

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA)

Interview

- Interviewee: Chanee Choi (Chanhee Choi)
- Interviewer: Jinyoung Koh
- January 18, 2024 via Zoom
- Recorded and transcribed by Jinyoung Koh (AKAA Research Fellow 2022-2023)
- Video files
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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AHL Interview with Chanee Choi (Chanhee Choi)

Jinyoung Koh (JK): Having earned degrees in Craft Design, Fiber and Material Studies, and a Ph.D. in Art and Technology, how did you pursue these diverse areas, and how do these academic backgrounds contribute to your transdisciplinary approach to art?

Chanee Choi (CC): When I was a high school student, I had a dream to be part of the broadcast media, like moving images. But later, I realized that I might not have much talent. So, I had to find out what type of study I should pursue, what type of things I could learn to get a job, because I was really unsure and didn't know anything about career options. And then, when people don't have much information, getting a job is very important. And then, I found that I had good skills, using my hands to make small items like clay play or embroidery stitches. I studied craft design at Dongduk Women's University in Seoul, which has a division for craft designs. It is separate from fine art, which gave me a second chance. At the time, I was able to study crafting, and then I was able to focus more on hand stitches, which was part of fiber art. I studied fiber craft design at Dongduk Women's University, where I discovered a gap in craft history that I had to address. The lectures and books I had to read were based on Japanese perspectives by Yanagi Muneyoshi, which I found contradictory. I was quite confused about why we were supposed to study craft design from a Japanese perspective in Korea, while we had to find aesthetic appeal from them rather than a colonized view. I was not able to complain about it, because even the craft study I had to work on was more focused on getting a job in the industry. Companies like design, pattern design, and some shops were more focused on fabrics or ceramics. So, I found it better to look for a job. I was actually rather to study art, which was what I wanted. That's what I realized, even though it was quite different from when I was in high school. So, I had to deal with that and figure out what I should do. I found some futures in the United States that I thought I could pursue. I just had to go there to see the possibilities, and then I was lucky to be accepted in the master's program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I chose Chicago because the school was interdisciplinary, which allowed everyone to take classes in other fields. This was one of the really good things about the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. It was quite different from what I used to learn in crafting in South Korea, even though I loved anything related to South Korea's craft, art, and craft design. I studied freely in Chicago, focusing more on multimedia digital art, moving images, and making animations with fiber art. So, I explored video games and interactive art. This idea came from what I was studying in Chicago, moving images and interactive art. I had a really different point of view on how to show artwork to audiences. It was necessary to let audiences choose what they wanted to see, rather

than just showing them some moving images. So, I naturally followed this idea. This is why I studied from fiber art to interactive art. Right now, I could call it game design. Even though it changed, it was because of my personal preference and finding a solution to the gap I felt something was wrong.

JK: Your work has been featured in various publications and exhibitions. How has this recognition impacted your artistic journey, and what challenges have you encountered?

CC: During my Ph.D. at the University of Washington in Seattle, I started to receive attention from many media outlets because I was making video games about racism during the Covid-19 pandemic. I didn't expect it to be something that many people wanted to hear more about, as I usually didn't get that much attention when creating artwork, whether it was meaningful for society or just personal. I think my pandemic project had problems because so many publications and many news media outlets tried to interview me because my game was necessary to show one side of the political positions to fight against racism in the United States. I'm not going to go into detail, but there was a President who tried to speak about everything as Chinese faults, and the consequences led to many problems where people tried to attack Asian people without any reason. This was financially and emotionally troubling, and things were changing during the quarantine and pandemic. So, I had to emphasize the particular part and the sociological perspective that caused the problem and try to find a solution. I didn't expect the news media to show more about my project, even though it was still developing. Many people who were not on my side or didn't agree with my ideas started to feel uncomfortable and gave negative feedback. Some even emailed me personally to say very good things, while others were quite threatening. At the time, I even realized that my personal life with my ex-husband had a different political view. So, I think that getting a lot of recognition for a project in art, if it is very strong in a particular reason, you will also get attacked and targeted. I think that your original question might be something more positive. I have also received many positive feedbacks from different projects. For example, the remembrance project about Alzheimer's. Since I got a lot of exhibitions and recognitions for this project, I got many good suggestions and collaborations about disability in art, memory loss, and therapeutic art. I was able to talk with many scientists who are trying to understand the brain system in our time. So, I got a lot of good feedback, suggestions, and ideas for collaborations, and I made a lot of good friends from the project internationally. So, I'd like to say that having good recognition and publications has a positive effect.

