

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA)

Interview

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- Interviewer: Jiyeon Jeong
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- Recorded and transcribed by Youngshin Yook (AKAA Research Fellow 2022-2023)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Jiyeon Jeong (JJ): I am pleased to interview you today as a researcher and colleague who has been following your work. How have you been?

YS Song (YS): Hello. I am so happy to have this opportunity to talk more with you, JJ, through this interview. We met at the Clayarch Gimhae Museum during the pandemic through the exhibitions "on/off in between; movement for dialogue" and "Invisible and Existent" . I appreciate that we are connected again through this interview.

JJ: Thank you, I appreciate it too. I have been keenly following your work for quite a long time and am one of the colleagues who understands your work well. However, today I would like to ask you a few questions about you and your work for those who are less familiar with you. Before we jump into the conversation, could you give a brief introduction about yourself and your work?

YS: Sure, I was born and raised in Busan, and now I work as a media artist in New York. I create participatory works that utilize technology and interaction as materials, with the audience becoming an integral part of the project. I often favor non-visual materials over visual ones. I showcase my work not only in institutions like museums and galleries but also have a keen interest in exploring spaces beyond these conventional venues, experimenting with various approaches accordingly. One of my representative works is the "Invisible Sculptures" series, sculptures that cannot be seen with the eyes but can be experienced through other senses. I create stages where the audience becomes the performer, projects that combine research, education, and art, and I engage in various works and activities as an educator. Currently, I am an assistant professor at the ITP/IMA (Interactive Telecommunications Program/Interactive Media Arts) at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, where I teach, conduct research with students, and more.

JJ: In your introduction, you mentioned many interesting points. However, first, I would like to ask about your approach to technology. In Korea and the United States, new



works of art that utilize new technologies are being continuously introduced. I believe these works are fostering new discourses previously unseen. Amidst this contemporary art trend, your work seems to take a slightly different approach compared to other pieces that utilize technological media. I am eager to hear more about your thoughts on technology and art.

YS: The first time I engaged with digital technology was in middle school. At that time, web design was a burgeoning concept, and there were numerous captivating websites. Driven by the desire to create my own, I self-taught HTML and JavaScript, which are the building blocks of web design. Lacking formal guidance, I would print the entire source code of websites in a tiny font, cramming eight rows onto a single page, to pore over them discreetly beneath my textbooks. This curiosity eventually led me to undertake small-scale projects, crafting unique websites. During my college years, I majored in Library and Information Science and Design, with a special focus on user research within information science—specifically, how people interact with and utilize information. My professional experience includes an UX researcher at Naver, a leading tech company. Although this period allowed me to deepen my engagement with technology, I grew increasingly discontent with its limitations to the confines of a screen. Moreover, the corporate environment often meant that technology was harnessed primarily for the company's efficiency. That's when I figured out I was really aiming for something more in the art world.

In a way, I have always been very curious about technology and enjoyed using it to create something. However, I also have some resistance. While I embrace and try new technologies that enable me to create new things as an artist, I'm more conservative with technology in my personal life, like with my cellphone, using only what's essential.

Thinking about this dichotomy within my work, take for instance the time I was an artist-in-residence at the Museum of Art and Design in New York. They provide a workspace for artists, and it's a unique setup where the museum visitors don't just view



exhibitions; they also interact with the artists and engage with works in progress. Watching the visitors, I realized that they vary greatly. Every day, there are a few who are more intrigued by the creation process of the work rather than the piece itself—the experience it offers, or the emotions it evokes. They're curious about what's inside, the technology used, and its operation. Those discussions are stimulating, but they also highlighted for me how technology can sometimes overshadow the artwork's concept or message. Before the technology becomes so flashy and gives the impression of "Oh, this is technology," I prefer an approach where one's curiosity is piqued and a connection with the piece is formed without technology becoming a barrier. Also, Human emotions and thoughts are soft, ambiguous, and flowing, whereas digital technology is often perceived as binary, just zeros and ones—like steps. Instead of depicting it in such a stark manner, I endeavor to make technology more pliable, akin to molding clay. As current digital media artworks tend to highlight technology more prominently, my approach might come across as distinct to some viewers.

JJ: As you mentioned, I perceive technology in your work as a useful tool to engage more people with art, even though it fundamentally stems from "technology." Thus, your work often fosters a unique relationship with the audience. In your pieces, the audience may be referred to as "viewers," but not always. They are simultaneously observers and participants, and in instances like "Thought Sculptures," they become the art itself. This has led me to consider that perhaps the true "viewer" of your work is you, the artist. Could you share your thoughts on this?

