skye Jin, Trine Mee Sook, and Jane: Thank you for the effort of coming together again to re-member UFOlab in front of, first, a listening audience and, now, a wider faceless readership, and thank you for the labor of looking back, and for the effort of self-archiving in written concert.

*Solveig Daugaard, Anna Meera Gaonkar  
& Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt*

# Unidentified Foreign Objects

LENE MYONG

On January 16, 2024, the only remaining Danish adoption agency, Danish International Adoption (DIA), announced that it would terminate its operations. The announcement followed on the heels of the Danish National Social Appeals Board's suspension of adoptions from South Africa in December 2023 and its intention to implement a (temporary) suspension of all transnational adoptions. The political mobilisation and organising of adoptees have in many ways made these developments possible. This include efforts to politicise transnational adoption, to build and sustain adoptee communities, and to expose illegal adoption practices, human rights abuses, and systematic violations of moral and ethical standards.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> A recent example concerning adoptions from South Korea is the association Danish Korean Rights Group [DKRG],

Such interventions have served to recontextualise adoption practices and to contest the idealised narratives of family and nation that keep transnational adoption alive in the (white) welfare state imagination. For the past decade, Danish politicians have, on their part, scrambled to salvage transnational adoption through so-called adoption reforms. The implementation of such reforms have been motivated by political desires to secure access to children and to rebuild (moral) legitimacy for the continued displacement of children through the adoption system.<sup>2</sup> As I write these words in early 2024 it feels premature to claim that transnational adoption has ended, but with the collapse of DIA and adoptees' intensifying demands for justice and

---

which was founded by Danish adoptees from South Korea. In 2022, DKRG submitted a total of 334 adoption cases to The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Republic of Korea, calling for an exhaustive investigation of adoptions in South Korea. Findings and results from DKRG's research and advocacy work can be accessed on their website: <https://danishkorean.dk/> [accessed February 17, 2024]. Motivated by DKRG UFOLab member Anna Jin Hwa Borstam's Network SKAN also submitted a number of Swedish adoption cases to the commission during autumn and winter 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See Ingvill Stuvøy & Lene Myong (2023). 'The Biopolitics of Parental Access: Cross-Readings of Transnational Adoption and Surrogacy in Denmark and Norway'. *Social Politic: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 30(4): 1089-1112.

accountability the prospect of a permanent end to the transnational adoption system in Denmark has moved closer.

★

South Korea's adoption program has produced the largest group of adoptable children transferring more than 200.000 children to adopters primarily in Europe and the US and with the Scandinavian welfare states receiving the highest number of transnational adoptees per capita. Since the late 1950s and early 1960s more than 25,000 children have most likely been removed from around 70 countries and subsequently placed with Danish adopters. In Denmark, the rise of transnational adoption was intimately tied to the expansion of the Danish welfare state post world war II and Danish colonial rule in Kalaallit Nunaat. In the 1950s and 1960s privately facilitated adoptions/abductions by Danish adopters involved Inuit children from Kalaallit Nunaat and Black children from West Germany. It is estimated that Danish adopters adopted/abducted at least 257 children from Kalaallit Nunaat between 1964-1979 and as many as 3,000 children from West Germany.<sup>3</sup> Towards the late 1960s

---

<sup>3</sup> The estimation concerning children from Kalaallit Nunaat is made by researcher Gitte Adler Reimer in Helle Nørrelund Sørensen (2023) 'Endnu en sag på vej: Grønlandske adoptiv-

and around 1970 Danish adoption agencies managed to procure a growing number of children, primarily from South Korea as well as India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Adoption markets have been replaced and/or joined by new markets over time. Increasing numbers of children were procured from Columbia during the 1980s and from post-communist countries and China in the 1990s. In the 2000s Ethiopia and South Africa also became important markets for Danish adoption agencies. After 2010 the number of transnational adoptions have decreased steadily, and in 2023 the transnational adoption system facilitated 'only' 17 children to

Danish adopters. This marked the lowest number for many decades. From 2015-2022 South Africa and Thailand have been the biggest suppliers of children to Denmark – with 129 and 94 children, respectively, followed by South Korea with 38 children. This shows that even though the overall number of transnational adoptions, and adoptions from South Korea in particular, have been in sharp decline, South Korea has nevertheless maintained a position as a central supplier of children to Danish adopters.

