

Exercise of the Body, Apart from the Body

1. Walking

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Not before long, when he was able to walk backwards to some degree, his eyes were retuning his body from outside the body. Hyungkoo Lee continued this peculiar exercise for days on his commute between the campus studio and home, and recorded these events from 2001 on video. Although the video documenting the routine was never exhibited, Lee would often publicly talk about the event with others, explaining it in detail, in words and hand gestures, so that whoever was listening could imagine the movements in his or her head. What Lee had created was a simple device using a pair of small convex mirrors, which he fixed on his head facing towards him and spaced slightly apart. He called it "A Device for Walking Backwards." Shaped like the antennae of an insect, the mirror device positioned itself between the body wearing the device and the surrounding landscape, and began to readjust the system between the two in order to reflect the landscape behind, outside the range of vision, as much as possible. With the mirrors, Lee was able to secure a field of vision that was otherwise impossible to see, and began his plan to train walking backwards under this new condition. For some time, he practiced walking backwards wearing the device every day, during his daily commute between home and school. Eventually, Lee achieved his goal. He was able to walk backwards, and by the end of the video, he even ran backwards with ease. His body acquired new movements that did not exist before.

On the other hand, she documented her own feet on video, wandering around in an unspecified place. Min Oh, in her work *A Dance* (2007), shows the camera following her perspective, pointed at the floor and tracing her own footsteps, constantly changing in speed and direction. Her steps follow the cracks on the floor while her eyes and feet quickly analyze the course of movement with intense focus. As mentioned in the title, Min Oh likened this movement to a "dance." The movement, searching for balance somewhere between spontaneous gesture and a choreographed dance, creates an unpredictable and unconstrained order of the body. Her two feet start off from the borders of the floor, and soon create a rhythm of their own as they trace through the random cracks.

The feet stop, walk fast, slowly, then fast again and stop. Min Oh exercises the movements of the body in reaction to restricted conditions and controlled situations. The artist gladly endures the repeated training under strict control, while skillfully systemizing the spontaneous impulses of the body in reaction to conflict. Drawing focus to the movements of the body occurring in this process, *A Dance* demonstrates how an individual situated in an unspecified place could perceive and analyze existing time and space with her own body.

Hyungkoo Lee and Min Oh, in his and her videos made years ago, both explore the movement of the body through simple exercises involving the act of “walking.” Now brought together in this *Title Match*, this connection could lead to a myriad of possibilities in their artistic encounter. Hyungkoo Lee altered the senses of the body by walking backwards and reversing the directions of joint and muscle movements. Interestingly, his eyes came to closely examine his own body in training, only after making a detour outside the body (with the physical help of mirrors). Min Oh reveals the tension arising from spontaneous movements of the body and sight as she tries to keep up with the fast-paced steps of her feet over the cracks of the floor. Systemizing the unique rhythm and movements acquired through the exercise and training of the body, Min Oh and Hyungkoo Lee share interesting common ground, shedding new light on each other’s artistic attitudes and methodologies. While Lee continues to analyze and playfully explore the body in the scientific or medical realm, testing the delicate balance of control and order, Min Oh closely focuses on the experience of the body as she examines the system of rehearsed and spontaneous movements that lie between the process and result of music and dance performances. At the same time, Lee and Oh both focus on the body trained by a certain order and control, imagining and mapping out (future) movements yet to occur, or movements beyond one’s control.

2. Trace

Around the same time as the device for walking backwards, he went on to create a few additional pieces of headgear, with around ten of them produced as part of his 1999 series, *The Objectuals*. As one can speculate from the dictionary definition of the adjective “objectual,” the wearable devices Lee created for the series reconfigure the (subject’s) body into the object from outside and become one with it (the body), or skillfully become the objectified body itself. For example, *A Device (Gauntlet1) that Makes My Hand Bigger* (1999), which, as the title indicates, is shaped like a gauntlet, traces a new body and magically changes its rhythm in an instant. What Lee created was a simple device made by connecting plastic bottles and shot glasses, so that when one put his hand into it, water filled inside the device would make the fingers and forearm appear enlarged. For an instant, it would create a new hand with three enlarged fingers and a forearm. *The Objectuals* consists of external devices designed to alter the body in new ways, realizing the imagination of an unrealistic body before our eyes. Just as the device for walking backwards, the devices trace new movements of the body by situating it under conditions that require different order and control. What is more important to note here is their “sculptural gesture,” which attempts to create an illusion of form by imagining the modification of anatomical order without any actual modification. This sculptural attitude reveals the artist’s intense desire to distance his own body to the position of the other and obsessively identify himself with it.

