

# AHL Foundation

## Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Young Min Moon
- Interviewer: Joo Yun Lee
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- Recorded and transcribed by Joo Yun Lee (AKAA Research Fellow 2016-2017)
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- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
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Joo Yun Lee (JYL): Your practice has continuously scrutinized and delved into Korea's historical, political, and social realities. Is there a particular motive behind your inquiry?

Young Min Moon (YMM): At first, my practice began from certain existential questions about myself and where I came from rather than a desire to publicize Korea's political circumstances, or from any particular interest in politics *per se*. I had a compulsion to ask myself fundamental questions about my history or identity, and tackle the issues arising from them, instead of focusing on whatever message I could bring to the viewer. For example, in my childhood, I remember being shocked and surprised with my friends at President Park Chung Hee's assassination. He was almost like a god to us. We thought of him in a similar way that people in North Korea still believe its first leader Kim Il Sung, as almost a myth. Back then, school buildings in South Korea had slogans that called for the destruction of the North Korean communist regime, in an analogous scene to the political propaganda in today's Pyongyang. After experiencing such situations and remembering them as an adult, I thought that Korea's political past was an important part of my identity and I wanted to deal with the related issues. It wasn't because I wanted to show politically sensational images. Further, from a North American perspective, I learned that the US has been deeply involved in Korea's socio-political situation for a long time, and I slowly came to understand my inquiry of the socio-political relationship between the US and Korea was not solely a personal issue. I came to associate such matters with my practice.

JYL: As you say, observing the social and political situation in Korea from North America makes you understand the political relationship between the two countries from a different perspective. While pursuing your career as an artist, you have curated exhibitions that introduce other Korean artists whose work also deals with Korea's historical, social, and political issues. You have also written criticism centered on these artists. What made you pursue your own art projects and work as a curator and critic simultaneously?

YMM: If you look at how Korean art is typically introduced outside of Korea, the works that are showcased in exhibitions funded by the Korean government tend to highlight Korea's exotic side, presumably from a Western point of view. In the same way that the US and other powers have continued to involve themselves with Korean politics over the past century, and thus Korea's modern history is inseparable from world history, it is hard to see Korean art as a case of exoticism set apart from Western art. So I began to curate exhibitions and write texts to introduce Korean artists that shed light on such points. My critique or curation don't necessarily dovetail with my own work, but, as I am remote from my home country, they fulfill parts that I can't fully express as an artist dealing with the social and political realities of Korea. In that sense, I didn't set out to become an art critic. When I started teaching, I wanted to introduce the students to artists who were casting a critical eye on society, and that is how I started my critique. Also, as I started to apply for grants from the government or cultural foundations for my

curatorial projects, I also published a collection of my texts and slowly became known as an art critic.

JYL: You studied fine art both as an undergraduate and graduate (at CalArts) and continued to paint. It is interesting to see the ways in which your painting incorporates text. 'Text' or language as a symbol seems an important part of your practice and you have mentioned the poetic and political potential of language. Would you elaborate further?

YMM: I started to write art criticism while teaching students, but I think it took a while for text to become part of my art practice. I gave up painting for about 6 years at one point. I was disillusioned by the commercialization of painting, and also had a fundamental question about what painting could achieve in a complicated and challenging world, so I distanced myself from painting. Looking back, until then, my conception of painting was more dominated by European oil painting or the notion of a 'masterpiece.' Then, at one point I became hugely influenced by Korean-American artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's work. I first came across her work at the Whitney Museum in 1993. I remember being moved to tears as I watched one of her video pieces. Sometimes sound can be more powerful and moving than the visual, and such was the case with the work. In the video a woman's voice, likely that of Cha herself, was saying in Korean, very ordinary words, such as "Turn off the light, don't turn off the light, keep the light on..." accompanied by the moving image of a light bulb turned on and off. Such ordinary utterances gave me indescribable emotions. But afterwards, I forgot about Cha's work for quite some time. I don't remember how I came to be interested again. Perhaps my own struggles with language have transpired: from feeling the discomfort or having difficulties that arose from language issues that I experienced as an immigrant.