★

---

børn undersøger mulighed for erstatningssag mod staten'. Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa. <https://knr.gl/da/nyheder/groenlandske-adoptivboern-undersoeger-mulighed-erstatningssag-mod-staten> [accessed February 17, 2024]. For literature see for example Gitte Trøndheim (now Gitte Adler Reimer) (2010) 'Grønlandsk adoption – et vigtigt element i grønlandsk slægtskab'. *Social Kritik* 123, 44-50. For the estimation of number of adoptions/abductions from West Germany see Matilde Hørmand-Pallesen, Amalie Königsfeldt, Amalie Linde (2014) 'Den kaotiske begyndelse – adoption af afrotyske børn til Danmark i tiden efter 2. verdenskrig.' *Social Kritik* 137, 18-27. For a comparative historical study of transnational adoption in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden during the late half of the 20th century, I refer to Kasper Emil Rosbjørn Eriksen's PhD dissertation [forthcoming 2024] *A Scandinavian Way of Adoption?* European University Institute.

Over the years, many organisations, groups, and individual adoptees have articulated important critiques of the transnational adoption system. Adopted Koreans' Association was founded in Sweden in 1986 and four years later Korean adoptees in Denmark established Korea Klubben. These organisations became important meeting points for Korea adoptees during the 1990s as more adoptees returned to South Korea for visits or to live on a more permanent basis. With the formation of a Korean adoptee diaspora new connections were also forged between adoptee artists, activists, and scholars.<sup>4</sup> The artist collective UFOlab:

---

4 See Eleana Kim (2013) 'Producing Missing Persons: Korean Adoptee Artists Imagining (Im)Possible Lives'. In: *War Baby/*

Unidentified Foreign Object Laboratory emerges, in part, from these shifts in the Korean adoptee diaspora. UFOlab was founded by Anna Jin Hwa Borstam, Jane Jin Kaisen, Skye Jin (was Jette Hye Jin Mortensen), Trine Mee Sook and Charlotte Kim Boed, and the collective constitutes an early example of critical adoption art in Scandinavia.<sup>5</sup> UFOlab was mostly active between 2004-2010, but it has occasionally resurfaced and all members are still active in the arts and cultural sphere. Scrutinising the racist structures inherent to the displacement of children through the adoption system as well as adoptees' lived experience of racism in Scandinavia, UFOlab's interventions dismantled dominant narratives of transnational adoption as a 'good' humanitarian deed as well as exceptionalist notions of the Scandinavian welfare state as non-racist and tolerant. UFOlab's practices were also characterised by effects to destabilise the principles of racial isolation and assimilation that structure and condition the lives of transracial adoptees who are raised in white families and white societies, for example, by exploring and establishing

connections between Korean adoptees and other racialised diasporic communities. UFOlab, and critical adoption art in general, have thus made significant contributions, in public domains as well as in the art scene, to carve out critical perspectives on both transnational adoption and Scandinavian racism. As part of these efforts to extricate the transnational adoptee subject from white knowledge regimes – and to unlearn the language and habits of whiteness – one of UFOlab's most significant contributions was, perhaps, to reimagine the transnational adoptee subject as a political subject and to assemble a critical adoption epistemology building on anti-racist knowledges and political visions generated by and in collaboration with critical adoptees and communities and movements led by Black, Indigenous and People of Color artists, activists, and researchers. Many of these interventions have created new registers for adoptee subjectivity and thus contributed to the reshaping of how adoptees understand, resist, and negotiate the politics of transnational adoption as well as to situate adoption critiques in adoptees' lived experiences. While contemporary iterations of adoption critique and adoptee political movements are connected to early forms of critique, of which UFOlab is one example, current adoptee movements have not only grown stronger in terms of adoptee mobilisation, the spectrum of political positions have widened to encompass different priorities and demands in relation to, for example, human rights, human trafficking,

---

*Love Child: Mixed Race Asian American Art*, eds. Wei-Ming Dariotis and Laura Kina, pp. 75-85. Seattle & London: University of Washington Press.

- 5 For further analysis of UFOlab's interventions see Lene Myong (2018) 'Et laboratorium for de uidentificerbare og fremmede objekter: Om UFOlabs bidrag til at udforme en adoptionskritisk epistemologi'. *Kunst og kultur* 101(3), 186-204.

anti-capitalism, anti-colonialism, reproductive justice, reparations, and abolitionist politics.

★

In March 2022 DIA announced on its website that it would phase out adoptions from South Korea in 2023 or 2024. While DIA presented this as a happy decision and as a consequence of how the South Korean state is now able to care for its children, the announcement did not mention the numerous transgressions involving adoptions from South Korea. Likewise, the announcement did not address how DIA planned to continue its operations or if DIA would search for ‘new’ countries as a replacement for South Korea. Korean adoptees were thus invited to feel momentary ‘relief’ – or even pride? – predicated on the silencing of how Danish adoption agencies and the Danish welfare state in past, present and future actively displace children through transnational adoption. The closure of DIA and the Danish government’s temporary stop on transnational adoption in early 2024 have not, however, appeased the political demands stated by adoptees. On the contrary, adoptee groups have intensified the calls for accountability and justice. White Danish adopters have, on their part, responded by mobilising affective claims to their (moral) right and entitlement to adopt Black children and children of color. These appeals to Danish politicians to continue

and renew support for transnational adoption still carry a lot of weight in a white public.