Like the classical sculptors who examined the human anatomy in great depth, Hyungkoo Lee often references anatomy books in his work. His *ANIMATUS* series, which began in 2005, takes the anatomical system as its core reference to realize non-existent beings in a dramatic presence. In other words, Lee takes personified cartoon characters that are “imagined” as his subject and traces their anatomical structures “in reality” with great success. In the series, which recreates imaginary characters through the study of anatomy, Lee carefully analyzes the anatomical order and system on which he creates entirely new variations. Lee does not dissect his objects directly (it would be impossible

to do so, since the characters exist as two-dimensional figures), but obsessively traces their internal anatomical structures from the outside by looking at their exterior shapes. The artist's anatomy books play an important role in this process. Through his extensive collection of resources, the artist looks for biological evidence for each character and searches for possible references in detail. He then uses this information to build their invisible interior structures, in other words, to construct their anatomical structures "in reality." While the exaggerated cartoon characters recreated by the artist reveal every detail of their physical construction, Lee also ironically hides their fictional nature by presenting them in familiar and perfect anatomical form.

In order to realize the imaginary, or those yet to come into existence, one needs the ability to connect the unrealized imagination of the future to the present reality. As Hyungkoo Lee attempts to evidence the imaginary beings in reality by tracing their anatomy, Min Oh traces the possible forms of movement through the choreography of dance. In *A Sit* (2015), a performer appears seated on a chair, with her eyes closed and focusing intensely on something. As the viewer stares intently at the screen, the space of the performer begins to feel almost like an abstract musical score rather than a place in reality. As time passes, the viewer can even sense a kind of horizontal, poetic movement across the screen. The performer on the screen is a dancer and choreographer, calmly rehearsing her choreography inside her head. During the six minutes of the video, she is constantly practicing the choreography in her head, reflecting its movements through the subtle gestures of her body. Seated with her eyes closed, her "spontaneous gestures" analyze the relationship between the abstract choreography inside her head, and the actual movements internalized in her body. In the moment, she is "marking" her choreography, in something of a brief but fleeting moment where the imagination and the real coexist. While the choreography is enfolding in her head, her trained body reacts with spontaneous gestures to realize the performance in reality. Tracing the movements of the finished choreography, her gestures in the present create possibilities for a new kind of movement in a "dance" that is yet to be realized.

Min Oh's *Audience and Performers* (2017, 2018) also closely examines the "spontaneous" that occurs between the process and result of a music or dance performance. As indicated in the title of the work, the roles of the audience and the performer unexpectedly overlap in the work, creating multiple layers of spontaneous gestures. In the "audience" part of the two-part video, five people are shown seated in a row as in *A Sit*, with everyone looking in different directions. The people, who are most likely the audience, wait to perform their roles as they look for subtle signs of the "performers" from the second half of the video which is later presented in five parts. Their untrained bodies attempt to adjust themselves in big and small ways between the signals from outside and their own reactions. It is evident from their physical reactions that they are trying to understand the pattern of the score. (At the same time, as I watch them on the screen from across the space, I find myself watching them as performers and begin to observe their every movement, standing with my breath held in expectation without even knowing I am doing it.) They are focusing on the movements and signs of the performers outside the screen, who make up the other half of the video. Like the performers who train their every muscle and joint to perform and interpret the score, the audiences also create "musical gestures" like the performers themselves, trying to understand the uncertainty of the situation they are in. On the other hand, the actors in the "performers" part of the video also perform the roles they are given (filming, choreography and dance). In the process of their performance, they are given three sets of different rhythms, during which they are to send regular or spontaneous signals across to the audience. Then, in one moment, the trained performers shift themselves to the position of the audience, actively tracing and analyzing their senses. In this way, the movements of the performers resemble the spontaneous and uncertain movements of the audiences before them as they try to understand and react to the uncertainty of the situation.

