

Min Oh: Towards
the Perfection of the Unrehearsable, and Towards
the Rehearsal of the Imperfectible

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1.

Minimal movement. A minimal event. A minimal story. Minimal characters and backdrop. We might as well summarize an instant understanding of Min Oh's works into an impression of such 'minimality.' The series of *Études* presented as new works in this exhibition does not deviate so far from this principle of minimality. What are these minimal components here to (not) tell us?

To begin, I'd like to point out that these minimal elements do not boil down to a fundamental rejection of a potential narrative. Rather, Oh's works are closer to reinventing a distinctive (non)narrative of video works in visual arts in a way that film in general cannot. In other words, her video works of minimal elements would be classified as an absence of narrative on the one hand, but by aiming for a square refusal of such a convention on the other, they explore the potential of the (new) (non)narrative video. Above all, the time that runs through the video becomes more and more acute, and the audience witness a sharpening of their sensation when clear features of the narrative are deleted and only the indeconstructible elements remain. These are the very problem of the body and the meta-body of the video medium. Such is concentrated in the form of performance/video in Oh's works.

2.

Oh's videos are linked with performance in any number of ways. They are films of a performance, or to be more precise, constructions of performance in view of video. At times, the actual performance outside the video derives from the video work, operating like a kind of series.

Such an intimate relationship between video and performance sometimes invites a certain misunderstanding of Oh's work. There could arise a criticism that the spontaneity, freedom and presence of the body commonly considered crucial in performance are suppressed 'within' the performance of her video. For instance, to what extent do the movements of Lyon Eun Kwon, the lone performer in *A Sit* (2015), manifest her capability as a choreographer and a dancer? However, such questions are misguided. It is the moment that the

performer merely stays seated on a chair and repeats very simple motions at best, with all the potential for spontaneous movement suspended for a moment, such that the very posture of sitting on a chair provokes a strange ‘thrill’ from the conditions of confinement.

From the perspective of the general narrative, the origin of this thrill is trivial and weak without comparison. The way the top of the performer’s head seems to touch the white shelf that stretches out horizontally across the gray wall of the backdrop as if they belong to the same plane, and how the performer’s head causes an optical illusion of balancing a stick on top of itself, just barely separated from the line. The formative segmentation and rearrangement of the workings of the body, objects and space give shape to this work’s thrilling performance.

If this is so, then is the performer’s body merely one element among many others that constitute the formativeness? This kind of question, too, is the result of a hasty prejudice. Indeed, the real ‘thrill’ of this work is based upon the presupposition that the performer, incorporated as a part of the formativeness, embodies a spontaneity that enables a break from the control at any time. (As proof, the performer leaves his/her body unto the humming as an expression from within as opposed to dancing under duress.)

In other words, the ‘performance’ of *A Sit* is not satisfied by the calculation of the performance nor from the camera’s angles, that strictly regulate the objectified performer. It is realized in the collision and combination of the performance’s presence and the camera’s regulatory angles. All kinds of control bring about a symptom of deviation. The reality of control is silently in operation from all such spontaneity. This paradoxically sensitive revelation traverses the entirety of Oh’s work.

3.

Although the reason behind a certain misreading of Oh’s works lies in the refusal to pursue what we understand as conventional virtues of performance, this very quality serves as a creative and outstanding element that sets them apart from any other performance-video. The artist does not

produce a 'performance-video' that effectively captures the performance that stands outside of the video; she creates performances of the kind that are only possible in video, or 'video-performances' that are engendered only through the clash of the performance inside of the video and the video itself.

Before further discussion on this (also, deciding to exclude for the moment a certain difficulty that occurs when only the performance is extracted from the video-attached-performance that takes place only in video, or when an actual performance is carried out), we should first have a glimpse into the titles of Oh's works.

Of course, what stands out from the list of Oh's works is that most of the titles consist of concise (combinations of) nouns. What's more, these nouns do not express any passion or emotion, nor do they identify a social and political context, nor a particular time. They are merely the names of roles, actions, musical forms and participating performers. They are explicit words, seemingly designating the minimum element of the work, irreducible to anything else. These words make no room for any further poetic imagination or potential dispute.

From a certain angle, they make us assume a refusal of language along with the fact that figures from Oh's work are usually deprived of lines, at most maybe humming. (A child's mouth shut tight in comparison with the 'noisy objects' from *Daughter*, one of her earlier works, for instance.) However, overly assuring words at times trigger a fundamental dispute for its very naturalness. For example, a structure of *Audience and Performers* (2017) that sets the audience as the subject of appreciation against the performer, who is the object of appreciation as well as the subject of creation, seems to be appropriate and natural. But is it really?

Are the figures that play the audience in *Audience* not performers? Are they subjects or objects of the gaze? What are they, posited as the audience, looking at? (Judging by the structure set up within the video, what they see is the process of preparation before the performance of *Performers*, which is a scene a conventional 'audience' has no access to, or the actual audience who are wandering around the gallery.)

What kind of choreography could be created by the audience through the movement of the gaze?

