

ARTISTS

Sojung Jun

*A Method with Plasticity:
Sojung Jun in Conversation
with Nav Haq & Adeena Mey*



A METHOD WITH PLASTICITY: A CONVERSATION WITH SOJUNG JUN

Nav Haq & Adeena Mey

In this conversation with *Afterall* editors Nav Haq and Adeena Mey, Sojung Jun reflects on her practice, which traverses film, sound, sculpture, and installation to explore questions of social and technological acceleration, transcultural movements and hybridity, rhythm and temporality. From her recent work *Syncope* (2023) to earlier projects engaging with diasporic memory and the legacies of East Asian modernity, Jun unpacks how 'plasticity' functions as both method and metaphor. She reflects on topics including colonial infrastructures, speculative fabulation, the sonic dimensions of time, and the poetic fragments of artists like Kim Hyesoon, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Yi Sang.

Nav Haq (NH): You were shortlisted for the 2023 Korea Artist Prize at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul, where the accompanying exhibition featured *Syncope* (2023). How did you come to develop this project?

Sojung Jun (SJ): *Syncope* is like a travelogue made with fellow musicians I have worked with for a long time. This work traces the journeys of people who travelled afar following sound, intersecting their experiences with train derailments, the movement of plants, the time of gamelan, transformations and changes of bodies in myths, and the movement and transformation of data, thereby sensing speeds that stray from modernity. Perhaps it can be seen that in the weightless space of video, individual media are liberated from the stability or framework of modernised time, writing down various forms of storytelling. The way social and commercial infrastructures, like trains, ships, underwater tunnels, and department stores, illustrate the history of geopolitical relationships and movement between nations is always fascinating. In this work, the train serves as a metaphor for the image-carrying video and plays a crucial role in the construction of nation-states and colonial expansion under the modern, rational world dreamed of across Asia and Europe. It is significant that the perspective of this work is on the shifting of gears and derailments rather than the linear speed of the train.

NH: Like other works you have made, there is a reflection here on the coexistence of tradition and modernisation, particularly through sound and the notion of speed. And we are in the midst of a rebalancing of societies globally, that can encompass both mass-synchronisation and also local practices.

SJ: This work reflects my long-standing interest in movement, time and speed. It concerns how various entities that escape modern time and singular speed operate with different senses of time, capturing this through sound. For example, it includes the time when gayageum player Park Soon-a learns and performs Nonghyun (a Korean-style vibrato) that are not recorded in the score, the individual time of the plant *Epiphyllum* that adapts and blooms while moving here and there beyond the garden, and how gamelan players move at different times with their own breaths and rhythms, which then combine to create the overall time.

The interest in speed and accelerationism can be seen as a political and philosophical idea that uses the contradictions of capitalism

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Sojung Jun, *Organ_Knee*, 2020, plastic,
40 x 30 x 40cm. Courtesy Atelier
Hermès. Photo: Sangtae Kim

as a driving force. Of course, it has the limitation of lacking realistic alternatives, but it seems to provide interesting points for thinking aesthetically about contemporaneity. For instance, when considering ecology and technology together, the restrictions on human movement and contact during the pandemic have led us to reflect on the activities we have undertaken on Earth, but rather than a strategy of doing nothing, it is about envisioning the possibility of thinking about technology and ecology together, or the possibility of converting acceleration into another energy. We can also discover future possibilities from the contradictions of the past.

While producing this work, I thought about how the diaspora of Asian women has been inscribed, the spatiotemporal notion of Asia, and ways to transcend the dichotomous distinction of globalisation driven by locality or capital. In the process of this work, I rethought how the migration history of Korean women is inscribed and gained many reference points regarding nomadic identity in the artistic practices of female poets and novelists. Separating from the fictionality or fantasy of Asia as named by the West, I could evoke Asia as a method with plasticity. In the essay 'I Do Woman Animal Asia', poet Kim Hyesoon focusses on the beings in between as she crosses the borders of Asia, stating that one can 'do woman animal Asia' regardless of gender, race or nation. This piece reminds us of the stories of futuristic bodies that undergo transformations in the works of Korean women SF writers like Kim Choyeop, or the tales of vines that spread (move) slowly but far in a world destroyed by dust.