YS: I've never thought about it in that way, so it seems like a very fresh perspective, and I couldn't agree more. When interaction itself becomes an artistic tool, the events that occur between people, or between a person and an object, or between the environment and a person, can evolve into an artistic experience. So, I often weave these moments of encounter into my work.

Also, back when I was conducting user research, the essence of design methodology revolved around observing and understanding people. I believe those elements are still deeply ingrained in my practice. The most thrilling part of creating a work is when I have a prototype or a finished piece and I observe people's reactions to it. Sometimes, I place the piece somewhere and watch from a distance how people interact with it. Or, when I have an exhibition, I spend a lot of time at the venue, watching the visitors.

For me, these observations are crucial. Through them, I meet people, uncover aspects of my work I hadn't realized before, and gather ideas for future projects. These observations and ideas have once been formalized in works like "Invisible Sculptures," where participants create sculptures using sound, smell, and heat. They perceive and envision them through sensory integration and then shape them in clay, in a piece I call "Participatory Sculptures." Because the sculptures are invisible, the resulting forms are varied yet subtly similar. I've come to understand these sculptures as collective interpretations of the invisible ones. Watching these collections is akin to my usual practice of observing diverse viewers, but this time it's through the tangible form of clay sculptures. I recall an exhibition at the Clayarch Gimhae Museum where thousands of these sculptures were assembled. I still have those 'embodied reactions of the audience' and am trying to analyze them.

On a recent project during the pandemic, titled "*Are You There?*" with NYU law school, I experimented with how much personal information can be divulged by simple sensors not governed by privacy laws. For two months, I tracked my sleeping, eating, working, and bathing habits with basic sensors and used the data to create a spatial sound installation with multiple speakers that played the sounds of my daily activities. Visitors, whom I had only seen briefly through Zoom or in large groups and never really talked to or met, were invited to enter my personal space and interpret my daily routines based on the sounds and data. After spending 30 minutes like this, their first real encounter with me was in the kitchen. I wanted to observe these interactions, both their reactions

and mine, in an unexpected way. All these aspects, they filter into my work and intentions.

JJ: Sure, that seems like a sufficient answer. In addition, the "Participatory Sculptures" you mentioned at the Clayarch Gimhae Museum are well-rested in the storage. Listening to you, a thought came to mind. When I meet various artists, some start their stories from their inner selves or from within, while others, like you, start their stories from an interest in certain people, relationships, or society. Many contemporary artists often talk about socially engaged art or the sociology of art. On the other hand, one of the frequently discussed topics these days is the counterargument to why art must necessarily address social issues. You have also participated in various public program projects and have introduced works that go beyond the white cube and directly enter into diverse groups of people. Could I hear your thoughts on this aspect?

YS: When works are shown in museums, it seems that the people who can access art are limited. Especially in New York, where I mainly work, the admission fee to enter a museum is quite expensive, and although galleries can be entered for free, there seems to be some unspoken pressure to enter. It feels like you have to dress well and appear to carry a sense of sophistication to walk through their doors. I've always been aware of these barriers. In the midst of that, the pandemic hit, and it was a very extreme situation at that time. Suddenly, I had to pack my things and go home from the place where I was working at the school. I initially thought it would just be for a week when I returned home, but it stretched into years. With my studio inaccessible and exhibitions getting canceled, I found myself confined to a small room surrounded by various materials and unfinished works. During this time, as I pondered over how to utilize this period, I decided, "Why not take my work outside?" In my "*Invisible Sculptures*" series, there's a piece that involves a pedestal and an 'invisible' sculpture above it, which can be perceived through touch. I made a cart, loaded it with electrical devices and everything, moved it through the stairs, and took it out to parks and streets. At that time, public spaces were becoming quite deserted. People were scared and not coming out. But

occasionally, some would venture out for a breath of fresh air, and those who had no choice but to live in parks or on the streets would stumble upon my work. They interacted with it, found joy, and we had conversations. That experience made me realize that I had been boxed into the museum space. Also it seemed that new possibilities [were emerging] and the audience was expanding by coming out like this. I also felt like I was finally doing something meaningful as an artist.

Having that experience once, my feelings were quite distinct from those I've had with other exhibitions. It left me thinking I should venture out more often. Subsequently, during the exhibition at the Clayarch Gimhae Museum, JJ, we organized a public program you named brilliantly as "Out of the Museum," where I had the chance to interact with the residents of Gimhae in various locations. In New York, I conducted several projects outside, either independently or with organizations, in places like Brooklyn, Union Square, and Columbus Park. Over the course of about a year, I engaged in numerous outdoor projects. Each one required a considerable amount of energy, but in return, they energized me and resulted in many enjoyable encounters.

