



Beyond Body

Hey-kyung Ki

The human body has been a central subject and motif in art for centuries. From the idealized body, the body as the vessel of the soul, the body as machine of the modernist vision, the body without organs, to the body as marker of identity – the representation of the human body in art has varied significantly over different periods of history. With the collapse of the rationalist worldview that was long at the heart of Western thought, the human body has reemerged as an important subject matter for contemporary artists today more than ever before, providing them with an endless source of inspiration and creativity. Such a change derives from the realization that no matter how desperately we, as humans, try to reach the absolute and transcend our existence here and now, we are ultimately physical, organic beings. For *2018 Title Match*, SeMA, Buk-Seoul Museum of Art has invited artists Hyungkoo Lee and Min Oh, whose works continue to examine the subject of the human body, sense and perception through unique perspectives.

Min Oh, who transitioned her career into visual art after years of training as a professional pianist, translates musical structure and logic into visual language in her work. Since transforming musical logic and structure into time-based art in video around 2012, Oh went on to create *Sonatas* (2016), a new series attempting to visualize musical structures by translating the sonata, one of the most fundamental musical forms in Western musical history, into audiovisual symbols such as objects, colors, patterns, textures and sounds. The series was followed by *ABA*, another series of works which analyzes and deconstructs the sonata form, transforming it into sound, video and performance. In this exhibition, Oh presents her recent works on the theme of “performance,” which the artist has continued to explore and examine since 2014. Through her works, Oh probes the various aspects involved in the process of preparation for a live performance – from the rules and guidelines, planning and training, repetition and difference, to the mental concentration and reactions of the body that occur during the event. Musicians and performers who practice rigorously to deliver a perfect recital or a performance internalize and imprint the long hours of repetitive practice onto their bodies. Conscious and

unconscious expressions of their body language inevitably reflect the rules and discipline they impose (intentionally or unintentionally) on themselves to accomplish that impossible moment of perfect control, while they also reveal the internalized movements, facial expressions and physical reactions prescribed onto their bodies under the strict routine. Oh, who was trained many years as a pianist herself, explores the traces of time marked onto the performer's body through hours of repeated practice, and the manners in which he or she controls the performance with intense concentration. At times, the artist assumes a rehearsal as the final performance, displaces the roles of the composer, the performer and the audience, or changes the before and after sequence of a performance. The artist then examines the performers' response as they try to focus and recompose themselves under the unstable circumstances, and translates their physical reactions into the work. From the five characters appearing on the screen, the artist weaves their narratives, choreography and tension into a polyphonic musical composition by observing their attitudes and responses. In this way, Min Oh examines the sensations and reactions internalized in the performers' bodies during training to achieve the moment of perfect control, at the same time focusing on their body language, caught between repetition and difference, familiarity and unfamiliarity, when they are put under unstable circumstances beyond their control. Oh's three new works for this exhibition center on *étude* compositions which require specific techniques to master. The works connect to Oh's earlier works on the theme of performance, since mastering the *étude* naturally leads to the beginning of mastering another piece that requires the same techniques. Through her two new works, both entitled *Étude for Étude*, Oh probes the process of endless practice that is repeated until the performers unconsciously react to every movement and sound in their heads, then recreates those moments in the present of here and now. In *Étude for Étude (dance composition)*, for example, the dancer is shown engaged in a rehearsal creating a choreography of the gaze. Meanwhile, the viewer's gaze captures the subtle changes happening in the still space where the dancer is situated, and create one's own choreography of the gaze.

If Min Oh analyzes and deconstructs musical forms, or examines the performers' physical reactions and situations on stage through the eyes of a performer, Hyungkoo Lee works in the manner of a pseudo-scientist as he analyzes, deconstructs and reconstructs the human body. Aiming to enlarge or alter human body parts using devices and contraptions, Lee's early series *The Objectuals* consisted of installations imitating a medical laboratory filled with optical instruments, along with a series of photographs documenting people wearing the devices. Around the same time, the artist created *A Device for Walking Backwards* (2001), a kind of headgear equipped with mirrors similar to the rearview mirror of a car, allowing the person wearing the device to walk backwards by looking into the mirror. The artist, after keeping the device on for days, was able to train himself to run backwards without difficulty. The work was the first of Lee's many works exploring how our sense and perception could be readjusted through repeated practice and training. Later, his interest in human senses expanded into a series of works involving a variety of subjects – from fish vision and insects to dressage training – exploring how features of man and man-made objects, or man and other organisms could be integrated to develop new movements of the body and expand the senses. Whether enlarging body parts with devices, or expanding our senses and perception through media, Lee's oeuvre reveals the incredible ability of the human body to adapt and systematically function in a given environment. In this exhibition, Lee further explores his concepts of the human body with a new work, *Kiamkoysek*. Unlike the titles of his previous works that imitate laboratory codes or Latin binomial nomenclature, the title of the new work refers to a Korean word meaning "oddly shaped rocks and stones" transcribed in the Yale romanization system. The new shift in Lee's oeuvre, away from the sterilized environment of laboratories, indicates that the artist's interest now more closely focuses on the wonders of the human body, while looking beyond the body into the greater realm of nature. The new work – showing images of bones around major joints of the human body magnified tenfold with ropes wrapped around them as tendons and muscles – follows Lee's earlier series *ANIMATUS*, creating skeletons of animation characters, or *The Objectuals*, reflecting the

desire to enlarge and alter the human body. At the same time, the massive scale of this new work convinces the viewers to think that they are looking at a form of landscape, much like the title of the work, rather than recognizing the image as human bones. The work, with its title inspired by nature and landscape-like scenery enveloping the viewer, reflects on the artist's philosophy of the human body as a microcosm. It is in this reflection that the work goes beyond Lee's early oeuvre exploring body alteration as manifestation of the Freudian view of human desire, or even later works that attempt to expand human sense and perception through media in the context of McLuhan. The work ultimately expands further, revealing the anagogic relationship between man and universe by metaphorically transforming the images of human bones into a landscape of oddly-shaped rocks (*kiamkoysek*) that embody the laws of nature.

As explained above, this exhibition presents the works of Hyungkoo Lee and Min Oh together in the format of a title match to highlight the artists' unique attitudes and methods of analyzing, deconstructing the objects revealed in the process of production and reconstructing them according to their own rules. The juxtaposition of the works also emphasizes the artists' extraordinary perspectives on examining the subject of the human body and perception. At the same time, the viewers will be able to appreciate the formal beauty of the works for itself beyond their wide-ranging discourses. Through the works of Hyungkoo Lee and Min Oh, the exhibition hopes to provide an opportunity for the viewers to reexamine different attitudes towards the human body through the cultural conditions and discursive environment of our society today.