Adeena Mey (AM): Is there some kind of parallel between the plasticity of Asia and your interest in change and transformation through speed which we could understand through this notion of plasticity? Can you tell us more about what you mean by plasticity?

SJ: Plasticity refers to a physical property that signifies the ability to undergo deformation without breaking, leaving traces and changes. Similarly, through the act of listening to others, one does not lose their original self but transforms into a completely different self. When I think of the sense of speed in Asia, I reflect on the rapid experiences of imperialism, modernisation, colonisation and capitalism, which leave traces and create a force that drives change. Even without recalling the cosmotechnical perspective of Yuk Hui, who understands technology as a relationship between humans and the environment, one can understand the nature of humans and the environment, as well as political and economic systems, along with speed and technology. Transformation and metamorphosis are deeply related to the relationships with surrounding materials or their patches.

AM: Your works *Eclipse I* and *Eclipse II* (both 2020) feature music composed for a North Korean version of gayageum, which unlike its Southern counterpart, which is a twelve-string instrument, has twenty-one strings. The latter, by way of Soviet influence, was redesigned to adjust to Western musical scale. This, of course, speaks to the division of the Koreas, but also to broader transregional dynamics of hybridisation at the intersections of art and politics. Can you tell us more about these works and about these issues more broadly?

SJ: Perhaps it can be seen that I am exploring the complex layers of contemporary Asian modernity through my works. It crosses individual lives across geographical and national boundaries,

revealing the aesthetic and simultaneously political elements inherent in personal lives.

At the centre of the works *Eclipse I* and *Eclipse II* is the North Korean gayageum. The irony of the instrument can be said to drive the work, and the aspects that betray expectations and predictions are intriguing. While traditional Korean instruments in the South tend to maintain their form relatively strictly under the name of 'tradition', North Korean traditional instruments have undergone significant modifications by referencing Western instruments. For example, the core playing technique of the gayageum, known as Nonghyun, is difficult to achieve on the modified gayageum, even though the North Korean gayageum has been adapted to allow for this technique. Just as the division of Korea is not merely a North-South issue, this work reveals hybridisation and extensive transregional dynamics at the intersection of art and politics through the North Korean gayageum. The life and music of composer Yun Isang, who inspired this work, as well as the composers and performers involved, reflect this as well. This perspective was also revealed in our first collaboration between North and South Korean performers, titled *Early Arrival of Future* (2015), through the eyes of multiple cameras that capture the two performers and their intersections. For me, the experience of shifting the axes of time and space is important; reading and reinterpreting history within the context of time differences and movement is fascinating. It focusses on discoveries, visions and sensations that can only be obtained from the gaps or the disparities with the present.

Together with artists, curators and art historians active in East Asia I was recently talking about how the East Asian art market is thriving more than ever, yet the language to inscribe the art history of East Asia seems to be lacking. One alternative we agreed upon is that without falling into nationalism, we have no choice but to understand these elements through the intersections between nations and the dynamics between regions.

AM: For a project in Paris, at Villa Vassilieff, you worked on the question of exile. You did that by looking at Korean adoptees in France and at Korean-American writer and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's experimental novel *Dictée* (1982). How did you approach these different realities and references and how did they unfold in your project?

SJ: It is interesting to understand how our lives are connected and to identify those patches. This awareness made me feel that my life, the life of Korean adoptee Celia, whom I met in Paris, and the life of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha are intricately intertwined. Cha's experimental novel *Dictée* intricately intersects the lives of Yu Gwan-sun, Joan of Arc, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, mythological muses, her mother from Manchuria, and the author herself through various images and texts. As a work of feminism, post-colonialism, and diaspora literature, this experimental novel prompts me to imagine how the past and present converse and what stories they tell about the future.

At Villa Vassilieff, I conducted research on synaesthesia. I was curious about the possibility of evoking or sensing non-visible areas through focussing on senses other than sight, such as smell, touch and hearing. Of course, this also raises questions about how

individual experiences of synaesthesia can be shared with others in the context of creation and appreciation.