On the other hand, some question the restricted movement, especially of the choreographer and performer among the three characters of distinct occupation – the artist, choreographer and performer – in *Performers*. However, as the title indicates, three people, each identified in reality as the performer of a separate role, all become equal ‘performers’ within the work. Trivial movements that might have slipped away from their bodies when working together, or movements that are not ‘full-scale,’ or even closer to a halted state, themselves become a choreography and a performance in the arrangement and rhythm of time and through intricate repetition and intersection.

Then, out of the blue, the concept of the ‘performance/performer’ runs off course from convention. Now, a performance does not (only) include the trained movements of a professional dancer, but (also) incorporates something that occurs in the flow of spacetime through any body. The point is not the movement’s structure of a highly trained professional performer, but the (re)arrangement of the body that penetrates spacetime, or the eyes of the audience that perceive and restructure them. In this way, the body and movement that would not have made it to the stage are put on stage through, and as, a video.

The attempt to expand and redefine the layers of the performer and the performance was already boldly explicit from *Marina, Lukas and Myself* (2014), where Oh’s style began to be clearly established. Here, the delicate dance of Marina (who took the role as a performer in the conventional sense) becomes a moment of performing equal to Lukas’ performance of the piano piece of Steve Reich with a look of extreme concentration. The two kinds of performances both consist of control over a trained body and the deviation of expression. In particular, the engagement of the third axis, where Oh herself makes an appearance and arranges a series of hexahedrons in stop-motion, declares how the fundamental essence of the performance is the temporal tension constituted by the variability and progress of the sculptures.

In a similar manner, *Youngwoo Lee, Shinae An & Elodie Mollet* (2015) shows us how the bodies of a pianist practicing Chopin, a vocalist who sings a variation of it, and a martial artist in training miss and meet one another, and form a harmony. In this case, a kind of 'hexahedron-diagram,' which organizes into one and then scatters the disparate performances, sometimes withdraws behind the color planes that cover the screen.

4.

All the gallery spaces are potential stages where a performance could take place at any time. In particular, videos installed in the gallery space essentially insinuate the advent of a performance from outside of the video. I intend to declare such an argument as relevant in any other video/exhibition. This argument, possibly controversial depending on one's own position, however, proves to be fairly clear when applied to Oh. I anticipate an opportunity for the performance from the video works to be realized outside of the video at any moment. This is not only true of works where video and performance are actually coupled together like *ABA Video* and *ABA Performance* (2016) or *Idea* and *Rehearsal* (2017).

We know that this does not merely end up a sheer potential when the precision in the installation of the video is manifest. Installation of video for Oh is not a follow-up process that brings about a selective and additional effect to the (appreciation of) video, but at times becomes something critical to the point where the (understanding of) video itself is fundamentally reconsidered. *Marina, Lukas and Myself*, installed in the shape of a disconnected '□' in *Young Korean Artists 2014* (2014, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Gwacheon), and the video installation of *Youngwoo Lee, Shinae An & Elodie Mollet*, which crossed at right angles and drew diagonal lines in *Trio* (2015, D Project Space), were such cases. In particular, viewing *Audience and Performers* from *Moving/Image* (2017, Arko Art Center) would be a completely different experience from appreciating the same works in *2018 Title Match: Hyungkoo Lee vs. Min Oh*.

When shown at Arko Art Center, *Audience and Performers* were projected facing each other on opposite walls. In the middle, there were chairs for the audience with headsets on

them. Thus, this work's unit of perception consisted of at least three steps. Viewing and listening to only *Audience* from one chair, switching to another chair facing the other way to view and listen to only *Performers*, and taking a bird's-eye view in general over a kind of a stage that includes both videos, the audience seated in between, and the gallery space. In this way, the relationship between the 'audience' and the 'performer' shifts constantly. In *Performers*, the definition of the 'performer' is modified and redefined by three people in different roles. On top of this, there are 'performers' playing the 'audience' in *Audience*, and the 'audience-performers' perceived in the eyes of another audience standing far beyond when the audience are sitting on a white chair, set like a stage, viewing the videos. Intricately traversing the gazes, I, the subject of the gaze within the intersections of the gaze, could become a part of the work at any moment. The limits and objects of the work change with surprising flexibility, and questions are amplified when coupled with a seemingly dichotomous title indicating that everything is the 'audience and performers.'

For this very variability and flexibility, Oh edits the video in an extremely strict manner. Splitting and connecting cuts that constitute the video in minutes and seconds, the temporal arrangement is made to achieve arithmetic and sequential formative beauty. In these exhibitions, *Performers* and *Audience*, initially edited separately as individual videos, each undergo a physical division to become a three-channel video. Furthermore, a combination of quite different perspectives will result from stronger crossover. The 'preparation' process of the three 'performers' that had initially operated simultaneously would be demonstrated as a horizontal array in space instead of a sequential arrangement in time. The overwhelming presence of the 'audience' will confront them obliquely before suddenly occupying even the place of the performer, allowing variations of a different dimension.

5.

Judging by their titles, *Étude for Étude (music performance)* and *Étude for Étude (dance composition)*, presented for the first time in this exhibition, belong to the series of musical forms such as *Suite 1* (2012), *Sonatas* (2016), and *ABA Video* (2017).