★

UFOLab imagined the adoptee as an unidentified foreign object. There is an unpredictability and unruliness to this figure: a troubling capacity to resist and to turn away from white expectations even if this is difficult and hard work. I like to think that the unidentified foreign object captures the unruliness of the political adoptee activism that seek to challenge the colonial, racial, and capitalist orders that underpin the transnational adoption system. As an adoptee, it requires unruliness to insist on the abolition of the transnational adoption system. As an adoptee, it requires unruliness to defy the whiteness that has shaped and destroyed the most intimate parts of our lives. This is one reason for why unruliness is often met with severe repercussions or, in some instances, death for the (unruly) BIPOC adoptee living in proximity to whiteness. Our unruliness moves us to flourish and live full lives in spite of and against the colonial violences inflicted through adoption. As we build a different world, solidarity to all unidentified foreign objects.

# Historicizing the Work of UFOLab Artist Collective Around Transnational Adoption

UFOLAB: UNIDENTIFIED FOREIGN OBJECT  
LABORATORY (2004-2010)

The group consisted of five artists: Anna Jin Hwa Borstam, raised in Sweden, and Charlotte Kim Boed, Trine Mee Sook Gleerup, Jane Jin Kaisen and Skye Jin (formerly Jette Hye Jin Mortensen), raised in Denmark. All are adopted from South Korea.

This essay re-examines the artist group UFOLab's performances and interventions. Histories of place and the timing of the group's founding matter deeply to its work, its art, self-organization, and friendly activism. Northern Europe took a leading role in the global history of adoption as the principal receiving/trafficking countries of transracial and transnational adoptees per capita in the world.

In the early 2000s BIPOC artists in Denmark often worked alone or in relative isolation from peers because of geographical distances and/or expectations to assimilate

to prevailing values, behaviors, and attitudes in the art world and in broader society. This was before social media made it easier for BIPOC artists to find and connect with each other. Art institutions commonly ignored individual BIPOC artists and diminished adoptee artists for being either self-indulgent, overly concerned with identity politics, angry, or even unthankful. Its members founded UFOlab in 2004 to create space for their work within this institutional, political, and cultural context. It proved more difficult for art institutions to ignore a strong collective creating art from this perspective.

UFOlab, which stands for Unidentified Foreign Object Laboratory, became one of Scandinavia's first East Asian diaspora and women of color artist groups. There was no precedent in Scandinavia for East Asian diaspora artists connecting and organizing together as an artist collective. As a unified entity, UFOlab could speak from a multi-voiced platform. Thematically, through its collective art practice, it made public interventions that contested and re-framed normative perceptions of racism and transnational adoption from a postcolonial and decolonial feminist viewpoint.

During UFOlab's most active years the group produced exhibitions, talks, events, performances, as well as public interventions. Twisting everyday situations, norms and expectations and highlighting structural hierarchies, the group made visible prevalent prejudices and stereotypes. While primarily active in Denmark and South Korea, UFOlab collaborated with a global network of cultural workers,

activists, and researchers to challenge official narratives around transnational adoption by adoption agencies, and sending and receiving countries. It also worked for adoptee rights and to nuance the discourse around transnational adoption and its complex global history tied to war, militarism, white privilege, patriarchy, and class.

### *Based within transnational adoption*

UFOlab, one of the earliest Scandinavian BIPOC feminist art collectives, forged new ground towards articulating a critical discourse on transnational adoption by reimagining the adoptee not as an infantilized object, but rather, as a political, critical subject.<sup>1</sup>

The group came together thanks to the pioneer networks of Korean adoptees like Denmark's Korea Club, Tobias Hübinette, Associate Professor at Karlstad University in Sweden, and events organized by International Adoptee Gathering (IKAA). A solidarity network of Korean adoptees involved in the visual arts, film, literature, theater, acting,

---

1 Lene Myong, 'Et laboratorium for de uidentificerbare og fremmede objekter: Om UFOlabs bidrag til at udforme en adoptionskritisk epistemologi', *Kunst og kultur* Vol.101, Iss.3, 2018 (in Danish) <https://www.idunn.no/doi/full/10.18261/issn.1504-3029-2018-03-05>

and academic research met during the early and mid 2000s. The strongest political adoptee movements grew in Denmark and many of the artists involved in UFOlab interacted with the Adoption Political Forum (which formed later) or went on to join the Danish Korean Rights Group to bring the cases of numerous illegal adoptions, child harvesting, and identity fraud to the Korean Parliaments Truth commission in 2022. As of 2024, all transnational adoption has been temporarily suspended in Denmark, and in Norway a suggestion to follow suit is being processed. In Sweden an investigation is currently underway on allegations of child trafficking and breaches of human rights in numerous countries involved in transnational adoption.