Interval. Recess. Pause. (2017) can be seen as a narrative generated from my visual responses, collective and personal memories, and the intersection and collision of images and sounds, borrowing the writing style of *Dictée* within my research on synaesthesia. It is also a way of re-inscribing the missing personal histories.

NH: The form of your installations is very interesting too. For instance, *Syncope* incorporates both physical and digital objects, particularly the digital plants that are in the film, but which are also physical objects in the installation and viewable via augmented reality (AR) on one's smartphone. You clearly think spatially as an artist. Could you say something about your approach to spatial practice in relation to film?

SJ: The expression of thinking spatially is intriguing. Some point out the tactile quality of my videos, and I believe there is a connection. I can certainly say that I think spatially. Even when making a video, I often think of organising images, sounds, light, movement, text, characters and landscapes as if building a house on the space of the video. In video, time and space are not experienced as fixed and singular entities but are experienced as a variable and discontinuous process that changes through the interaction of elements. I hope this work can re-establish relationships with space within the exhibition venue, as I believe the work can be activated through the bodies of the audience.

If the work feels like a physical body or an organic entity, it is likely because the appropriation of media operates prominently in the work. If the existing use of 3D or AR focusses on virtualising existing things or creating illusions, in the case of the *Syncope* app and sculpture, it vibrates the immateriality of data, appearing before us as a body that stands against gravity and weight. The sculpture, returning in the form of heavy traditional material like aluminium casting, engages with the way of sensing weight, gravity, speed and time as a body that traverses the medium of sculpture from the past to the present. Instead of choosing a way to virtually move while shedding the weight of the present, it appropriates by reversing gravity. Here, virtual space is sensed as light and colour. The sculpture in *Syncope* could be an allegory of movement, speed and time, as well as of my practice more broadly, which deals with both video and sculpture, especially in terms of technology.

AM: You have already discussed Kim Hyesoon and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Another significant figure from the pantheon of radical Korean artists you have engaged with is the poet Yi Sang. Could you tell us more about him?

SJ: My video installation *Despair to be Reborn* (2020) examines the sense of speed in Seoul and the time when subjectivity was absent through the prism of Yi Sang's poem *Au Magasin de Nouveautés* (1932) within a nearly 100-year time span. Yi Sang was a poet and architect who lived a short life during the Japanese colonial period in Korea, which was a time full of contradictions. He also worked as an architect for the governor-general of Korea. His poetry, known for its radical forms and the difficulty of its content, often employs wordplay and repetition akin to concrete poetry or Dadaism. The

poem I referenced captures the poet's astonishment and wonder at the Japanese-style department stores built in Seoul at that time. From this, I read the sharp perspective of an artist who anticipates the beginning of modern capitalism in Seoul along with its sense of speed. Yi Sang initially wrote many poems in Japanese, but he also utilised other languages such as English, French and Chinese, as well as terms from atomic structure and physics. Artists who traverse contradictory time and space provide me with many questions. While existing evaluations often focus on aesthetic experimentation, I am interested in the possibility of resistance as a form of thinking about the era or the voice of the artist in his poetry.

AM: To end with a sense of futurity, could you tell us about how you envision your projects to come? Is there anything you haven't been able to make yet that you are working on?

SJ: That seems like an appropriate question. Since these are works that have not yet come, they are filled with excitement, fear and impulse. Perhaps this is the most ideal state where everything is possible. These days, I am exploring the archaeological time of Eurasia and the Silk Road, as well as the SF-like time —understood not only as Science Fiction but also as speculative fabulation — and the layers of time, while investigating the potential for a new nomad. The Silk Road is not just a trade route of the past, but a tool of thought that poses profound questions about cultural and geopolitical norms related to nations, ethnicities and economies. Following the narratives of Koreans forcibly relocated to Central Asia aboard the Trans-Siberian Railway in the early twentieth century, I am making the identity of movement that transcends the boundaries of time and space in the network of decentralised thought evoked by the Silk Road into a central question of my work. I look forward to having other conversations about my work soon.

