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# Cho 0 Joo

Guide

1. This book is a critical study of Youngjoo Cho's activities from her debut in 2002 to 2023. The first part of the book organizes the major activities of the artist based on her archives, compiling a list of 69 works. This list encompasses works that have not been introduced in Korea but were presented overseas, as well as those presented in Korea but not introduced in foreign countries. In the process, unreleased materials and art works have been included in the book.
2. Some of them were selected and categorized according to the format of the works: 'Solo,' 'Collective,' and 'Collaboration.' The process of constructing the works was reorganized into the Project Manual. Essential contents such as records and memos that served as the foundation for creating the works are included at the beginning.
3. The latter part of the book is composed of new texts on the author, examining the author through the 2022-2023 Artist Research-Study-Critique project, along with past articles.
4. This book has been produced in separate editions for Korean and English.
5. The titles of the works are listed as \_\_\_\_\_ and the exhibition titles are represented as \_\_\_\_\_ (double lines). It is hoped that this book will serve as a foundation for researchers exploring contemporary issues such as the body, gender, women, labor, etc., and that it will be a tool for curators to grasp the artist Youngjoo Cho's past works at a glance when encountering her art. Additionally, it is hoped that this book will be a valuable reference for emerging artists, curators, and critics of future generations in the process of creating artworks and exhibitions.

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## Divided Desire. Notes on Youngjoo Cho's Full time-double, Writing my body, and Three breaths

you have built your house  
 you have feathered your birds  
 you have beaten against the wind  
 with your own bones  
 you have finished on your own  
 what no one ever started  
 (Alejandra Pizarnik, *Diana's Tree*, #16, 1962)

In dialogue with the many feminist struggles and theoretical debates surrounding them, Youngjoo Cho's work has often been discussed with regards to her exploration of what Julia Kristeva has characterised as the '*signifying space*' — one that is 'a both corporeal and desiring mental space' — articulated by feminism. Carved as a third way between the tension of, on one side, 'insertion into history' and, on the other, 'the radical *refusal* of the subjective limitations imposed by this history's time', such signifying spaces posit the aesthetic, poetic — and, for Kristeva, the psychoanalytic — as modes of invention able to draw from the material realities of women's lives.<sup>[1]</sup> A major issue begged by Cho's work is the relationship entertained between her work and its inscription amongst feminist struggles — beyond the sphere contemporary are more broadly and within the context of feminisms in South Korea more specifically. Although the way they relate to one another is far from being unequivocal, the patriarchal edifice South Korean feminists are confronted to is one deeply entrenched within Confucianist values and ideology.

In the latter part of the 1980s, the landscape of feminist art in Korea experienced a local emergence, characterised by a militant cohort of women practitioners. These artists were deeply moved and influenced by their own life experiences, social theories, and literary realism. Their creative endeavours coalesced into what came to be known as *minjung misul* (art of the people) and they actively participated in the progressive feminist movement that bore the imprints of Marxist feminism. As noted by art historian Hyeonjoo Kim, a wave of feminism that would inform feminist art practice developed in the 1980s out of the various anti-

authoritarian, movements opposing Chun Doo-hwan's military dictatorship. These movements combined the notions of *minju* (democracy), *minjok* (nation) and *minjung* (people). The emergence of *minjung* art as the accompanying development in the field of art of this social phenomena saw the development of practices using a range of media and strategies — from oil painting and graphic prints, to agitprop and figurative narration — to signal a form of material translation of a mode of practice opened onto the social field.<sup>[2]</sup> *Minjung misul* was a spectrum of post-media practices with explicit political intent with, as central to its ideology, a sharp critique of the trifecta of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy — paralleled within the art sphere by its opposition to *Dansaekhwa*, Korean monochrome painting and the local iteration of autonomous art. *Minjung misul* recognised the forces of capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy as the primary culprits behind the perpetuation of social and structural discrimination against women. The Women's Art Research Society (*Yeosung Misul Yeonguhoe*), a pivotal embodiment of 1980s feminism, served as a significant driving force for social transformation. Championing the cause of women, they tirelessly worked towards raising awareness about discrimination faced by women, while simultaneously lending their support to class-based, popular, and broader social struggles through activism. What set these artists apart was their willingness to stand firm against the uncritical assimilation of Western culture that was prevalent at the time among radicals and leftists. Instead, they nurtured a unique artistic practice called *Yeosung Misul* or 'women's art,' which laid the very foundations for the burgeoning feminist activist art movement in Korea.