Now, I've started to integrate these spaces into the work process itself. For instance, in a recent project aimed at collecting and archiving the sounds of the endangered Sunken Forest in New York, part of our process involved taking the recordings to 14th Street—a bustling area—and inviting people to sit and listen, informing them about the project and the forest. When foot traffic was low, we even played the sounds in an elevator leading to an overpass. In a city like New York, where the unexpected is the norm, people were intrigued rather than shocked. They'd ask, "What's that sound?" sparking conversations about the forest, environmental issues, and generating feedback. It seems this approach is becoming a natural part of my practice, and it was similarly reflected in the "Are You There?" project I did in my living space. It's become clear to me that art should not be confined to museums, and I'm actively trying to put this belief into action.



JJ: As I also experienced together with you, listening to your story, it seems that you have conducted participatory works through various spaces and places, and have met a wide range of audiences with works that utilize more diverse senses for the viewers to experience. By the way, you mentioned earlier that there were many fun episodes. Are there any particularly memorable or interesting stories you'd like to share?

YS: The memory that comes to mind is from when I wheeled the cart out to Brooklyn. There was this one person who approached the project in a very noisy area. The project allowed you to wear headphones and, by moving your hands over a platform, you could listen to sounds that changed with the position of your hands, helping you sense the shape of the sound sculpture. This person was so immersed in the experience that they stayed for over 20 minutes, even with people waiting around. With their eyes closed, completely absorbed, their hand movements were so graceful. Watching them, I felt like, even though I created the piece, it wasn't mine anymore, and that moment of personal discovery was precious to me.

Also, last year at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., I presented "Two Subtle Bodies," where participants wear cloak-like garments fitted with sensors. It's designed to let two strangers meet non-verbally, sensing each other's energy through sound and vibration that changes with their distance and interaction. It was initially for strangers, but I saw all sorts of people trying it. There were couples who spent a long time with it, showing such intense expressions—surprised, then sad, then joyful. One couple came up to me afterwards, in tears, saying that the experience made them feel close yet vulnerable, as if they were sharing their inner selves. They were about to get married and were nervous about whether their 'auras' would match, but they found they created beautiful music together, which they couldn't do with others. It was a moment that affirmed their love. They were such a cute couple.

And then there's the exhibition JJ organized, "Invisible and Existent" You managed to invite members from the Gimhae Visually Impaired Association, which I know wasn't



easy. Initially, they were doubtful, having been to museums where they couldn't fully engage or felt like just a media spectacle. But their actual experience turned out to be meaningful—they took it seriously, really enjoyed it, and had great conversations. As they left, they took JJ's hand and expressed a wish for more such experiences. That response was very touching and reaffirmed the potential of these experiences to reach and resonate with more people. It was incredibly meaningful.

JJ: Yes, it was incredibly meaningful for me as well. Actually, when I reflect on it, I consider the "Invisible Sculptures" series to be a significant milestone or pivot in your body of work, at least from my perspective. That leads me to some further questions about this series. If your initial works were more about the visual outcomes of specific actions, it appears that with "Invisible Sculptures," you began to explore beyond the visual realm, engaging other senses like hearing and touch. I'm curious about any specific events or motivations that prompted this shift towards interacting through a wider range of senses.

YS: As you mentioned, in the beginning, my work was more focused on visual elements, especially light. I created playful, interactive pieces like a light bulb that followed me around, a light that would gradually illuminate by moving individual rice grains, and a mirage responsive to my body movements. Then, a turning point came when I learned about electromagnetic field theory from a scientist, complete with a huge explanatory poster. This theory posits that everything is made up of different wavelengths: solids like tables and chairs have low wavelengths due to their stable structures, liquids have their unique wavelengths, and various universal devices, like Wi-Fi or signals, are composed of differing wavelengths. On that poster, there was a tiny rainbow-colored section, representing the visual spectrum available to human sight—a minuscule part of the whole spectrum. I came to realize the enormity of the spectrum beyond what is visible to the eye—a realization that struck me at a time when the people were deeply engrossed with projections and large LED displays. This prompted

me to explore beyond these visual confines, despite it seeming somewhat audacious at the time.

