

## Once-Unfamiliar Names, Imagined Homes: Transnational Longing in Korean Ballads and Contemporary Art

Jaye Rhee

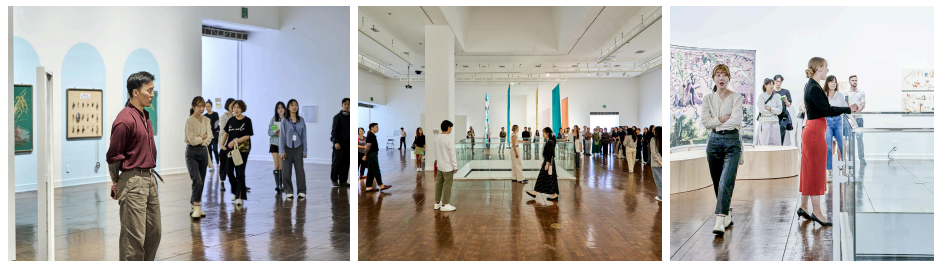
### Abstract

This presentation explores how *Arizona Cowboy* (1959), a postwar Korean ballad, reimagines the American cowboy myth through longing, absence, and imagined belonging. Referencing distant places never visited, the song constructs affective geographies shaped by postwar cultural circulation and the lingering presence of U.S. military and media in Korea. The cowboy becomes a vessel for solitude and a mythic search for home. These emotional logics anticipate later transnational imaginaries. The speaker's performance work revisits *Arizona Cowboy* as a disembodied choral piece echoing emotional dislocation.

My project, *Arizona Cowboy* (tentative title), starts with one uncompromisable sentence: If you are well, it is good. I too am well, or, in Latin, *si vales bene est, ego valeo*. Marcus Tulio Cicero always finished his letters to his wife in this manner, a common form of address at the time but made famous by Cicero.

*Arizona Cowboy* was the title of an American Western film released in 1950. The song with the same title was composed in a country devastated by the Korean War in 1959. Despite the name “*Arizona Cowboy*,” the song does not speak directly to imagery from Arizona but relies on clichéd imagery of “the American West” much like a Spaghetti Western. Influenced by the remains of the American army in South Korea, the lyric spoke to Koreans’ desire to return “home,” a desire shaped by displacement.

This song, filled with a longing for home, found resonance among an audience grappling with deep cultural upheaval. This was a music of ambition and a desire to become more Western, to become “modern.” The longed-for future became projected on an idealized vision of the past, but also the dream of a socio-cultural utopia that never actually existed and never would exist. In my creation of a new version of *Arizona Cowboy: A Project* (2024) as a genre of experimental art, I argued that the *Arizona Cowboy* provides a path to immersion, both in terms of place and in relationships. It is an admission of empathy, a sign of recognition: I know you; I see you. In a time when we are tethered to our devices, hardly aware of our surroundings. The locality of Arizona manifests an aspiration for something not yet realized. Arizona is a universal nostalgic vision of “home” in a way equivalent to a future dream of utopia, in that both represent a location that does not truly exist. I call this collapse of time “nostalgic utopia.”



## Biography



Born in Seoul, South Korea, Rhee graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (BFA, MFA) and is based in New York City and Seoul. Her work has been exhibited at international venues including High Museum of Art, MCA Denver, Denver Art Museum, Norton Museum of Art, Queens Museum, The Bronx Museum of the Arts, The Seoul Museum of Modern Art, Leeum Samsung Museum (Seoul), and La Triennale di Milano (Milan). Jaye Rhee, *Arizona Cowboy* (as part of *Far West, So Close*) (2023) was shown as a performance entitled *THIS TOO, IS A MAP* at the 12th Seoul Mediacity Biennale, Seoul Museum of Art (SeMA) on 21 September 2023. The same work was on view in the group exhibition *Cowboy* at MCA Denver (29 September 2023–18 February 2024), where it enveloped visitors at the museum's entrance.

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