3. Face

In *Audience and Performers*, the objective perspective of the camera that captures all of the actors together on screen shifts midway through the video, zooming in on the face of each actor. With each new close-up of the faces on

the screen, the individual expressions of each character, focusing intently on something, appear more clearly. Min Oh searches for the “expression of thought” on the performers’ faces during performance, calling it the “look of control.” In her own writing on the “physical expressions during performance,” Oh explains that the “look of control” could be captured by “looking at the performers as they immerse themselves in the moment of performance that requires an intense level of practice and concentration, and examining their individual ‘expression of thought’ during performance.” She also explains her work *Marina, Lukas and Myself* (2014) in this same context. The work presents three performers – choreographer Marina, pianist Lukas and stop-motion filmmaker Min Oh herself – and attempts to capture their individual looks of control in great detail. The “expression of thought” on their faces, as they focus on their given situations for control, appears almost plain and expressionless, but ironically, such “expressionlessness” could be considered a “unique individual expression” attained through a long period of intense practice and concentration. In other words, the expressionless looks on their faces are in a way a unique expression of an individual awaiting his or her uncertain future. Therefore, the “expression of thought” of an individual performer, for whom “resemblance” (with the past or others) does not exist, is an active and spontaneous expression of emotion that occurs when he or she self-consciously exercises intense concentration and control in the most uncertain situations. Under these circumstances, the “spontaneous” is no different from control itself.

On the other hand, the expression of thought or the look of control recalls the spontaneous movements of musical gestures created under such a controlled setting, and the ultimate aesthetic beauty they bring. In *Five Voices* (2017), Min Oh creates perfectly seamless, organic flow between the independent movements created by five performers. In the work, five independent choreographies – a pondering face looking into the camera, the silent back of a performer, a fluid hand gesture across the space, a hand building an orderly pile of sticks, and the sound of a pencil scratching – are played simultaneously in the same temporal narrative. Oh’s style of editing in the work imitates the process of composing music,

reflecting on musical structures and forms. In fact, the artist's unique musical gestures can be identified in the organic flow of movements between the individual elements. Oh first examines and interprets the movements of each individual performer to set her own plan on how to present them in her works. As mentioned above, Oh searches for performers who immerse themselves in the performance, becoming a "body in performance," and examines them closely, while training herself to become the subject and object of control herself (as she had in her role as the stop-motion filmmaker) just like the performers. To elaborate, Oh examines the "expression of thought" on individual performers to identify a certain order in the process that could be translated into musical language and gestures, and from those, she in turn develops and achieves aesthetic value in their spontaneous and organic structures. Without looking further, Oh's *ABA* project is a key example of such effort.

Now let's turn to Hyungkoo Lee's *Face Trace*. Introduced in Lee's solo exhibition in 2012, *Face Trace* appears to reference traditional bust sculptures. In fact, *Face Trace* is the third in a series of "face" projects that Lee has created over the years. Following the headgear in *The Objectuals* and the imaginary skeletons in *ANIMATUS*, *Face Trace* proposes new face types based on physiognomy. In the series, the artist introduces twelve different face types. Layering his own interpretation and context over the basic framework of physiognomy and phrenology, the artist once again attempts to bring non-existent beings into existence. In the series, Lee identifies five types of skulls according to the general categories of race – Caucasian, Mongolian, Malayan, Negroid and American – as the starting point of his work. Using human skull structures as the last traces of existence, Lee "backtraces" unidentified pieces of bones, just as a laboratory researcher at a natural history museum would imagine and trace the existence of some extinct species. To restore the missing pieces of the bone structures, however, Lee creates molds of his own facial features to reconstruct the parts into physiognomic models. Over the years, the artist has frequently engaged his own body in his work, either in altered forms or strictly trained forms to perform in a certain way. In the same way, the artist applies his own face in this series to create new

physiognomic models. However, despite the artist's strict emphasis on scientific analysis and technique to maintain the visual credibility of his works, the final product of Lee's works always remains distant from reality, just as in the visual hypnosis of his personified cartoon characters, or his illusive devices that alter the body in a split second right before our eyes.

Hyungkoo Lee's oeuvre continues to trace the anatomy of familiar beings to recreate the unfamiliar, or invent devices for the body to integrate itself with other objects as a way to train and transform itself into non-existent beings. In his 2014 solo exhibition *MEASURE*, Lee created a series of wearable instruments entitled *Instruments 01-02 (2014)* to attune the body to a new order. In a video work of the same title, the artist explores the definition of the word "measure" – ascertaining distance, rhythm, scale and pattern – as he analyzes and attunes his body to a new order of movements. Wearing his device *Instrument 01*, the artist is seen in the video freely roaming across an open space like a horse or a dressage rider. As in his earlier work *A Device for Walking Backwards*, the artist pushes his body to impossible limits outside his comfort zone and strictly trains his body to adjust itself to unfamiliar conditions. Like the great sculptors of the past who tried to highlight the beauty of the human body through idealization, Hyungkoo Lee is perhaps trying to achieve beauty by escaping the familiar, and realizing all possible forms of the body, even under conditions that are impossible to control – as he has shown in *Gallus*, a massive landscape created by amassing chicken bones in the exhibition space.