Public discourse on transnational adoption has dramatically changed since UFOlabs first interventions. The group through often humorous works and 'friendly activist' projects advanced a resilient strategy towards hope in its often-hopeless and complex journey to bring the dark side of racism, colonialism, and adoption to public attention. At times it faced harsh backlashes from the art world, academia, and in the member's private lives. The price can be high for paving the way for new understandings of prevailing public understandings as strong interests invested in the sunshine story of international adoption pushed back. UFOlab continued to advance through its slow, collective, and global feminist formats of co-creation and production aesthetics that refused individualizing the adoption story and experience, while insisting on drawing attention to its patterns and structures.

UFOlab faced an extra layer of complexity through its critique of a western-centered feminism through global feminism. Being the very objects of desire for childless, western women and even sometimes the solution to forming a family for single and same-sex parents, motherhood and the child were ambiguous figures in critical adoptee discourse. Infantilization was a common pattern for domination and power while debating the problematic aspects of adoption. Adult adoptees were often referred to as an 'adoptee child', bringing the orphaned baby to mind ridiculing with indignation their ungratefulness for the care and stability they gained in a western family. This discourse both denied Korean adoptees the space to voice their own lived experiences and ignored the breadth of their lives within the families that adopted them.

UFOlab mostly exhibited outside of larger institutions in Scandinavia. In South Korea it was presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale in 2006 and Kyunghee University Museum of Art in 2007. It also did activist work in both locations. In 2024 members of the group remain active as artists, activists, curators, parents, and community facilitators.

### *Gazing back*

In a text on UFOlab's artistic practice, the professor of gender studies Lene Myong wrote (our translation):

In May-June 2005, UFOlab organized a series of events, film screenings and exhibitions which took place at Galleri Pixel, Ydre Nørrebro Kultur Bureau (YNKB) and Galleri Q in Copenhagen. UFOlab wanted to launch a critical study of transnational adoption. The initiative coincided with a growing interest among South Korean adoptees in Europe, the USA and South Korea to explore the phenomenon's moral legitimacy and lived consequences.

The photograph of UFOlab members was taken in connection with the events in 2005. The hooded masks' covering the hair and face contributes to blurring and downplaying the individuality of each person. The activist uniform functions by anonymizing and masking: the hooded masks make identification difficult, but at the same time emphasize five sets of racialized eyes that meet the viewer's gaze. The framing of the eyes can be understood as an underlining of racialization as a collective condition that marks and connects the five (adopted) bodies, but also as a designation of the five looks as an epistemological framework in itself. Gazes that communicate a mixture of rebellion, sadness, anger, humor, vulnerability, and community.<sup>2</sup>

Myong's 2018 text both introduces her academic work and clarifies how UFOlab gained energy and expanded its artistic field in relation to other adoptees who began their journey investigating transnational adoption outside the prevailing narratives that only view adoption as for the greater good and a win-win situation because childless couples get a child, and orphans get a new family.

The circumstances around transnational adoption reflect the adoptee children's outermost dire circumstance: Being transported to another part of the world, cut off from their birth family or friends (depending on their age), as well as their birth-country, culture, language, food, and everything familiar to navigate among strangers. A cursory understanding of children's psychological development, trauma response, or family dynamics provides evidence that children will do almost anything to avoid being left by their (new) caretakers and fitting into the (new) family as if their life depended on it.

This difficult human process was exacerbated by the assimilationist discourse of the Danish immigration policy in the early 1980's, the period in which the largest numbers of transnational adoptees arrived in Denmark. Regardless of origin, family history, ethnicity, political circumstances,

---

adoptionskritisk epistemologi', *Kunst og kultur* Vol.101, Iss.3, 2018 (in Danish) <https://www.idunn.no/doi/full/10.18261/issn.1504-3029-2018-03-05>

---

2 Lene Myong, 'Et laboratorium for de uidentificerbare og fremmede objekter: Om UFOlabs bidrag til at udforme en



trauma, or anything else, all new arrivals must adapt to 'Danish society and Danish values.' Identification with Franz Fanon's writing, *Black Skin, White Masks* resonate strongly with this condition. Fanon described the psychological challenges of being raised as a white person and feeling white inside, while having brown, black, or East Asian skin color or perceived physical traits. UFOlab elaborated on this discourse in its work 'Banana Power' (2006), to which we will return later in the essay.

