

The Aesthetic Remains of Language and Body

[Quiet] RohwaJeong X Chang Sungeun

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I

Some time ago, I received a letter from someone living in Mongolia. He might have thought that I could not read their language, as the letter outlined simple words of greetings and enclosed a drawing on a slightly larger piece of paper. On the earthly meadows of Mongolia, a couple of houses sat side by side in the far distance. Migratory birds in the sky, sprouting grass on the ground, and the transparent, light-blue lake that runs parallel with the land cuts across the atmosphere, delivering a landscape of Mongolia that I have never seen, into my body.

Whether it was imbued in the paper that was once in that land or whether the drawing of the landscape unfolded in the paper carried it, I sensed the earth's temperature even though I have never visited the place.

A single-syllable word in Mongolian was written on the upper corner of the drawing. As I could not comprehend its meaning, I imagined a sound based on the word's shape. Imagining something that cannot be seen, i.e., something unknown because it is not seen, is like an event of illumination, finding an unreal subject that has overcome the impossible and failure. The drawing that arrived from Mongolia sent me a message on the artistic power that can break through reality, one in which unknown and silent forms rise within the senses through the imagination.

The reason I recalled this memory upon my encounter with *Quiet*, the duo exhibition (or three person exhibition) of Chang Sungeun and RohwaJeong, was because it reminded me of a dimension of belief that was hard to describe, in which bodily senses mediated by the imagination allow one to possess the experience of an aesthetic event that steps on both fiction and real simultaneously - like the density of a silence that fills the space. Although not yet certain of the end point, the two (or three) artists unrealistically divided the space into two, calling attention to the action of continuously overturning and investigating the possibility and impossibility of an experience. What does it mean to split the space into two? Chang and RohwaJeong divided the space horizontally in midair, stirring up the banal body (bodies) of reality that entered the room. Faintly dividing the space into upper and lower areas, as if opening the trap of empty gazes enthralled by the doorstep of this space, the object/world looks at the empty eyes of "the silent movement," while the movement of silence that breaks "static silence" continuously looks around the empty object/world.

For instance, two aerial bars hang diagonally across the exhibition space. The bar supported by sturdy white ropes is engraved with English and Russian sentences, "words never can be learned" and "техника, которая повторяет неудачи," resembling a conversation/dialogue. By overlapping the two sentences on aerial bars that stand still, *trapeze* (2020) by RohwaJeong invokes a certain kind of imagination and movement related to the static moment. I should say something about this, yet this will have to wait - instead, I sit down low, beneath the movement of the (static) pendulum that the aerial bar imagines, on one of the points of the triangle, and observe the rest of the points.

Foot (2020), *Shoulder* (2020), and *Neck* (2020) by Chang Sungeun can be called the remains of the body, or what came off of it, which awakens a perspective that can eventually see through the (fundamental) matter of a series of distinctive forms. The location for looking at *Foot* falls in the place where one places his/her left foot on the *soban* small table for dining (actually, as if to bolster one's left foot by fully touching the top of the *soban*), awkwardly standing with his knee bent with a white ball tied around the knee. A white flower stem as tall as the knee is stuck between the second and third toes; the still image is created by the power accumulated at the tip of the toes, without

dispersing it but leaving it there when this ultimate situation is presented. In other words, this spot for observation works as a support for form, owing to the fresh tension and force that is created in the body by looking and staying still by bending both legs and sitting on the yellow chair or shelf, carefully placing one's heel deeply toward the knees, and turning one's face to the right. The series of forms transfer all remains of the body to the dimension of pure material as if they were a sculpture.

Although I do not readily believe in the word "pure," RohwaJeong may have thought about the belief or wish toward a pure form in *trapeze*, judging by some observations - yet this is only my speculation. Assuming they fully considered the abstract yet general gazes of the body (bodies) that roams around—regarding the diagonal line that cuts across the rectangular space where two aerial bars hang in parallel facing each other, the immaculate site where the two form a connection—doesn't *trapeze* contemplate the wonder of a technique (which repeats failure) that goes beyond language (which can never be learned), as the senses are re/constructed in this real space? It was about art, they said. When the phrases "words never can be learned" and "техника, которая повторяет неудачи" give shape to a specific situation by intervening with imaginary scenes of technology and forms of latent movement in the aerial bar—I decided on calling the aerial bar an "object" to be most neutral—RohwaJeong may have been in search for a new kind of agreement on art as pure form (which has been replaced by an aesthetic discussion of the distant past) beyond the veil. In other words, it may be a belief in the nonverbal perception of art as being an unlearnable language, as well as a faith in the aesthetic imagination led by failure and the impossibility of the technique of repetitive failure. This is like a belief in oneself, who has cracked the verbal meaning of "техника, которая повторяет неудачи," and therefore can see the sensations of form that the arrangements create, and can also talk about the aesthetic attitude and experience of imagining its sound.