Cho can be seen as expanding and complicating these relationships between post- or intermedia practices and feminist analytics of women's status. In several of her projects, the material realities she explores and takes as subject matter, is an issue that in itself complexifies that of women's labour, namely childcare and motherhood. Be it in the form of moving image, installation or performance, women's parenting is indeed a central them in several of Cho's projects. Encountering Cho's work or the artist herself is an encounter with a sense of agency probably only found in artist-mothers such as herself. Although the addressee of the Alejandra Pizarnik's poem in the epigraph is not specified it is not difficult to imagine — and here I declare taking it upon myself to make this free association — that this could be her, or a mother.

[1] Julia Kristeva, *Women's Time* [extract], in Margaret Iversen, Douglas Crimp, Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), Mary Kelly, London, Phaidon, 1997, pp. 102–05.

[2] Hyeonjoo Kim, 'Ip Gim: Feminist Art and Activism in South Korea', *Afterall*, Issue 52, Autumn/Winter 2021, pp.134–45.

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To be sure, what can be said, is that in six free verses, Pizarnik's dense and precise poem combines effects of strong individuality with a symbolism that speaks of creation, nurturing, resilience and accomplishment. The repetition of 'you/you/you' followed by the variation on the mutable 'your' and then another 'you' contrasts the mother's positionality, as desiring subject acting towards 'what no one ever started'.

From all of the above, a fundamental question arises. To what extent can we draw a connection between motherhood — its difficulties but also its agency — and the possibility of producing new signifying spaces? In a text of psychoanalytic clinical orientation, Jacques-Alain Miller reminds us that 'the mother is only good enough by not being too much the mother, and provided that the care she lavishes on the child does not turn her away from desiring as woman'<sup>[3]</sup>. In fact, the mother-child relationship holds by virtue of this division of desire between that of the mother and that of the woman; in this configuration in which desire goes beyond the child, a mother avoids fulfilling the maternal fantasy of being all for the child, while at the same time, women can also endorse the function of the Name-of-the-Father.

Such a division of desire — this is the hypothesis I would like to suggest here — finds in Cho's practice a form of resolution and founds the basis for aesthetic and poetic invention. This is observable through processes of translation between various levels of experiences and registers of the sensible — at work in three pieces, Full time-double (2019), Writing my body (2019), and Three breaths (2020) — and taking place between the three works themselves. Indeed, all stem from a 'parenting journal' kept by the artist between 2016–19. Over an extended period of time, after the birth of her child, Cho took notes on graph paper of both her labour as a mother and of her daughter's activity. Establishing a system of visual inscriptions, Cho recorded 'the child's bowel movement, breastfeeding and sleep'<sup>[4]</sup>. The original drawings [which can be seen in Cho's recent artist publication *A Screamer* (2023)], consists essentially in a daily journal, with lines of varying length representing the duration of an activity, the latter being indicated by different symbols. At this level, Cho's approach can be brought close to Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document (1973–79), her seminal six-part installation charting the development of her son and of their interactions in

which she used some of her child's artefacts, layered with text. The obvious shared concern for motherhood and maternal labour, as well as the diaristic approach and the look at the infant's development place the two artists in correspondence. Of course, the case of Kelly's Post-Partum Document is one engaging with the feminist and artistic debates of its time and geography, its use of indexical signs, 'gestural marks, found objects, imprints traces, moulds'<sup>[5]</sup>, giving its mode of existence within the moment of conceptual art, as a specific attempt to address the crisis of the real and reweave and rethink the relationship between thing and sign. But in Cho's work, this relationship, between thing and sign, life and its representation, an event and its archive, etc. becomes more complicated.