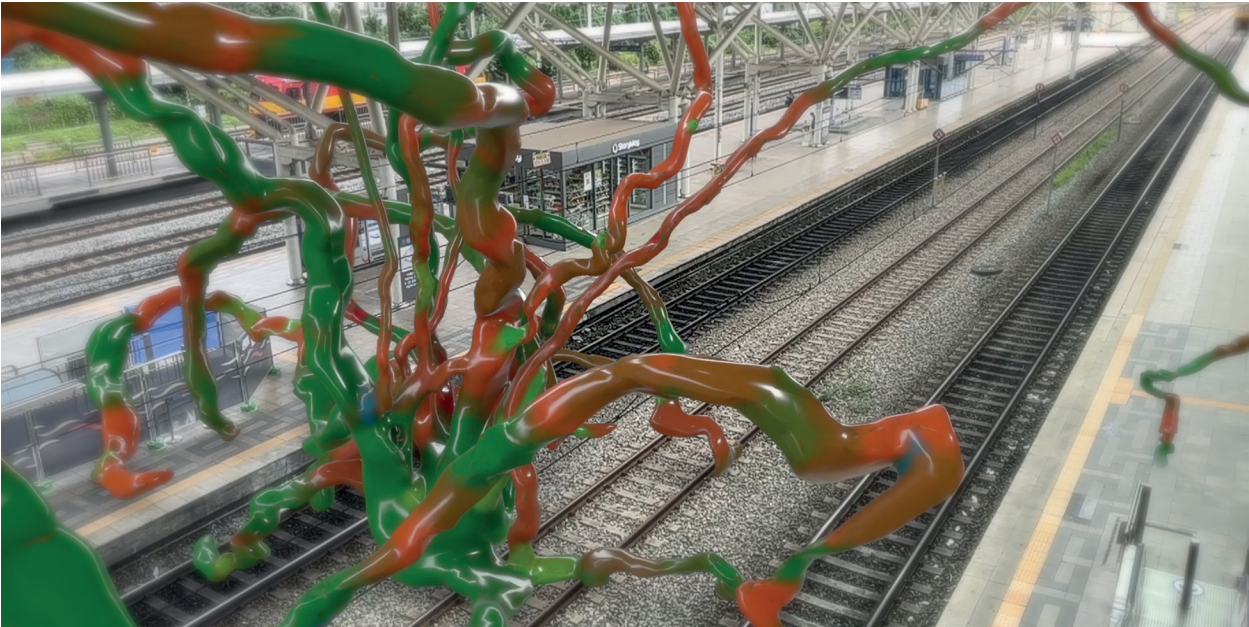


Sojung Jun, *Epiphyllum I, III*, 2023, VR 3D sculptures, aluminium cast. Installation view at Barakat Contemporary, Seoul, 2023. Courtesy Barakat Contemporary. Photo: Jeon Byung Cheol



Installation view of Korea Artist Prize 2023,
National Museum of Modern and Contemporary
Art, Seoul, 2023. Courtesy National Museum of
Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea. Photo:
Jang Junho (Image Zoom)







Sojung Jun, *Syncope*, 2023, single channel
video, 32min 10sec, still. Courtesy the artist





Sojung Jun, *Green Screen*, 2022, single channel video, stereo sound. Installation view at Leeum Museum of Art, Seoul. Courtesy Leeum Museum of Art. Photo: Sangtae Kim





Above: Sojung Jun, *Eclipse I*, 2020, two-channel video, stereo sound, 4K, 10min 27sec, still

Below: Sojung Jun, *Eclipse II*, 2020, two-channel video, stereo sound, 4K, 13min 25sec, still





Left: Installation view of Korea Artist Prize 2023, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, 2023. Courtesy National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea. Photo: Jang Junho (Image Zoom)

Right: Sojung Jun, *Despair to be Reborn*, 2020, single channel video, 24min 45sec. Installation view at Atelier Hermès, Seoul. Courtesy Atelier Hermès. Photo by Sangtae Kim