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Source *NJP Reader #1 Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology*, pp.58-59

Publisher Nam June Paik Art Center, Yongin

Contributions to an Artistic Anthropology: Haegue Yang

Colophon

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Final Editing Annette W. Balkema

Designer TEXT (Jin Jung, Han Jeong Hoon)

Published on 2010

Haegue Yang

Haegue Yang lives and works in Berlin and Seoul.

In 2009, Yang represented the Republic of Korea at the 53rd Venice Biennale and presented *Haegue Yang: Integrity of the Insider* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA. Other recent solo projects have taken place at Sala Rekalde, Bilbao; REDCAT, Los Angeles; and Portikus, Frankfurt.

The legacy of Nam June Paik continues to challenge art. Today, we think, imagine, and elaborate beyond what he has done, and this, directly and indirectly, is his achievement. For me, the most inspiring element of Nam June Paik is his “shapeless form” of reference manifested in his “singular” existence in a pre-globalized art world alongside his international career. In the context of an art-related discourse and the necessity to re-examine closely the complexity of today’s conception of medium-specificity, I believe that, in spite of a literal and even partially naive way of translating phenomena of life into an early video language, Nam June Paik’s complex work somehow survived and still fascinates through its vitality and its vivid voice.

In thinking about an artistic anthropology, I would like to introduce the notion of “unknown crowd” as a form of relation different from relational aesthetics’ “open crowd”. I do believe that many of my contemporaries are aware of how to imagine novel forms of “community” referring to unknown territories of the self as well as the other. Traditional definitions of anthropology refer to the holistic, global, comparative study of humans. Anthropology as an “holistic study” requires a complex perspective of multiple observations. Since the development of our society is to become more and more fragmented, a holistic study of humanity and civilizations would be valuable. Artists as thinkers in and commentators on societies are free to delve into the notion of holistic and its connections to science, ethics, politics, and other elements of society including the issue of medium.

Artistic knowledge production might look counter-productive in the context of economic or

scientific knowledge production. Due to its reflective nature not producing action into a given structure, artistic knowledge production is not an act of constructing, but the act of acknowledging the very moment of artistic practice. Therefore, I view artistic knowledge production as a non-constructive production of knowledge. Such a type of knowledge production, however, presumes an intellectual and political stance often originating in the awareness of injustice in society and including the right to be a “ghost” in society as a fundamental human condition.

The condition for the existence of human beings does not erase the trivial need for speaking and non-speaking about notions of vulnerability such as shame, poverty, insanity, ignorance, and incapability manifested as urgency and subject matter. Today’s globalization seems to no longer allow that vulnerability of both speaking and non-speaking, since even the sciences need to disguise the existential struggle as a human condition in the face of managerial thought. Unmasking that disguise could enable us to face each other’s naked “facelessness” as vulnerable beings, which seems to be the very subject for human beings to share with each other.

My understanding of a holistic anthropology as subversive makes me believe that anthropology could help to rethink the shadow side of humanity without erasing the right to vulnerability. Artistic practices which always refuse singular, rigid concepts - which might be called the very concept of art - but rather prefer continuous movement, could be considered a struggle against the reductionistic tendencies against humanity. Instead of hiding behind the never-ending debate about the death of ideology and idealism, I want to cling to unexplainable contradictions as a necessary element of the human condition.