What differentiated UFOlab from its predecessors was its forming as a joint artist group, where individual artistic practice became the practice of the collective. Collective practice as a strategy has a long historical tradition in Denmark, notably within leftist movements, and feminist and queer collectives. The network of allies self-organizing artist-driven and non-profit artistic platforms was one of the precursors of UFOlab's establishment on the Danish art scene. Informed by activist organizing, it initiated a new strategy for adoptees and BIPOC artists in a Scandinavian context: the collective. Before its founding, it was not usual for UFOlab's future members to speak in a shared voice and point to the structural factors of their position and artistic practice.

It was not easy for them to connect with other like-minded artists as art students who felt uneasy about transnational adoption while also having early visions for

their artworks that came later as they created the social sculpture of their organization and activism and developed a discourse to articulate their position and ideals. It was a very special stroke of fate that brought the group together and moved it in a shared direction into a terrain that nobody on the outside wanted them to move into. The art world in Scandinavia did not know quite what to do with the group, so some of them went abroad to grow their artistic practices.

The early 2000s were a time when the (Scandinavian/Danish) art scene slowly began to address more openly colonial issues, and artists in Denmark, with its colonial relationship to Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), highlighted these issues within the art scene. For example, projects and exhibitions such as *Minority Report: Challenging Intolerance in Contemporary Denmark* (2004) and *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism: A Postcolonial Project in Five Acts* (2006) brought these issues to a larger public audience.

The Korean American researcher Eleana Kim stated that not talking about one's own lived experience as an adoptee (artist) could be somehow 'a double edged sword or painting yourself into a corner' if you fight for adoptee human rights and justice (as an artist).<sup>3</sup> The fact that the

---

3 Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging*, Duke University Press, 2010

civil rights movements was founded in the lived experience of entire communities and the hunger to claim personal narratives both validate and invalidate the global struggle for equal civil rights and human rights. Documents like the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child were maliciously transgressed by those entities involved in transnational adoptions from South Korea that erased personal data, birthdates, and family origins, making it impossible for many adoptees to reunite with their birth family.

UFOLab as a group, though, never highlighted its members' most private experience with transnational adoption. Their upbringing and personal history were their own to decide how and when and with whom to share. Rather, UFOLab decided early to focus its attention on the system that created transnational adoption and how it continues to be upheld today as part of a colonial world order.

### *Resisting and de-colonizing the romanticization of the orphan mythology*

Through individual stigmatization, psychologization, and the fact that the members of UFOLab were never meant to meet and be seen as a minority community—rather Danish society and institutions pressured their quiet assimilation into white families and society—their very formation of a collective was in itself radical and a political statement. Unexpectedly adoptees began to speak through a unified

voice, a voice of multitudes, which moved the marginalized narratives of identity and transnational adoption from the personal into the political sphere.

The silencing of the critical adoptee and the public urge to know and dwell in the innermost private experiences of the lived experiences of adoptees proved impossible to navigate between. This was the tension that Eleana Kim drew out through her metaphor of the double edge sword of not speaking from personal lived experience when you fight for social justice from a minority perspective. One more reason why UFOLab decided to work more structurally within their theme of transnational adoption rather than the actual or fictional romanticization of the orphan adoptee.

The orphan narrative is strong in classic literature, commercial blockbuster films, comics, theater, video games, and other kinds of storytelling. Often protagonists are orphans, a foundling, or an adoptee. The projection of an imagined 'clean slate' and the protagonist's search for knowledge, roots, and finding their home are such strong emotional identifiers and emotional releases that it is used repeatedly in the commercialization of the lived experience of actual children and adults growing up separated from their first mother and family.

In 2014 the British writer Lemn Sissay created his famous work 'Superman was a Foundling' at the Foundling Museum in London. In this work and in his activism and writing, he uses his experience growing up in foster care to highlight how society takes care of the most vulnerable

citizens, the orphans, foundlings, foster children, and adoptees. This work was made long after UFOlab's most active period, but the work in itself visualizes how the fictionalization of the lived experience of an adoptee also made it difficult to become a politically subjective voice as an adoptee.

### *First exhibition at Gallery Q*

UFOlab held its largest event in the spring of 2005 at Gallery Q, an exhibition space of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Denmark. It was one of the first exhibitions in a Nordic context to address transnational adoption from a more critical discourse. One of the first texts that UFOlab formulated about the exhibition at Gallery Q, stated:

The incentive to found UFOlab was the lack of an artist network in Europe putting focus on diaspora and identity in relation to transnational adoption. The artistic practice of UFOlab is a mix of personal works by each member and more collaborative and process-oriented works as a collective. UFOlab wishes to focus on a number of issues connected to transnational adoption; specific themes (such as adoption psychology, archiving of artistic practice among the Korean diaspora, and adoptee rights) as well as more

general issues, often in a social-political context, such as multicultural identity, national identity, and representation.<sup>4</sup>

During the curatorial discussion at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, where three of UFOlab's members attended as students at the time, there were different requirements stipulated that the UFOlab group had to adhere to.