Having lived in Canada and the US., I found myself between two cultures that used two different languages and I felt uncertain about where I belonged. I realized that using language to assert oneself and to make utterances is nothing other than revealing one's existence. In American culture, it is important to be assertive through verbal utterances, and if you don't speak up, people don't think you have any independent thoughts. In Asia, not speaking up may be a sign of virtuous humility. Conflicts arise from such cultural differences. Language itself has an intimate relationship with identity, subjectivity, and the formation of self. I also became interested in language as a political tool. It was during this time I came across Cha's work again, and it resonated with me.

Cha's work doesn't reveal such insights about language in an explicitly political manner, but rather combines it with history and poetry, which is why it is so impressive. I think her work is very complex in that regard. She was also knowledgeable about film theory, and I think this is reflected in her work also. Due to the popularity of postmodernism at the time, people have mischaracterized her work as merely an instance of the

postmodern notion of indeterminacy. Rather, Cha was clearly aware of and positioned herself as a Korean, and in her work she clearly represented the hardships that Koreans have endured in modern times. In her seminal text *Dictée* (1982), in which she experimented with the polyphonic aspects of text juxtaposed with image, Cha reveals the potential political power of language. For example, in the beginning of the book she articulates the process of writing after dictation. A *dictée* writes, but she doesn't mean what she writes. I learned this among many other aspects about her work, and I discover new things from her text whenever I read it again. I found it deeply inspirational for my work.

JYL: Inspired and influenced by Cha's *Dictée*, your work *Intervals* must have originated from your growing interest in language.

YMM: Yes. When I was reading Cha's *Dictée* again, I began to approach the particular form of Catholic prayer in Korea called *Yondo* as my subject. As I grew up in a devout Catholic family, *Yondo* was a familiar religious ritual. *Yondo* is similar to Cha's *Dictée* in that it has the heterogeneous and hybrid aspects of language, which interested me. The litany prayer I used for my work is written in the colloquial Korean of the late nineteenth century. Its phrasing seems somewhat odd and unfamiliar since it is quite different from the current Korean language. It sounds even more awkward because the content of the litany contains Catholic references, such as geographic names of places in Israel and the names of saints that are all transliterated into Korean. There are passages where prayers are offered to the saints for the dead to go to heaven. I remember it took almost 20 minutes to read aloud the entirety of the litany. In the case of my father, he ended up memorizing the entire prayer as he commemorated his parents' death for the three years of mourning. [Ed. Note: traditional Confucian Korean ritual following the death of parents]. I saw and performed the litany as I grew up, so it was instilled in me as very important. I started to incorporate those important texts in my work. I took photos of each page, fragmented them and recreated them in painting, and recorded my prayer-like reading of the fragmented text. But even if I fragmented the text, I couldn't read them arbitrarily. It's a bit like the destruction of an idol. I had torn the text into fragments, but because I was conscious of the religious ritual, I found myself reading it in a very pious way, which revealed contradictions.

Through the prayer I was concerned about the location of my mother tongue. This is also relevant in Cha's work, as there is no Korean in *Dictée*. The book explores Korean history, Korean identity, how Cha's parents were not allowed to speak Korean during the Japanese occupation of Korea, and how they sought refuge in Manchuria. But the Korean language never appears in the book, except that it appears in a photograph that captures a sentence, "Mom, I'm hungry, I want to go home." It is assumed that this was written by one of the Korean forced laborers in Japan. This made me think about the location of the mother tongue. Cha immigrated to the US when she was very young, so she probably didn't speak Korean very well, and perhaps that might have led her to

question the location of her mother tongue. If you look at the litany prayer *Yondo*, even though I had encountered it when I was very young and performed it with familiarity, if I look more closely at the language, the considerably different old Korean articulation and the transliteration of strange Israel geographic names, or the names of the saints, make me wonder what is the mother tongue? Even though Korean is my mother tongue, Korean could also be a foreign language for me. That unfamiliar litany made me think that the mother tongue itself could sometimes be a foreign language. I read it, and understand the meaning, but it is still a strange text. This is how I came to create my work *Intervals*, through which I wanted to reflect on the relationship between my father and I, and the relationships and gaps between cultures. I was interested in exploring the relationship between two very different cultures —between Catholicism and Confucianism, and the gap between late 19th century Korea and contemporary Korea.