JK: Your art practice is described as a ritualistic craft-based approach that transcends traditional East Asian craftwork. How did you develop this unique artistic style, and what inspired you to blend feminist theory and modern technology within it?

CC: I believe that craft art and craft design are at the core of my work, which is connected to performance, the medium of my art, and digital art, particularly 3D design. When creating designs, I often start with dots and lines that gradually form shapes, reminiscent of craft stitches. Using over 1,000 threads to create a single object is akin to the craft process. I recall Nam June Paik's statement that being an artist is akin to being a shaman, using art as a ritualistic event. I strive to connect with the essence of my subjects, as he suggested, and I wholeheartedly agree. Like craft, I have many questions about art and its processes, and I learn from these inquiries. I ponder the nature of art and my role in it, as well as the significance of media and why people often categorize it in black and white terms. I seek to address these questions through my work. It's akin to asking why I am a woman, why I am in America, and why I create craft art. The solution lies in action, in repetition, in the meditative process of crafting. This becomes a ritualistic event, a part of my work. You also mentioned feminist theory and modern technologies. My study revolves around my identity as a woman and the various gender perspectives I encounter. My work is intuitive, reflecting my personal experiences and observations of society. These elements are deeply interconnected, especially in the context of modern technology.

JK: Could you elaborate on your live performance "Remembrance: Coral," where you incorporate machine learning, Artificial Intelligence, Korean shamanic traditions, and East Asian crafting aesthetics to explore the poetics of an Alzheimer's mind? What motivated you to delve into such a unique and multi-faceted theme? Could you share some stories that connect these aspects?

CC: The story of my mom began when I started feeling guilty. As she developed Alzheimer's and her memory started to decline, I wasn't able to stay with her for long periods because I had to come here to live my life and work hard to graduate, including earning my Ph.D. This was especially challenging for me. I kept making excuses to myself that this was what I was supposed to do. I thought that distance was what she wanted, but in reality, she might have wanted me to be there with her when she started to get sick. This realization made me feel obligated to make an art project about her, especially for my Ph.D. dissertation and graduation. It was ironic because in Korea, it's important to take care of and respect one's parents, which is deeply rooted in Confucianism. However, I was making a project about my mom without actually being

there for her. This made me feel sad and guilty. Making this project was emotionally torturous because sometimes I felt like I was losing sight of the project's importance. I questioned whether it was better to stay with her instead of trying to make something that she wouldn't be able to see. This project also had another fact that my mom started getting sick only late fifties, which was unusual for Alzheimer's. Most patients start showing symptoms after their seventies. I had to investigate her family history to understand why she got sick so early. I wanted to check her mom's history that her mom got Alzheimer's at the same age when I was young to understand how this disease was passed down. However, I realized that my mom had many mysterious histories that were different than her sister's and my dad's stories, thus I couldn't track her family history. This made me scared that I might get the disease too, especially since it's highly possible. So, I had to decide what my next step would be with my project. I didn't know much about my mom, and she wasn't able to have interviews with me since she could only speak a few words and couldn't think or write. This is when I started making our project. I collected data from all her relatives and interviews with my mom. I then used AI and machine learning to generate the new story from her, along with her favorite poem, which is EH. I was able to compose them to making four different sections of the poem. The machine learning was helpful to generate. When I was reading in Korea, when I was in a middle school. I never feel I like the Korean translated version of this poem. But since I saw the English in here, and after I found the similar book in English version I found the original meaning, that Korean translation was somehow very different than. I thought it could not be a part of the problem of translation. Maybe that was what I was feeling about understanding the Western culture in America that what I didn't expect it before. So these things are quite interesting about thinking about my position as an immigration in here to try to make a narrative about my mom as her daughter, who are in here in America, not in Korea with her. These things ironically match together with a poem. So after that, what I did it was collected these all narrative of texts to moving images. The order that I was able to make narratives with this literally moving images, like playing a card game. So when I started to making the narrative with a 3D. Animation part especially. I have to do motion captures, especially face capturing and them moving like my bodies with the motion captures. And also sometimes I use animation on some of templates, that what they already having some of movements. So I mix them all with what I have my own originals. Because of the character in the narrative, there's a one woman is actually the drawing image of portrayed my mom when she was the same age with me when I started this project. But the drawing of her was too beautiful. So, when I generate 3D modeling, it looks to Westernize woman than Korean woman. So, I had to even mix up with my photo and the image of her to synchronize about her. Also, I'm her daughter. So why is about