The artists who ultimately showed at Gallery Q were all from the Korean adopted diaspora. These artists had various artistic backgrounds. Some were self-taught, but most of them trained at art academies in Europe and the United States. This exhibition marked the beginning of UFOlab's international networking within the Korean diaspora, where the shared experience of being transnationally adopted created a sense of home and community.

UFOlab displayed a wall of archival information like posters, writings, flyers of collaborators and networks as examples of this global community. 'OKAYbook' is an anthology placing Korean diaspora art within contemporary art history. 'Orientity Exhibition' is a group of artists with Korean roots, residing in a number of different countries who exhibit around the world aiming at a redefinition of 'Oriental Identity' 'AREUM Neo Vessel' is a network of more

---

4 UFOlab, 'Artist statement', 2005

than one hundred artists established by Koreans residing in Japan. 'KADSWAN' is an American based artist network involved in international artistic initiatives and that serves as a forum for information on Asian-American exhibitions and projects. 'ASK' (Adoptee Solidarity Korea), is a Korean based activist organization working for adoptee rights and trying to find solutions to international adoption in Korea. 'Mix Rice' is a Korean artist group, putting focus on immigration and racism within Korea.

UFOlab members also exhibited their individual works at Gallery Q in order to show the variety of voices and expressions that existed within the group: showing the energy field between individuality and collectivity.

UFOlab invited a number of colleagues, adopted artists and researchers, and artists who worked within a feminist frame and early versions of intersectional criticism—although not all currently understood aspects of intersectional criticism were developed at the time—to broaden understanding for those who had never reflected on transnational adoption and open up a larger critical discourse on the complexity of adoption at Gallery Q. UFOlab invited the following people in 2005:

- Lene Myong Ph.D. student at Danish School of Education, Aarhus University
- Kim Su Rasmussen, activist and postdoctoral fellow, MA in Literature and Ph.D. in History of Ideas
- Ellen Nymann, actor and activist

- Honey Biba Beckerlee & Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, art students at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, and artists and curators of Jubil96um feminist anniversary publication
- Tobias Hübinette, Ph.D. in Korean Studies at Stockholm University
- Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine, pioneer adoptee artist and activist

The primary questions encountered by UFOlab in its curatorial and artistic planning of the exhibition were:

- How can artists work with politically charged topics that may be new to many to create space for reflection and critical discussion, while not over-explaining things?
- How can artists open up and widen the field of the prevailing narrative surrounding transnational adoption through public activities such as interdisciplinary lectures, artistic interventions, and artworks?
- How could they add something that has not been made public before as a collective?
- Who was UFOlab speaking to and who did the group hope would listen?
- What would the consequences be if the exhibition was a separatist event where only BIPOCs and transnational adoptees would gather in order to create a new, safe space?

The group also discussed who to invite and whether to do an open call to reach out to artists who were not yet part of the networks known to UFOlab.

How do we assess artistic quality when we historicize the 'political' works of others and our own? Is it works that age well with their contemporaries, that feel current even if they were created in the past, works that were ahead of their time, or works that were overlooked in their time? Maybe all of these questions must interact so that the works will get their rightful place in art history? Re-visiting the works of UFOlab is sensitive because we now have information that was not public when the works were created and displayed.

When creating new context and narratives around a sensitive topic such as adoption—whose narrative, as mentioned before, had been controlled by adopters, powerful adoption organizations, and even governmental organizations in both recipient and donor countries—how much pedagogy and background history in an artistic context is required to invite a re-reading of transnational adoption?

UFOlab wondered early on what the contemporary art scene and society's expectations were of so-called intercultural artists (in this case adopted artists) and whether these artists had a certain responsibility to promote and position themselves within the art scene given the fact that Danish art history of the early feminist collectives and left-wing political movements had not yet been written during that period. These questions came to create a basis for how UFOlab tackled future collaborations and interventions.

### *Carry on: collective strategies*

UFOlab was, as previously explained, born out of a self-organizing tradition present in the aesthetics of how the group created and executed works. The works and interventions UFOlab launched were usually based on a do-it-yourself tradition. The group relied on its ability to organize, network, and create works and interventions from very limited funds. Often the time between concept, idea, and implementation was short.

In the project Friendly Activist Hoods visitors to the Gallery Q space could make their own activist hoods. It used materials found, donated by others, or borrowed and the budget for new productions was often deliberately modest. Choosing materials not traditionally used by classical artists, rather materials that could be easily packed into a bag while being on the go, became an UFOlab strategy and trait. During the period of the early 2000s, video and photo-based art made a wide impact within art academies, but UFOlab often worked with simple, documentation-like, digital photographs, and digital video that were easy to manage and travel with.

