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Movement as Material



Portrait of MIN OH. Photo by Kim S. Gon. Courtesy Elle.

MIN OH



MIN OH, *Daughter*, 2011, detailed stills from single-channel film installation, six-channel audio, loop: 4 min 6 sec. Courtesy the artist.

BY ANDY ST. LOUIS

When American composer John Cage disrupted the historical discourse of Western music in the 20th century by challenging basic assumptions of composition and performance, he precipitated a fundamental reconsideration of musical linguistics. One pillar of his legacy is an understanding of music not as a language of tonal harmony, but of configurations of sounds generated through specific movements of the performer's body. As such, the work of contemporary composers can be seen as designing sequences of movements that yield patterns of sound—at least, that's the way that Min Oh thinks about it.

The Amsterdam-based Korean artist's multilayered film practice triangulates multiple approaches to movement using media that are durational in nature—namely, music, dance, and film—to probe the mutable syntaxes of performance. In doing so, Oh examines the relationships that link creators' intentions to performers' interpretations and audiences' perceptions as heterogeneous representations of the same expressive impulse, highlighting the duality of control and uncertainty when working with musicians or dancers. Her works take shape as visual mediations on the communicative potential of movement as a proxy for the passage of time, with an acute sensitivity to transience and immateriality that gives rise to films as beautiful as they are meticulous. "Time is irrevocable and sound is invisible," she remarks, but music proposes "a language in which to perceive, construct, convey, and remember something invisible and ungraspable."

An unorthodox career trajectory informs the creative considerations that underpin Oh's practice: she earned a bachelor's degree in piano performance but opted out of a professional music career. "I thought that life as a pianist was very limited," she recalls. To expand her outlook, she enrolled in an illustration class before quitting piano and eventually pursuing an MFA in graphic design from Yale University a decade later. It was there that Oh's musical background resurfaced as a conceptual starting point for experiments in time-based media. In her initial encounters with video, she recognized its potential for manipulating time in a manner reminiscent of the way that piano performance had once allowed her to "sculpt a sense of time" through her body, but without the limitations of Western music's tradition-bound classical canon.

In her early video works, Oh experiments with imposing order amid elements of indeterminacy, an imperative borne out of her "fear of powerlessness or, in other words, 'not being aware' of what

is happening." *Daughter* (2011), a key work from this period, establishes an environment of confusion by interweaving audio and visual elements: a young girl discovers a cabinet full of rotating ceramic cups and jugs that produce a droning, ominous clamor. Although unnerved at first, the girl appears to ultimately gain power over the menacing din by embracing the chaos, jumping and skipping to generate a pulse that the clattering earthenware follow in unison. Succinct and spellbinding, the four-minute film exhibits the genesis of what would become a core concept in Oh's distinct oeuvre: the role of the body in regulating interrelationships of sound and movement.

As she searched for alternate time-based approaches to rendering these concerns, Oh looked to standardized forms of musical composition as methodologies for structuring her works. Initially, she adapted a format from the piano repertoire of her youth: the sonata (notated as ABA'), which Oh considers "the most fundamental form in musical composition." Works by Joseph Haydn, Franz Schubert, and Sergey Prokofiev furnished temporal frameworks for her film *Sonatas* (2016), in which she uses the camera to carefully frame the choreographed movements of water vessels, plants, bits of cloth, and other quotidian objects, allowing viewers "to see images through musical scores and listen to pieces of music played with visual images," according to curator Haeju Kim. Through this interrogation of formal language in classical music, Oh drew closer to attaining the expanded conceptual potential of time itself as a compositional material.

An inevitable corollary to this broadening inquiry was Oh's growing interest in musical scores as physical manifestations of temporal structures, which provoked a series of conversations with composers, choreographers, and video artists that she compiled into a book, *Score by Score* (2017). As her works increased in complexity, Oh's own scores have become indispensable to the films they orchestrate. Her manuscripts fuse the languages of graphic design and music notation, establishing the parameters for performances using diagrams and statements in addition to musical staves. These scores also undergo continuous revision in response to changes in performers' subjectivities as well as the artist's own perception of the works. Despite her proclivity for precision, Oh subverts the archetype of the solitary composer by working closely with performers, allowing her scores to operate as a "game between predetermination and indetermination."

In keeping with the spirit of collaboration, her works often concentrate on the experience of performers themselves. For instance, in the film *A Sit* (2015), a solitary dancer runs through a piece of choreography in her head while seated on a chair. The silence is punctuated by the dancer's rhythmic breathing, mumbled mental cues, tapping of feet, and rustling of clothing—externalized sounds that reflect the performer's internal rehearsal process. "Performance is being aware," Oh states, noting that while dancers demonstrate a keen sensitivity to the "here and now" through their bodies, musicians "should also be aware of the conceptual space between sound and the body," despite their lack of training in this regard. She explored such skillsets in a pair of films, *Étude for Étude (Music Performance)* and *Étude for Étude (Dance Composition)* (both 2018), which show musicians vocalizing a composition without their instruments and a dancer executing a choreography with only her eyes, respectively. The two films foreground the flow of time through restrained bodies and suggests an answer to the question of how performances can be realized in the absence of conventional means of expression.

The inquisitive impulse at the heart of Oh's practice has since propelled her works into increasingly abstract, discursive domains, with her largest project to date centering on composing, playing, and listening to sounds that are difficult or impossible to hear. Her solo exhibition "Invitee, Attendee, Absentee," held in 2020 at Platform-L Contemporary Art Center in Seoul, presented a suite of five musical compositions (*Absentee*, 2019) that propose different avenues for realizing situations such as hearing "sound not made but assumed to exist" or focusing on the involuntary physical reactions of a performer as they "listen" to a score without playing it. The performances of these pieces are captured in a film (*Attendee*, 2019) that was projected during a live event (*Invitee*, 2019) at the art center, in which the position of the projected image constantly changed in relation to the audience, imbuing the film with performative agency. Together, the three intertwined works explore uncharted territory in the realm of contemporary music by challenging performers and audiences alike with alternative modes of sound and movement—all while emphasizing continuous experimentation over conclusive results. "These questions cannot be answered by a single set of answers because the answers will change every time, depending on what the score is for," she explains. "Not knowing is very important."