4. Name

It seems that once again, he has dreamed of a landscape – a landscape of massive and familiar movements, but nonetheless unidentifiable. Lee eventually names the landscape *Kiamkoysek (2018)*, which appears for the first time in this *Title Match* exhibition. In the work, the artist creates massive bones reproduced after a human skeleton, and presents an unexpected landscape by expanding them into an abstract bundle. Focusing on major joints of the human body, Lee applies multiple instruments to

recreate the possible movements of the bone structures. Magnified tenfold in size, the bone structures create a steep landscape through the movements and directionality created by the ropes, pulleys and metal beams that support them. To this day, Hyungkoo Lee continues to call his studio “HK LAB,” recognizing it as a valid laboratory. It was in this laboratory that he created his *ANIMATUS* series by tracing and imagining the bone structures of non-existent species with meticulous detail, as well as *The Objectuals* series, in which he produced devices for extreme body alteration without anatomical intervention. Through this process, he continued to experiment by situating his own body through various hypotheses and conditions, ultimately examining the ways the body adjusts and renews itself under such circumstances. Therefore, it is in this context that Lee’s new work *Kiamkoysek* could be understood as an overarching work which encompasses his entire oeuvre – an abstract landscape created by Lee, in the style of Lee, and in reference to Lee.

Meanwhile, though Hyungkoo Lee employs the metaphor of *Kiamkoysek* (meaning “oddly shaped rocks and stones” in Korean) to describe his abstract landscape, the title ultimately hides a kind of unexpected humor unique to the artist. In the work, the artist presents an abstract landscape which appears to be something between a human body and landscape, or nature and artifact, and then sets up his visual logic to convince the viewers that the landscape could in fact be *Kiamkoysek*. The “I” who stands in front of this vast landscape, magnified tenfold compared to the actual body, is forced to trace the course of a path set by another while having to reacquaint oneself with his or her own body. In this context, the title of the work carries significant meaning. Pronounced *kee-am-koy-sek*, the title *Kiamkoysek* is a transcription of the Korean word “oddly shaped rocks and stones” using the Yale romanization system developed by Yale University for their publication of Korean-English dictionaries. The system analyzes words according to their morphophonemic structures consistent with the written spelling of vowels and consonants in Korean. It is through this system that the original word takes on a new phonetic value (one different from the native Korean pronunciation) which

is then visualized in the work, demonstrating a cycle in which the subject continues to transform endlessly outside itself through new frameworks. It is in this process that Hyungkoo Lee's logic and humor intimately connect with each other.

On the other hand, the overarching theme of Min Oh's new works is the "Étude." Although an étude is a type of musical composition unto itself, its purpose is to train the techniques of the performer, and therefore it requires a high level of skill and technical mastery. Whereas Oh examined the body (of both performers and audiences) in relation to music and dance performance from multiple perspectives in her earlier works, in her new "Étude" series, she closely examines the technical training processes of musical performers and the ways they deal with or escape their own sensory experience. In the artist's notes, Oh also focuses on the distance between the performer's body and their instruments, on which she explains, "In a musical performance, the 'physical distance' between the 'sound' and the 'performer's body' depend on the performing instrument." From my understanding, this statement reveals that her interest focuses on how freely the performer could control the instrument like his or her body, depending on how and how close the instrument, as an object outside the body, is placed in relation to the body (and the senses). In other words, it seems as though the artist is exploring how a performer could perceive his or her body (and senses) in a kind of overtly spontaneous state, apart from the body. This is perhaps the central question which Oh proposes in her *Étude for Étude*.

Étude No. 1 (2018) examines how techniques acquired through long periods of "practice" leave their trace on the "trained body" and how they are perceived by the performers. In the long process of making the unfamiliar become familiar, the performers find themselves in a continuous cycle of change in their senses. In both *Étude for Étude (music performance)* (2018) and *Étude for Étude (dance composition)* (2018), Oh focuses on the actual process and format of training, on how spontaneous sensations and technique are experienced inside and outside of the performer's body. As Hyungkoo Lee continues to repeatedly reference his own works, Min Oh revisits and reexamines key concepts and frameworks

of her oeuvre, while expanding their meaning in new ways. Therefore, this *Title Match* between Min Oh and Hyungkoo Lee, or Hyungkoo Lee and Min Oh, should not be seen as a competition between the artists and their artistic accomplishments, but rather an opportunity for the two well-seasoned artists to challenge themselves and surpass their own achievements.