Indeed, Cho's diary of maternal labour can be said to be further abstracted and remediated. Full time-double, for instance, constitutes a graphic rendering of the diary. Reorganised and retyped using a dedicated font and replaced from single pages of graph paper to a paper scroll of 10 metres long, what pertained to the realm of daily life and affective labour becomes translated through printed matter and shifts into the domain of visual poetry or concrete poetry. By the same token, the private becomes public, Cho's experience with her daughter entering the domain of the exhibitionary which mediates it between the art institution, the public and other objects. Moreover, the postpartum journal also serves as the basis of the score for Three breaths, an intermedia work which brings together installation, dance and musical performance. As its title indicates, Three breaths refers to three types of breaths (the baby's and the mother's breaths before, the third occurring the caring relationship between care-giver and receiver, or during a possible incident happening between them), these three parts being used by Eunji Lee to write her score.<sup>[6]</sup> In an exhibition hall, long segments of duct pipes are laid across. The use of industrial material is interesting in that if, at first sight, it might speak the language of Minimalist sculpture — reminiscing of Charlotte Posenenske's work for instance — and its distancing from the human hand in favour of reproducible manufactured products, in Three breaths it takes on a more organic and anthropomorphic dimension, the pipes referencing both the umbilical cord

[5] Margaret Iversen, 'Visualizing the Unconscious: Mary Kelly's Installations,' in Margaret Iversen, Douglas Crimp, Homi K. Bhabha, *Mary Kelly*, p. 41.

[6] The process of turning the postpartum diary into a musical score is beautifully recounted by composer Eunji Anna Lee in Three breaths in Youngjoo Cho, *A Screamer*, Seoul. Gyeongbokgung Collabo, 2023, p. 26.

[3] Jacques-Alain Miler, 'The child and the object' (trans. B. Wolf), *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* no. 28, London, 2014, p. 12.

[4] 'Full time-double', Youngjoo Cho [website], <http://youngjoocho.com/works/full-time-double-풀-타임-더블/>

and the respiratory system.

As modes of translating Cho's experience of care labour, Full time-double and Three breaths are also fascinating in that both could be seen as scores. As composer Eunji Lee, who turned the diary into a score, puts it: 'unlike in writing or visual media, the approach to conveying sensations abstractly in music is inevitably different when dealing with complex and multi-layered topics'<sup>[7]</sup>. Full time double is a potential score, an elaboration and use of a specific graphic notation presenting the possibility de-hierarchising and deskilling roles and status within conventional performing modalities, based on the idea of order with, as its corollary, the notion of expression. Adapting into an actual score for Three breaths, the collaboration between Lee and Cho reveals the question of the legibility and of what composer Michael Nyman calls 'aural recognizability'. The latter, Nyman writes, is 'both impossible and irrelevant since the (non-musical) graphic symbols it contains have no meanings attached to them but "are to be interpreted in the context of their role in the whole"'<sup>[8]</sup>. If, with regards to Cho's work, this speaks to the untranslatability of the experience of childcare and maternal labour, her postpartum notes find yet another iteration.

In Writing my body, a performance by Cho herself, the artist wears a white dress. Its shape might be that of a labour and delivery gown, but the upper front part has a triangular black pattern, base at neck level, tip on the abdomen. Cho stands in front of a white background, an atonal piano piece composed by Harim Kim being performed. The gestures performed by Cho are deceptively mundane. Sign language, daily movements veering into explicitly choreographed ones, the artist produces her own idiosyncratic visual dialect. The work has been described consisting of Cho 'look[ing] back at her body and tr[ying] to reveal the uniqueness and memory of the present body'.<sup>[9]</sup> Writing my body represents another one of Cho's experiments with unravelling the complexities of her postpartum emotions and experiences. With the experience of motherhood, a profound transformation occurs with ever-persistent concerns about one's appearance and altered physical self. Here, Cho literally develops a body-language, a psychic and somatic experience being further translated into a

play of anatomy and sign. In this regard, anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan has noted that signs (and symbols) result from a gradual process of 'intellectualization of sensations'. A process which 'has stripped the real forms of their contents and kept only the signs. Writing comes after visual aesthetics, its images being purely intellectual and its symbol completely interiorized'. Based on her corporeal transformations, Cho's attempt at 'writing' her body can thus be seen as cogently articulating a 'signifying space'.

Finally, Cho's experiments with the remediation of her experiences of maternity, of postpartum life and of care labour, and with the translation of her journal into drawing, performance, and score — through Full time double, Writing my body and Three breaths — speak both to the impossibility to translate, but also about its possibility. It is about the possibility of what filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha calls 'speaking nearby', namely 'a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it'<sup>[10]</sup>, a speaking, we might add, that speaks from the divided place of the mother's desire.

[10] Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Nancy N. Chen, "'Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha', *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, Spring 1992, p. 87.