JYL: In your painting series, *some sense of order*, you depict the important Confucian ceremony, *jesa*, and you repeat the ritual of the deep bow (*jeol*). It seems you tried to show how Western religion and ritual was accepted and fused into Korean culture. Can you explain it further?

YMM: I think that having completed the work that dealt with the litany prayer made it possible for me to start the series with *some sense of order*. Although I have painted this series for five years now, a detailed depiction of a *jesa* appears in only one small group of paintings. In most cases, there is no depiction of a *jesa* set up, such as the screen, the offering table, the floor—but just the person who conducts the ritual, sometimes with the person's shadow. Although I painted the backdrop of *jesa* in order to emphasize the context of the traditional ritual, the reason why I did not sustain it was due to my desire to grapple with more important issues. First, it was because I wanted to resist it being seen solely as an exotic foreign ritual from a Western point of view.

What is more important to me was an unresolved question about the act of *jeol*, or the deep bow, performed during the ceremony. *Jeol* is an action carried out with a pious spirit, but the act itself is extremely physical and sensual. It always makes some sounds. Your body makes a rustling noise with its clothes as it moves. When you bow along with all the family, you're not sure of the right timing for when you should get up. You fold your hands together, bow, then get up when your elders do. One often performs the bow for ancestors you've never met, and you might wonder whether the spirits even acknowledge that you are bowing for them. Nonetheless, this act of prostration seems to me the climax of the whole process of the *jesa* ceremony, including cleaning the house, washing yourself, carefully preparing food and praying. When you bow, you put your head on the ground, albeit for a short moment, and it may be an effort to transmit your deepest thoughts to a spirit, and you keep repeating it. As a young mind, I was curious if such an effort would be transmitted to the spirits of the ancestors? I may have been more curious about the afterlife, rather than the *jesa* ceremony itself. However, *jesa* is the form that allows this practice, and no ritual would be possible

without its form. Especially in our society of spectacle and consumerism, one would be severely deficient without such distinct forms of native culture. Whether you believe in the ritual or not, its form has a meaning. In this respect, I was interested in the bow as a formal expression with such a special meaning.

JYL: As you explained, the most notable part of *some sense of order* is the act of bowing, which is a ritual that mediates the body. For the viewers who don't know the context of the jesa, the image might just seem to be a kneeling middle-aged man in a suit. Yet showing the bodily gesture itself is significant.

YMM: It is important. Given that I work in North America and think about this from that perspective, I suppose Americans would not have a reason to be kneeling or sitting that way while wearing a suit. It is an alien cultural custom for Americans. I deliberately repeated it in order to emphasize practicing modesty as a way of being, which I rarely come across in Western society, where the emphasis is on the individual, 'I.'

You would feel physically uncomfortable in that position, when your body reaches so close to the floor, and if you stay in that pose for long you could have cramps. I underscore the bodily sensation, which is important. You will find that the face and hands are not visible while the feet and back are. Faces and hands are of course the dominant motifs in representation, not feet and back.

From a personal standpoint, my reflection on my father and what I had felt while watching him live his life may have morphed into the image of an ordinary middle-aged Korean man.

Now I'm older than my father was when he led my family to this new world, and I think about him differently from when I was younger. I expressed my ambivalence towards him that stems from seeing his human side and yet seeing his other side that I respect and admire. I couldn't put all of my feelings for him in the work, but that is an underlying impetus in my work.

JYL: Your work deals with the issue of immigration and the problems that immigrants are faced with from a wide-ranging perspective. It seems your personal experience of immigrating to Canada at a young age and settling in the US became an important motivation.