I found it noteworthy that Oh does not make direct connections with the problem of sounds when it comes to musical forms as a basis for her video works. (This is another point where she is widely misunderstood.) Why does she not make the best out of the musical qualities if she has decided to bring in musical forms? (In a slightly different context, it is interesting how *Five Voices* (2017), where she begins to employ musical forms in full, incorporates polyphony while refusing to adopt a particular musical form.)

Possible speculations are as follows: musical forms for Oh, who was a piano major, are more of a template to weave together the passage of time than an object of appreciation in the form of a sound, and they serve at times as a perceptible object in the form of documentations or illustrations as well as a non-auditory object realized as a sound only through bodies ceaselessly bumping into one another. In other words, it may be that musical forms are at the same time something highly physical as well as a structural archetype of a certain (non)narrative.

What does it mean to employ music structurally? When a time-based work is called 'structural,' it would mean that the frame that stands among the detailed tissues that envelop the work, the soft or coarse skin, stiff hair and wet pores, is quite clearly perceptible. Such a frame has an inclination of becoming the foundational principle that assembles the work temporally. However, as seen from *ABA Video* and *ABA Performance*, Oh closely scrutinized the structure of the 1st movement of Rachmaninoff Piano Sonata No. 2 in 1st movement and converted each measure into totally different sensations. Each measure transformed according to the principle of visual form or quantitative size is no longer perceived as the frame that weaves time. Ultimately, the strict principle of 'A (exposition) – B (development) – A (recapitulation)' might seem like a MacGuffin that misleads us away from the structure that is actually entirely imperceptible.

Views may vary on the significance and efficiency of such attempts (especially when applied to performance, the questions may aggravate more so than in video), but one thing is clear: this is a statement of Oh's artistic ambition to search

for a new type of a principle of (non)narrative construction through the transference and transformation of sensation, so to speak.

The kind of 'étude' that the new works claim to be is fundamentally different from any other musical forms. For instance, as opposed to the sonata form, there is no such thing as a structure that constitutes the form itself from the beginning. In other words, there are blanks and ambiguous parentheses without an object of analysis. It may retreat to a private field with a declaration that it is a preliminary step for something that has not yet arrived, but at times it was considered a completed work with a purpose to be performed on stage after the age of romanticism. Basically, serving the purpose of obtaining skills to handle relevant mediums, it is full of desire for completion more than anything, while endlessly suspending the stage of completion.

Such a paradoxical form must have inevitably captivated Oh. On the one hand, the artist suspends her work to remain in some kind of rehearsal and preparation stage at all times, while on the other pursuing a perfectly controlled result more so than any other artist in order to realize such a preliminary stage and suspension. As 'étude' originally meant 'research,' an étude is a piece that experiments with techniques and sound that is not yet pioneered with the relevant instrument. In a sense, the entirety of Min Oh's work consists of 'études' that experiment with a new language to learn unknown fields yet to be explored, or more specifically, the relationship between performance and video, and construction of a (non)narrative. Among Oh's works, *Étude for Étude (music performance)* and *Étude for Étude (dance composition)* are videos presented as a departure of the designated series of the 'étude.' Practicing for practice, rehearsing for the rehearsal, and suspending suspension. Time spins in a spiral.

The fact that these videos are each made in collaboration with a composer and a choreographer is also noteworthy. Besides Min Oh's continued attempts to reciprocally cross music and dance in the realm of 'performing,' these collaborations are bound to be fundamentally different: to put it directly, the way a contemporary choreographer and

a composer of contemporary music in the field of art are completely different. What's more, there is a difference that cannot be overlooked between one genre where a form of 'étude' has been absent and another where it has firmly stood its ground. Thus, on the one hand, *Étude for Étude (music performance)* dealt with the problem of perspective (that perceives spacetime flowing slowly over the body, with the movement converging to 'dance' excluded) as an example of exploring the potential of an actual 'étude' in choreography. On the other hand, however, *Étude for Étude (dance composition)* must have demanded a transition of the practicing-subject that deconstructs a piece of music that a composer 'completed' in the form of an étude before the 'performer' takes over, rather than exploring a new realm of the étude in composition.

The two works are only the beginning of exploration on the form of the 'étude,' and we have little idea of how it will be realized in the future. Still, we can at least picture unexpectedly bright potentials (like the sunlight, temperature and scent of grass in the air from *Étude for Étude (dance composition)*, which is rare for Oh's work) when we cross one work over another from Oh's past journeys with the inherent contradiction of the form of the 'étude' in mind. György Ligeti admitted how his *Études* (1985–2004), composed over a long time, were created to complement his flaws in failing to become a master pianist, as he hadn't started early enough. This talented master says that he wanted to carry out a "transformation from incompetence to professionalism." The form of the 'étude' is defined elsewhere as follows: "Analysis of the technique's form through motion. Or disassembling a particularly difficult technique by means of repetition." Oh has extracted physicality from music and established a new performance/video language by exploring the disassembly of spacetime through the technique of repetition and attitude of suspension; she has now embarked on a rehearsal for another étude.