It was a bit audacious because there are actually many tools to create visual things. There are many industry-standard tools like Processing, Open Frameworks, Touch Designer, and you can learn and utilize them. But there were hardly any non-visual tools. So I thought I should research this first. I collaborated with scientists and conducted various studies, leading to my first creation: a 3D sculpture made from Wi-Fi signals filling a large space. This exploration culminated in the "Invisible Sculptures" series, where sculptures made of sound, heat, thoughts, and more were placed atop ordinary-looking black platforms. These works engage senses beyond sight, like touch and hearing, or even synesthesia.

Another thing I realized while working with non-visual materials was how people interacted with the sculptures. After experiencing the invisible sculptures, I asked participants to recreate them using clay. This activity sparked conversations that were not about proving one's perspective over another's but rather about respecting and learning from the differences in what they perceived. It was a realization that "Invisible Sculptures" should be experienced collectively, fostering a collaborative and respectful atmosphere—a quality I've longed for in both my personal life and societal interactions. This experience deepened my fascination with non-visual materials, leading me to continue working with them, engage in educational efforts, and conduct further research into these unconventional tools.

JJ: From the perspective of having organized the first exhibition and showcasing "Invisible Sculptures" in Korea, what you just mentioned reminds me of a part of the preface I wrote for our exhibition. In it, I noted that with technological progression, we assumed the visual arts would be capable of presenting more and reaching a broader audience. Yet, ironically, the field has predominantly gravitated towards reinforcing its visual component. And I think your adventurous spirit in choosing a completely different

method in this trend has become an important cornerstone in shaping your identity as an artist. Linking this thought to your recent piece, "Two Subtle Bodies," what particularly intrigued me was the clothing—or perhaps more aptly, the cloak—integral to the work, serving simultaneously as part of the artwork and a functional device. Its visual aspect fascinated me, especially given that your projects have been increasingly oriented towards non-visual elements. Despite the primary focus on auditory and kinetic elements in "Two Subtle Bodies," the visual impact of the clothing is undeniable. Could you share any insights or stories related to this aspect of the work?

YS: When dealing with invisible materials, the principal challenge is enticing people to engage, to initiate the experience. With "Invisible Sculptures," I employed the 'pedestal'—a familiar base where artworks are typically displayed—as an introductory device. However, given its novelty, even during the exhibition at the Clayarch Gimhae Museum, staff assistance was essential to guide the audience, inadvertently creating additional layers of interaction. This led me to ponder how to facilitate an autonomous experience for the audience.

In "Two Subtle Bodies," the clothing, or cloak, acts as this gateway. Donning the cloak transforms participants, granting them a special sense of identity that emboldens even the most reserved individuals to engage more freely. My aim was to guide participants to a space where they could move uninhibitedly, focus inward, and connect with others through the creation of sound and vibrations. The cloak serves as both a preparatory tool for this journey and a medium of communication, signaling to observers the transformative process underway for the wearer. The cloak's color often sparks curiosity due to its vibrancy, yet it's devoid of a specific hue. It's iridescent, reflecting a spectrum of colors that change with the viewer's perspective, movement, and the angle of light—apt for a work centered on the concept of aura or human energy, where defining a single color felt restrictive. By choosing a color that embodies all yet none, and with its eye-catching, reflective quality, the cloak effectively marks the threshold between the participants' everyday selves and their new, experiential identities. This visual element

was thus integrated into the work, serving as both an invitation into the experience and a symbol of the transformative potential of art.

JJ: Listening to your story, it strikes me that you are an artist who generously opens up space for audience interaction, offering a variety of ways to engage. At the same time, your work encompasses a broad spectrum of elements. For instance, the participatory sculptures in the "Invisible Sculptures" series are crafted from colorless clay, capturing form without imposing specific colors or visuals. Similarly, the cloak in "Two Subtle Bodies" changes color based on the viewer's perspective, inviting the audience's imagination and personal narratives rather than presenting a definitive interpretation. Could you share more about how you cultivate this open-endedness in your work?

YS: That's an intriguing perspective, and I believe it will give me much to consider moving forward. Your observation seems spot-on. In both scenarios you mentioned, it appears I consciously chose not to make a definitive decision. Similarly, I believe in not providing direct answers to the audience during their interaction with my work. This inclination mirrors my personal traits and my approach to interpersonal relationships. I'm somewhat uneasy with the idea of creating a perfectly polished, costly object for display in a gallery, where it's admired and accepted as the definitive answer. As an artist, I recognize that everyone comes from diverse backgrounds, possesses unique personalities, and holds their own valuable insights and perspectives. I see no hierarchy in these differences and strive to respect them in my communication style.