Korean Shamanic traditions was when I tried to do face and also motion tracking with them. I had to keep repeating the process to get good data. This was like a Shamanic performance, and it was a process using artificial intelligence and Korean shamanic, also somewhat tradition to keep repeating, and then also the East Asian craft was a part of them.

JK: What challenges did you face in integrating such advanced technologies into a live-streamed artistic experience, and how do you see technology shaping the future of interactive art?

CC: Yes, the performance art project used a brain sensor, which I wore and remotely controlled like a video game controller. However, I had to control it using brain waves and signals, focusing on concentration. All of the things were from parts from the animations that I was explained what is about the theme how to make them to generate them. Because this animation has a time flow that I am using a video game engine is called Unity. So, when I make this Coral project from the Animation Project, which is named Magma. I took care of all the flow of the animation. and then I added the interaction part they are interacting depends on the concentrations on or off. So, the animation became a game. And I wear this brain sensor to try to controlling this game to moving to the next level with a limited time. And then there was a performance that I set over the two webcams and then tried to controlling myself. The camera was keep showing me live streaming. The background was the video game that I'm trying to be treated, controlling over. And then there is a left down section that was showing concentration when is on, a blue color always concentrating when it's not on is a red color, is not concentrating. The count time was each 5 min to 10 min each of the scene. So, if it is not concentrating until 5 min the time is gone it just has to naturally move to the next scene, because my purpose has to going on whether it works or not. But when it's not concentrating, everything in the background is stuck. They are not moving. They don't make any sound. And then I just have to keep practicing to be when the concentration level is on again. So, there it was a project about the performance to try to deal with this project as controlling live times to showing the audience. I had a problem to connect it with a brain system. Because before I didn't have many experiences to using brain sensor. But, regardless of the brain sensor part to talking about how I was able to work with all the multimedia I was able to controlling them very well without brain sensor parts is because I had been working a lot with different mediums all the times that, or even there was, begin from the last moment of even by Craft Design Department at Dongduk Women's University I already started to try to using different mediums, and try to being more complex and making complicated myself

to make sure what I'm doing could be the things I'm satisfied with. So, I'd like to say, brain systems still need to more develop the idea how to make it much more interesting part with it to controlling maybe different way. But in the game parts and others was not really difficult.

JK: The use of AI and machine learning in your art is a fascinating aspect. How do you envision the intersection of technology and art evolving in the future, and what possibilities do you see for artists working in the digital realm to explore new frontiers?

CC: So, for sure, new technologies keep evolving, and as new things emerge, I remember when photography was beginning. Many people wondered if it would damage art, paintings, and people's lives and jobs. Later, photography became a way of showing a different perspective of art. That's how it developed, like with the Duchamp's fountain. Technologies keep developing, and AI machine learning is quite new. Many people are trying to make art with them, like Refik Anadol, one of the pioneer artists who tried to create machine hallucinations with artificial technologies. That was the beginning of the era of AI art. That's what I think. So why am I doing it? First, I was quite interested in new technologies. When I tried to incorporate craft, art, and animation, I found that animation is a good way to show much more work, like a film in time flow. But I also found that interaction was a different way to show, and I wanted to learn how it could be very different from the audience's view. It was just, at first, more personally interesting to learn new things because it never ends. Later, I got to know a little bit about new technologies, even many times like machine learning, where I was able to find answers even if I didn't have specific questions, the solutions that I had. For example, my mom. When my mom was not able to talk, I wanted to find solutions and make a project about her. But what could I do? I was really not sure what to do with the data, which was quite different from everyone's perspective or view of my mom and her history. I was able to get help from machine learning to mix up all the data, the data from what I got from her and the surrounding context, to let it generate over and over until I got an interesting story. So, the incorporation of new technology is personally fascinating because I like to learn all the time. Also, I think it's a good way to introduce new methods to make art in different ways, which can be very challenging for the artist, even me. So, this is how I can answer how to incorporate and why I do it.