YMM: That's true. My experience as an immigrant, and my memory of my father, and my relationship with him are certainly important to my work. But, before we move onto my experience as an immigrant, I'd like to say that I've gained a deeper understanding of my work as I continue the same thematic for a number of years. One of the important realizations is this— as much as my work on the yondo prayer or jesa have been about hybridity of culture and exploration of language, they are also about the austere moments of silence when practicing them. Importantly, these spiritual practices were

carried out under the military regime, in which violence permeated the everyday. Violence was a norm, even in the classroom. In the midst of such a violent society, reciting the prayer or the moments of silence during jesa touched me deeply, as they were radically different from the fear of everyday violence. So I realized that my work is also about reflections on violence, death-drive, and mourning. Death is a kind of return, and the fear I felt in imagining repatriation to your homeland unexpectedly leading to death may have motivated me to do my project on the North Korean repatriation from Japan.

My parents, my three brothers, and I immigrated to Canada in 1984. At the time, I was told the reason for our immigration was because my parents were concerned about the education system and the military conscription in Korea. However, I found out the decisive reason for our migration much later when I became an adult and I became more interested in immigration. After the end of the Japanese occupation of Korea, many Koreans who were living in Japan were sent to North Korea. When I learned about it, it was a really shocking discovery for me, especially because most people of my generation and younger didn't know about it. I was even more surprised when I heard from my mother that two of my uncles had gone to North Korea in this way. In the early 1980s, my father had been running a business manufacturing and selling wireless transceiver systems for the military and the police. He frequented Japan for business travel and used to import electronic parts from Japan. One day one of the transceiver samples connected to the frequency used by the Blue House [Ed. note: the South Korean President's executive office and residence in Seoul]. Because of this incident, he had been summoned into the Blue House and questioned under the draconian National Security Law. Although he was released after just two hours, my father suffered from neurosis after that investigation. He feared that the authorities would discover that my uncles had gone to North Korea, possibly causing further misunderstandings, especially under the military dictatorship of President Chun Doo Hwan. This was the background to his decision to move abroad with my family.

JYL: Your project *here is our homeland, my dear* particularly covers the topic of mass deportation of Koreans who remained in Japan after the end of World War II. At the time, the Korean and Japanese governments, as well as that of the international community reacted to this quite differently. Could you explain the history and political context behind this event and the motivating factor that led to the development of this project?

YMM: The most important factor that made me delve into this project was reading Tessa Morris-Suzuki's book on this topic, *Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan's Cold War*. To briefly explain the historical background: in 1951, under the Treaty of San Francisco, Japan received international approval exempting it from any responsibilities towards Koreans who remained in Japan, known as *Zainichi* Koreans. Prior to this treaty, Koreans were subjects of the Japanese emperor and thus were supposed to be

loyal to Japan, even as they were being forced into hard labor and sent to the frontline. They were also victims of the nuclear bombings. However, under the treaty, they lost their citizenship overnight and Japan relieved itself from any responsibility to give them any social or legal protection. The South Korean government was in no position to give them any kind of assistance, since South Korea was poorer than North Korea after the Korean War. From the 1950s to the 1960s, even as they were aware of the plight of tens of thousands of the Korean Japanese, the Korean government couldn't help at all. Japan wanted to get rid of these non-citizens from their land, and one of the ways they came up with was the exile of the Zainichi Koreans to North Korea. The Japanese government coaxed them, saying that it was a charitable, humanitarian service to send them back to their homeland. But most of the Koreans living in Japan were from the South and had never even been to North Korea. The Japanese government couldn't simply deport them to North Korea, so it invited representatives from the Red Cross headquarters in Geneva, and asked them to get signatures from the Koreans individually on a document to verify their desire to go to North Korea of their own volition. But the problem was that, if the head of the household said yes, the entire family had no choice but to follow his wishes. At the time, Koreans in Japan faced systemic exclusion and discrimination, and saw that they had no future in Japan. They must have hoped for a better future in North Korea. Initially, Kim Il Sung was not so enthusiastic about the plan, but soon after changed his mind when he realized they would be a good source of labor. He even personally attended a welcome ceremony at a big auditorium, meeting and greeting the first boatful of people who arrived in North Korea. The mass migration of approximately 94,000 people continued, and many of them ended up in forced labor camps or were executed. Tessa Morris-Suzuki called this the 'exile to nowhere.' It is a tragic story. These people were trying to get out of a difficult situation, only to end up in hell. That's the historical background I've learned, and then I found out about my uncles who went to North Korea in this way. Of course, I don't know whether they survived or not.