This philosophy extends to my teaching. When I began my career in academia, my courses were densely packed with content, under the presumption that I needed to impart a certain volume of knowledge. However, as I've interacted more with students, I've gravitated towards leaving more room for open-ended exploration. Learning together and serving more as a facilitator than a traditional instructor, my pedagogical approach has evolved. It seems these reflections and adjustments in my teaching

philosophy are also mirrored in my artwork. I appreciate your highlighting this aspect; it's given me valuable insight to ponder.

JJ: Since you've brought up your role as a facilitator, it prompts me to ask this question. You're actively engaged in both the art world and academia, with a focus on the intersection of technology and art in both realms. It seems you're constantly in the position of mediator, bridging concepts, practices, and experiences between these two areas. How do these dual roles of artist and educator interrelate, and do your educational endeavors impact your artistic practice? I'm interested in hearing more about how these aspects of your career influence each other, especially in light of our previous discussion.

YS: Yes, my dual roles as an educator and artist significantly influence each other. Teaching feels very natural to me; it's an act of giving that doesn't prompt me to question my purpose, providing a strong sense of fulfillment. Regular interactions with students and witnessing their development instills a kind of routine that, in turn, energizes my own work and becomes a source of inspiration.

There are two main reasons I find myself constantly learning: one is to enhance my teaching, and the other is to acquire new techniques or understand concepts that can be applied in my art. The necessity to stay informed and continually learn in order to teach effectively often leads to the discovery of new tools or ideas for my work. Conversely, a deep engagement with my own artistic processes is crucial for teaching with authenticity. Merely relaying information from books isn't sufficient in our field; firsthand experience and creation are key. Thus, the interplay between my artistic and academic endeavors seems inevitable.

Our department encourages active engagement in one's field alongside teaching, making these roles inseparable. My current projects often emerge from this synergy, blending research and teaching. For example, I've seen how much my students use

acrylics for their projects, which prompted a research initiative to find environmentally friendly and health-conscious alternatives. This endeavor, which might not have arisen solely from my artistic practice, benefits from collaborative efforts with students and colleagues from various disciplines. This approach to combining education, art, science, and research fosters a culture of collective creativity and impact, a dynamic that would be less likely without my involvement in teaching.

JJ: Listening to what you've shared today, I was reminded of the three words that describe you on your website: immigrant, artist, and educator. It seems these aspects are deeply intertwined with your work. Listening to your story, it's clear to me that your work is fundamentally about relationships—between people, spaces and people, society and people, technology and people, the environment and people. You seem to explore these diverse connections. In the end, whether you're called an educator, an artist, or by any other title, you're essentially playing the role of a mediator between these elements. Given this perspective, are there any future projects you're excited about or aspects you'd like to delve into further, especially related to these themes?

YS: It seems that the alternative material research I mentioned earlier is something I can do well with my identity. Up to now, when people engage with art, it's usually just a one-time thing—like visiting an exhibition or being part of a performance. After that, it's hard to gauge the impact. I'm interested in extending those interactions. JJ, you mentioned something similar, and I really connected with it; it probably influenced me as well. I'm aiming to foster ongoing relationships. So, with the alternative material project, instead of just working with one student, I'm bringing in several students over time and talking to lots of people. It's all about building connections and maintaining those relationships as the work progresses.

The workshop I recently did at Leeum, discussing disability, the body, relationships, and boundaries using "Two Subtle Bodies" alongside artist Kim Won-young, producer Jang Soo-hye, and others, was more than just a one-off. Twelve participants got to

experience the work multiple times with different partners, create their own performances, etc., over a three-hour session spanning two days, deepening the relational aspect.

Looking back at the "on/off in between; movement for dialogue" project we did at Clayarch, which focused on building community, it now seems like a significant foundation. I'm keen on continuously building meaningful relationships.

And about being an immigrant, I recall starting "Invisible Sculptures" with a scent sculpture. I brought ripe durian to the bustling Grand Central Station in New York and stayed for a few hours. People's reactions varied—some politely avoided me, others cursed, some ran away, creating a void around me in that busy space. It was a performative piece about creating space with scent. Back then, I didn't know how "Invisible Sculptures" would evolve, but that experience, shaped by navigating invisible societal boundaries as an immigrant, is vivid in my memory. I want to dive deeper into projects that involve throwing myself into them, exploring these themes further.

JJ: To be honest, I believed I was quite familiar with you, the author, and had thoroughly studied your work. But talking to you today, I've learned so much more. I also hope this interview can be a resource for other researchers too.