JK: How do you balance your academic role with your artistic pursuits? How does teaching influence your own artistic practice, and vice versa?

CC: Even when I was at the University of Washington in Seattle, teaching creative art classes, I found that teaching was a really good thing. It allowed me to share what I had with my students, letting them create their own projects based on the ideas I provided. It wasn't just about teaching theories or philosophies but about fostering creativity. I think the 12-week to 16-week quarter system over the semester system in the school was really beneficial for artists and educators. It allowed us to teach everything in one semester, and there was a fantastic level of engagement in the class after the basic class. It was great to see students develop their projects and encourage them to do so. As a teacher, teaching creative classes is not just about sharing knowledge but also about getting good ideas from students and finding inspiration from them. Teaching can be unpredictable, depending on the type of class, but most of the time, it's related to creation. You often find a student who really helps you keep doing what you're doing in your research. Sometimes, you get good inspiration from their ideas. I'm not saying you should take their ideas, but you can learn from them and try to incorporate their experiences as independent artists into your own work. It's always rewarding to see how much students grow from the beginning to the end of a class and how much you get to know them. These things really help me as a teacher and an artist. This is what I think about teaching and being an artist.

JK: Your journey includes living, working, and studying in different locations. How has this geographical diversity influenced your artistic perspective, and do you find that your art resonates differently in various cultural contexts?

CC: Yes, I agree. I think the geographical location is really important because your artwork can be influenced by the weather, your environment, and the people around you. I had a really good time creating art in Chicago because it's a very big city, and I was connected to other places like the south part of Chicago. I was able to travel a lot because everything was accessible by train. Chicago was a very big place, so it was a good opportunity for me to launch and gather a community with a lot of artists. It was pretty much free and creative, beyond all the societal norms and rules, because it was like an incubator system to increase creativity. That's how I learned. But Chicago was very big, so I was able to meet many different people from different backgrounds, even when I wasn't able to speak English very well. Even still, I enjoyed learning about groups, America, and the United States. When I was studying in New York a little bit before I moved to Seattle for my Ph.D., I tried to learn more about diversity in New York City and met many independent artists trying to survive in a big city like New York. The weather in Seattle was quite liberal and individual, and during the summer it was beautiful, but in the winter, it was always foggy and rainy, which sometimes led to

feelings of depression. Personally, my Ph.D. was very harsh. So, I learned about the political ideas of Seattle, because at that time, depending on the beginning, and not just quarantine, like Black Lives Matter, it was important to learn about society. George Floyd and a lot of riots. These things all came together when I was in Seattle, which is quite liberal and also very windy. I think Seattle was the first state that tried to defund the police. So, I was able to learn about who I am as an immigrant in this situation, which made me feel quite isolated, like other people during the quarantine. So, my work has been really switching to thinking about not just making art, but also about immigration and diaspora, racism, gender issues, political segregation, and discrimination. What is the beginning of history with them? That was my next question, even though I found it out. There was a Japanese camp. Do you know about that? In Seattle, Washington State, during World War II, there were many Japanese immigrants in Washington State. Most of them usually had businesses like farming, especially strawberries. But after Japan became an enemy, they all had to move to the camp. They all lost their own inheritance and their own things, and even their houses. So, I have an interesting story about different ideas. Then, when I was in Korea as a Korean, you know, because what we learn was only the perspective view as a Korean, different races have different stories. Even Jewish people had to move to a small island in Washington State. So, I started to learn about humanity and more likely anthropological ideas than what I used to know. So, thinking about immigration and art has been more meaningful to me.

JK: How do you envision your artistic practice evolving in the future, and what new ideas or themes are you interested in exploring?

CC: For sure, my artwork involves experimenting with different mediums. I try to incorporate anything new or an evolved version of technology as much as possible. Most of the time, it's just an incident, not something I plan. When I learn about new technologies, I eventually find a way to use them. So, I'm not 100% sure what the future holds for my art. I think new ideas and technologies will shape it. As I mentioned, I don't have much knowledge about medical devices like brain sensors, but I'm interested in learning more. I'm not sure how much this project can develop, depending on what I can do with them. So, that might be what I'm interested in for future medical projects.