The fact that materials were easily found and transported everyday materials was a symbol of the group's migratory origins and its desire for mobile activity where works could be moved and carried to different places around the world. Anyone could inherit and carry out UFOlab's works given the origin of the artistic materials as a connec-

tion to the adoptee's ability to be forced to adapt to their surroundings.

Those with experience of working collectively know how time consuming and energy depleting decision-making processes can be. Collective decisions about artistic choices and the creation process of works also took time and care. Part of the group's strategy was that not everyone had to be involved in all of the work/interventions, but one or more members could represent the group. This was the case in one of the performances of the Banana Power Project carried out at the Gwangju Biennale where only one of the group's members was present.

To use the sci-fiction imagery of the Silver Blimp Sound Performance (2007, see page 42), one could say that UFOlab would sometimes choose to send out satellites to different parts of the world and the art scene instead of showing up all together. This was a way to play with authorship of the works and it was also an indirect criticism of the solitary male artist-genius who has defined the art scene for centuries. UFOlab inherited this strategy from previous feminist artist groups and collectives.

Since one of the group members grew up in Sweden, English was used as the working language in order to create an equal working process, even though the other four members were Danish speakers. The so-called Nordic English that UFOlab used in its work process was also an ambition, hope, and strategy to operate internationally.

UFOlab presents

**BANANA  
POWER**

## *Banana Power*

As mentioned, Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* spoke deeply to the group. Being so-called 'yellow' on the outside, yet being white, culturally assimilated, and dealing with similar struggles as other minority groups in society. In 2006 UFOlab performed Banana Power Project at Kultorvet in Copenhagen and in the Gwangju Biennale in South Korea. For the performance in Copenhagen, which was part of the Dynamo Performance Festival, UFOlab built a DIY style sales booth made out of cardboard boxes from which they offered banana and vanilla ice cream milkshakes and sold Banana Power t-shirts.

The Banana Power Project plays with Fanon's theory about *Black Skin, White Masks* as it blends different notions of passing, privilege, capitalism, and colonialism. Growing up in white families with very limited awareness of and access to a minority identity or culture, many transnational adoptees were and are raised white, but with East Asian skin tone and appearances preventing their passing as white. Thus, adoptees are excluded from the privileges that they have been raised to believe would belong to them. Quite literally UFOlab suggested and played with the prevailing stereotype how the South Korean adoptee in this respect resembles a 'banana.'

The Banana Power Project was a playful, yet very direct way to communicate with the public. The work itself pin-points the prevailing view of Danish racism. Even if you

are assimilated (white on the inside) you are not fully a Dane because of the color of your skin. In Banana Power Project the group flipped the script of this narrative and wrote 'Now mixed' on the Banana Power Milkshake sign as a playful, but sarcastic comment on the complex discussion of xenophobia, migration, skin color, and how skin color transmutes into a political identity.

In 2003 the Danish artist group Superflex collaborated with Brazilian guarana farmers on the Guarana Power Project to launch an energy drink that would benefit the farmers more directly than their exploitation by global commodities markets. Similar to UFOlab, Superflex was founded while most of the artists were still students at art academies. UFOlab's Banana Power Project mimics and even reproduces the graphics and name of the Danish/Brazilian energy drink as a comment on the post-colonial implications of the collaboration. Both pieces share implications about the power structures at the center of global capitalism and that constitute the foundation of transnational adoption.

## *Silver Blimp Sound Performance and intervention*

In 2007 UFOlab gave their Silver Blimp Sound Performance in the stadium at Seoul Racecourse Park Seoul, South Korea. The International Adoptee Gathering (IKAA), annual events where adult adoptees from South Korea gathered, provided



the context for the performance. The first events organized by IKAA were in Washington DC and Oslo. Since 2004 they have moved to Seoul, South Korea every third year. These gatherings brought together hundreds of Korean adoptees from primarily Europe and the United States. While these gatherings have not had a directly political agenda, art had a significant role in 2004 and 2007. In 2007 organizers arranged a number of football matches, mimicking the world football cup with teams from different nations. These matches took place during the few days of the gathering and during the final match UFOlab made their appearance in the stadium.

Dressed in silver costumes, pink wigs, and black and white make-up, members of the group entered the stadium stage and began playing abstract sounds and noises from laptops. Floating above their heads and the stage was a large silver blimp that looked like a zeppelin/airship/blimp-like hybrid. The performance, the costumes, the props, and the sounds all mimicked a sort of foreign, even alien sci-fi narrative. The soundscape played as a non-verbal form of communicating with and commenting on the football match, the players, and the audience of both the match and the performance.

At the end of the match UFOlab left the stage, undid the silver blimp, and with mechanical movements walked to the middle of the football field and released it! It slowly flew into the sky until it was eventually no longer visible to the naked eye.