But what really made me interested in this historical event was what the meaning of 'return' might be in this case. Just as Cha's work is about a desire to return to one's homeland, or a longing for her mother tongue, this project was also about what it means to return home. The people wanted to go back to South Korea, their homeland, but couldn't go, so they thought that it would be better off in North Korea than be subject to racism and humiliation in Japan. They thought about a homecoming or repatriation, but they had no idea about the horrific situation they were going to face. I think that is why there is an underlying death-drive in my work. If you look at Tessa Morris-Suzuki's book cover, there is a photograph of a couple on the ship arriving in North Korea, waving the North Korean flag as they regard the people on the dock who came out to greet them. The husband is smiling brightly as he waves, but the feeling of unease cast on the wife's face tells us that she is sensing something is not quite right. In her subtle expression I saw an uncanny feeling of doubt as to whether she had made the right decision. But she had already arrived there and couldn't go back.



JYL: In the historical and political contexts you illustrated, your *There is our homeland, my dear* project illuminates post-colonial Korea's political situation and its relation to complicated international relations, political interests as well as the human rights of the Zainichi Koreans who were essentially deported to North Korea. How did you organize the exhibition to address such issues, and what was the reaction of the viewers?

YMM: I came across the newly declassified documents that Morris-Suzuki found at the Red Cross headquarters in Geneva, which shocked me. Some of the documents included a letter from the Foreign Ministry of Japan to the Red Cross, requesting help to send Zainichi Koreans to North Korea. The Japanese government viewed the presence of Koreans left in Japan as a problem to get rid of, but in approaching the Red Cross, they framed their scheme as a humanitarian endeavor to help the Koreans. Morris-Suzuki had already taken photographs of these documents and published them on the internet. I printed out those documents and included them in the exhibition. I also displayed a near exact replica of the book titled *Korean Returnees from Japan*, which was published in Pyongyang. Kim Il Sung made this book to aggrandize the supposedly good deeds of North Korea and published it in English and French for international distribution. A few copies of this book still remain in the US. This exhibition was shown in the US and South Korea, but the American viewers were not very interested in it. For Americans, it is someone else's story. In Korea, it was exhibited at the Gyeonggi Museum of Art in Ansan, a city where over 60,000 foreign workers reside, where it resonated because it was showing Koreans who had left Japan for a better life but had failed in their quest.

JYL: Your work continues to deal with the issues of migration from a wide-ranging perspective, such as the lives of migrant workers in Korea and their human rights. You also have written about artists whose work grapples with such issues.

YMM: I am an immigrant myself, so I naturally have interest in the matter. Of course, I consider myself a privileged immigrant. My father came here as an investor, so my family didn't have financial problems. Unlike many first-generation Korean immigrants. That is not to say that my life has been entirely carefree and happy. Migration is such an important part of my work. I am concerned about migration, labor, the problems of national borders, observing the reality of a global world in which goods freely move across the border, but those people who made the goods can't. Living in America, a country that was founded on the dark history of white supremacy, genocide, and slavery, it is paradoxical that the immigration policy in this country is always one of the most contentious issues. It is lamentable to see that some people here still blatantly discriminate against people of color without any scruples. In this context, it may appear naïve and idealistic to talk about what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe in their book, *Empire* (2000), i.e. post-national, global citizenship, but I believe it must be something to aspire to. National borders are a human construct after all, yet they

become more pronounced, and this is regrettable. I can't help but heed issues of migration or problems of migrant workers in this situation.