[7] Ibid.  
[8] Michael Nyman, "Towards (a definition of) experimental music', *Experimental Music and Beyond*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 9-10.  
[9] Writing my body, Youngjoo Cho [website], <http://youngjoocho.com/works/writing-my-body/>.

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Taehyun Kwon

### Spring Up Beyond the Gardener's Control

White structures in various forms and red lighting here and there. Perhaps it is because of the objects placed around the exhibition hall. Their formative composition and architectural structure first capture our eyes before we can figure out what they are. Placed around the exhibition, it may be natural to think of them as installations or sculptures. After viewing them from a distance and then slowly approaching the objects, we begin to see other aspects of them. Through the texture and warmth of the objects felt by the body rather than the eyes, and touch rather than vision. Mats made of easy-to-wipe material and infrared devices beaming with warm light. They are objects usually found in hospitals or sanatoriums. Youngjoo Cho intricately weaves the characteristics of the materials and their symbolism in her work.

The most important point of discussion on the various sensory layers of such compositions is that an object does not converge on one definition. The material structure alternates between being useless sculptures and useful medical apparatus. In the same way, the mats are where people lie their bodies, but at the same time, they are structures dividing architectural traffic. Sure enough, people visiting the exhibition also enjoy the works with different attitudes, such as by just quietly viewing, lying down on them, or directly enjoying the warmth of the light without any particular reason. And this place is Youngjoo Cho's installation Humangarten, the stage for a performance called Human beings don't spring up like mushrooms and the location of the video piece called Com pani. Sharing the same material foundation but having distinctly different phases in each work may be more important than any other aspect in Youngjoo Cho's art works.

Her methodology of multi-layering messages and changing phases, which can be felt in detail, is prominent not only in Humangarten but also in Feathers on lips released in 2020. In Feathers on lips, several performers take turns physically fighting each other one on one. Their gestures seem to subdue their opponents like in wrestling or Jiu-jitsu, but over time, the gestures become more and more undefinable. Their fights slowly die down and their bodies overlap on top of each other, as they take in deep breaths and share each other's warmth. The performers repeatedly pull each other back and forth until the distinction between the one initiating the action and the one receiving the action disappears. And soon, the image of the performers deviates from the social construct

of gender and transcends a multitude of dichotomies. Subjects and objects, gestures to kill and gestures to save, unexplained hatred and unexplained love. These overlap with such complexity. And their repetitions. With such ambivalent and relative sensations and unknowingly changing gestures, and further social and historical layers tangled into the images of the bodies, the image created by Feathers on lips no longer becomes easily describable in a single phrase.

The issue continues in Human beings don't spring up like mushrooms, another performance staged at Humangarten. It is based on a fictional rule that the four performers have different constraints to their bodies and they move around the installation pieces of Humangarten and stop when they fall to the ground. The performance starts with the performers cooperating to get ahead, but a discord gradually appears and becomes clearer within their community. The profound overlap of two opposing ideas, cooperation and struggle, are again exhibited here. Whether they help each other or drag down each other's bodies to survive, the hard-to-define situation repeats itself. Moreover, the tension caused by the unexplained events leading to the performers dying after falling off the sculpture, whether unintentionally or planned, also brings out the unique sense of ambivalence from the audience.

Eyes closed, hands tied, feet tied, and back unbendable. Four bodies with different constraints and different motilities. The different bodies intertwine and go somewhere on the extremely limited space provided by the structure of Humangarten. They may look like they are fighting with each other to get ahead of each other because their bodies are complicatedly intertwined. But the performer who goes ahead first soon turns around and assists the others. When people are about to think that, after all, human beings can never go through life alone, the performer soon has to reach for a hanging object from a higher place to advance to the next area. Whether they assist each other out of pure cooperation or survival instinct, we cannot know. The performance continues with a mixture of cooperation and struggle. Using someone else's body to survive. For example, the one with their eyes closed cannot move alone easily but their free hands and feet are definitely useful for picking up things. This shows that human relationships are not the goal in itself, but necessary means for survival. Fundamental ethical issues. Cooperation seems to be a back-and-forth exchange of utilitarian and ethical actions.

The image of the performers is also an important aspect in Human beings don't spring up like mushrooms. The four performers are of different genders and ages, including one performer with her hands tied who appears