As mentioned, UFOlab is short for Unidentified Foreign Object Laboratory. However, in this particular context UFOlab played with the idea that the object is not only foreign but also flying! The object is in this respect the adoptee, who is indeed transported inside a flying object to a place far away, literally in every possible sense of the word. As Myong noted in her article, UFOlab created some kind of fictional space in which transnational adoption was interpreted as a form of forced migration and displacement in the performance. UFOlab later described its performance in 2007: 'UFOlab entered (the stadium) with all kinds of props suggesting both the migrating nature of all the transnationally adopted being at the gathering, and how the transnationally adopted left South Korea originally, not carrying anything - on a flying object to an indefinite destination.'

The players and the audience at the football stadium were all South Korean adoptees and their reactions to the performance were confusion mixed with ambivalence and curiosity. Most of the audience were at the stadium to watch and participate in the football match, and Myong, who was among the audience as well, described how the audience at the stadium were 'not there to watch an abstract performance.' Thus, the performance in itself became a kind of disruptive intervention or, for some, even an annoying disturbance to romantic narratives of identity and belonging produced at such gatherings.

### *A reunion*

What is the future for transnational adoptee art? We can recognize that the urge to discuss these questions publicly have definitively changed for adoptees and the art world has started to listen and acknowledge the adoptee artists' work. The members of UFOlab met in 2023 to look back at their impact, historicize its practice, and discuss how their ways of working and living have changed. Their own parenthood brought them closer together again, because in a way, their first chosen families were each other. In some ways, this is comparable to the act of coming out as LGBTQ+, since choosing a critical stance towards transnational adoption could weaken or even ruin their bonds with their adoptive parents<sup>5</sup>. Some of them found themselves in positions similar to orphans, family-less as grown-ups because of their critical adoption work. Being an activist and becoming a parent always puts societal and discursive changes into perspective. Suddenly, stories and histories were put into words again. What were they actually doing back then and for whom? Were they (hopefully) a dying species and a historical parenthesis? A nationless nation from a gigantic child trafficking industry, that will be remembered as a peculiar, shameful, wrong, and illegal

---

5 Tobias Hübinette, 'Den sista människohandeln' [The last human trade], *Arena* no. 6/2003 (vol. 11), pp. 12-17 (In Swedish)

scheme. Their children inherited this history, but at the same time are also 'free' from this history and identity. The members viewed it both with relief and sentimentality that they do not share a similar background with their children.

So, who are their kin? Parenthood might be an over-rated axis of identification. The problem with western centered feminisms, like the ones the members of UFOlab interacted with, for instance, at the art academies and later in the artistic and academic worlds, was that these feminisms had a serious blind side. They did not relate to the needs of the non-western woman, mother, parent, and child. The adoptee and thus, the possibility of motherhood as a solution to infertility, or other alternative family wishes, is often the very object of desire for a western woman. And therein lies the conflict that leads to intersectional awareness and to clashes. How to integrate and level privilege? The first step of self-education and reflection should of course be taken from the side of the most privileged. As a built-in burden for the adoptees, their empathy, pleasing survival mechanisms, and compassion for their adoptive mothers and the white women they mirrored themselves in as they grew up, took up so much time and space in their minds, that the double fatigue of decolonizing and reclaiming a self-written identity and outlook is twice the work.

On that note, UFOlab acknowledges its extended community. There are so many other adoptees that have been so influential to its work that have not been mentioned here,

but without its adoptee community there would never be a UFOlab! Since the history of adoptees has not been fully written or told by others, it has been crucial for the group to speak, and understand the specific position it holds. UFOlab thanks you for reading this text thereby making together with us a living and ongoing space for re-writing and critically understanding how we can fill in the gaps in history of the adopted and/or minority artist.

★

*Acknowledgements & special thanks to everyone who made this publication possible:*

Anna Meera Gaonkar  
Dave Struthers  
Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt  
Kunsten som Forum  
Lene Myong  
Solveig Daugaard  
Tobias Karlsson



BILLEDKUNST  
SKOLERNE

Det Kongelige  
Danske Kunstakademi

**KUNSTEN  
SOM  
FORUM**  
ART AS FORUM



KØBENHAVNS  
UNIVERSITET

**Kunsten som Forum på tryk** er en skriftserie med udvalgte tekster om kunstteori og -praksis, som på forskellig vis gentænker forholdet mellem kunsten og det sociale.

Formålet med serien er at styrke udvekslingen mellem kunstens teori og praksis og invitere en bredere kreds af kunstens interessenter – producenter, formidlere og publikum – ind i igangværende samtaler om kunsten og dens fællesskaber i bredeste forstand.

Serien er udgivet i et samarbejde mellem Kunsten som Forum, Ny Carlsbergfondets forskningscenter på Københavns Universitet og Billedkunstskolernes Forlag.





Billedkunstskolernes forlag