In this respect, I also see Korea has many issues regarding migration and migrant workers in very specific historical and sociocultural contexts. So I have written about Korean artists who deal with these issues, including the artist collective Mixrice on two occasions. Even before I got to know Mixrice, I knew about the rapid increase of foreign workers in Korea within a very short time. I worked for the Gwangju Biennale in 1997 and then came back to Korea in 2004, and one of the remarkable changes during this time was the surprising number of migrant workers. Of course, there were many foreign workers before, but because they were mostly working in the outer regions I didn't have a chance to come across them. I saw the migrant workers in places like Yeouido by the Han river where they would gather on the weekends to drink and let off steam. At the airport, I saw foreigners who had come to work in Korea looking awkward because they couldn't figure things out all at once. As an immigrant myself who had experienced difficulties in a foreign land, I came to notice them more, and rather than feel sorry for them, I felt it was an indicator that Korean society had radically changed. I wondered how these people managed to live in Korea. Then I found out Mixrice had been working with them for over ten years, forming a community with them instead of a one-off meeting. It's not to say Mixrice views the migrant workers solely in a positive light. Every human group has its problems. People have desires and they evolve and change. For example, a migrant worker who had been fighting for better labor conditions or human rights matters in South Korea would return to their country as someone with experience working in Korea and become part of the establishment earning money from that. Mixrice witnesses such changes and grapples with their experiences in a thoughtful way through their work.

JYL: As you exhibit and publish your work in Korea, you have criticized the distorted meaning of the term 'global contemporary.' In this respect, your texts on *minjung* art [Ed note.: Korean socio-political art movement that emerged from the 1980s demonstrations against military dictatorship] focuses on the role of the arts in Korea's democratization. Please explain your thinking on this.

YMM: Insofar as contemporary art is defined as a catch-all term for all art that emerged after postmodernism and in the age of globalization, it tends to negate specificities of the local, which is also the main characteristic of globalization. Given that there is no dominant genre or style in global contemporary art, there are some Korean art professionals who maintain that there is no longer a dominant narrative in contemporary Korean art. As far as I am concerned, the notion of global contemporary art is a myth. The term itself is an oxymoron. The more globalization becomes dominant, the more art criticism should seek out the narrative that is firmly rooted in the specific context of the local.

In the case of *minjung* art, it shares certain affinities with other cultural activities that arise under oppressive regimes elsewhere. The difference is that it was a nationalistic movement, and the nature of *minjung* art is multifaceted and it was not necessarily a unified style. Everyone had differing views on what it even was. For example, the critic Wan-kyung Sung distinguishes between Modernist *minjung* art and social activist *minjung* art. In the former, the works were mostly displayed in a white cube, while with the latter, there was a push back against such artist-focused tendencies and those artists refused to title their works or even leave any permanent work. It's well known now that such artists were trying to reject Modernism and the Western influence in that way. They had even rejected Conceptual Art as a kind of formalism, when they could have utilized it for their cause. As a result, in some cases, *minjung* art regressed in its formal aspect. Nowadays, the sharing of information occurs so fast that I think the prevalent form of community-based art in Korea, for instance, doesn't look very different from the social participatory art that turns up outside of Korea.

JYL: You've settled in the US and have been teaching for a long time, yet you steadily show your work in Korea and publish there. How do you balance things out?

YMM: I make an effort to travel to Korea regularly and continue to meet people. I think I will always be an outsider in the US. Galleries and museums in the US seem to operate some kind of a quota for exhibitions and collections. While they consider artists' ethnicity in organizing their shows, such consideration readily means that they predetermine a limit in their inclusion of artists of color. I feel that it's quite a firm limit for an artist of color to overcome. This discussion of politics of visibility and representation needs another occasion. Suffice to say that there is far greater interest in Asian art than Asian American art, no doubt about it. The mainstream institutions want to avoid engaging political discourse within the US. By contrast, it is so much safer and easier for them to host Asian art from Asia because they don't have to grapple with the politics represented in Asian art. It's not their business and they don't have to deal with it. On another note, there has been a gap between my artwork, writing, and teaching, and I have been trying to lessen that gap. But it hasn't been easy.

JYL: It is important to stay in one place, either Korea or the US, to continue one's work, but it also seems necessary to have people who travel between the two places and write about Korean art in order to introduce it to a US audience.

YMM: I think so. The mode of communication is somewhat different, after all. For example, when Koreans write government grants to publish books in Korea for the purpose of disseminating them in the US, those books usually don't do very well. There is not only the problem of translation, but also the ways in which the book is planned, designed, and how the content is organized. It is quite different from what you find here. I think we need people who understand those differences and can bridge the gap.