Upon observing Chang's *Neck*—a photograph loosely rolled up and placed on a rectangular wooden board that is supported by four thin rods—one may talk about an unexpected experience

of the aesthetic moment carefully constructed by the body, the photograph, and the remains of the pieces. One may also talk without blaming our poor vocabulary in regards to this temporary experience, where the abstract senses and bodily senses correspond aesthetically on an imaginative path. This is because one is observing the ironic aesthetic moment when language becomes form, and form becomes language. *Shoulder*, as remains of the image, is located at the corner where two walls meet the ground, and leads to the imagination of the body, photography, and language. A thin linear object, which was once combined with the body [shoulder] and used for building a static moment of time-wise isolation, is balanced on a triangular support placed on top of a small block, thus imagining an invisible body and its shoulders. This observation upon *Neck* and *Shoulder* realizes an imaginary form of the unseen - what is unknown because it is invisible. Just as the hidden remains of language and body simultaneously look at me. Like what the philosopher says.

The aerial bars—positioned across the space that is divided into two—as well as *Foot*, *Shoulder*, and *Neck*—displayed in three points beneath the bars—also look at the imagination of movement, sound, and form, which is yet to appear and cannot be seen, in a serenity as close as possible to silence. This quietness is not merely a hushed silence but an emotion of aesthetic contemplation similar to a gap, cracking and bursting as each other's imaginary visions and movements across.

II

words never can be learned

техника, которая повторяет неудачи the technique of repeating failure

The two phrases that face each other horizontally in midair exist as if they were excuses for (the lack of) each other. "words never can be learned" seem to say so towards the sentence that it faces, in other words, firmly stating that one cannot learn it. Simultaneously, one can experience the presence of a powerful gesture asserting that "words never can be learned" as it is itself a failed language that cannot be attained. A failed voice of someone that has uttered: "words never can be

learned." Its' emergence. By conceiving a voice caught up in an (impossible) language, "техника, которая повторяет неудачи" yearns for an imaginary gesture, as a technique that overcomes the intensity of both language and body. Yearning; I briefly hesitated on using this grandiose term. Yet, if we could talk about our artistic vocation of reading this language of absence as an imaginary image in front of the presence of "техника, которая повторяет неудачи," in which sound has disappeared, wouldn't we be able to recognize its propriety that goes beyond cliché, as a language that can bear its weight?

Jeong: "words never can be learned"

may mean that one does not have the ability to learn it,

but it can also show the attitude of one's refusal to learn.

Choosing not to do something seemed like another stern attitude of doing something.

The fact that the two phrases face each other, the tension that this configuration exposes, may be due to the longing action of "reading/not reading," and our desire to ponder. Reading and not reading, doing and not doing; an experience generated by the two switching places presents a heavy tension while the contradicting actions relate to each other and try to continuously reach a kind of "denial".

Jeong: Since we work together, we like to talk about things lying at opposite ends,

and the technique of repeating failure seems similar to our approach.

Therefore, I'm not afraid of failure.

Roh: I am afraid. Afraid, but I ignore it. I just couldn't stand somewhere in between.

I felt the need to keep both ends. As much as I'm afraid, I had to ignore.

By doing so, I think we can maintain our attitude.

Jeong: Some people will just walk past the unreadable phrase written in Russian, but some

people may be curious, wanting to learn what it means, desiring to read it. I thought about these desires.

As an object hanging in the air, the aerial bar makes one imagine its movement produced by an immobile state. While the two bars generate a vast pendular movement in the air, moving from "here" to "there," the two will also collide, drift apart, and fall out of line continuously, leaving invisible trajectories in space. We imagine a movement that silence creates, like a tightly shut mouth. A move that is absent here. The disappeared sound. The true, the genuine beauty of the object.

Jeong: I liked the connotation of the word quiet.

Not only does it mean silence, but it also refers to a person's calm and poised attitude, so while it is passive, I also think it is an active movement.

Roh: It seemed like a powerful word.

In quiet, whether it is holding on to it, or whether it is demanding it, it feels extremely strong.

Jeong: I focused on the trapeze because I was thinking about the remains when beauty is erased. I thought a lot about the circus I saw when I was young.

Gestures of the trapeze at the circus are beautiful. I wanted to talk about what was left when that beauty has disappeared.

Roh: Although there's no message or straightforward procedure, my thoughts on creating something beautiful gets bigger and bigger.

Beauty, is of course, subjective.

Aerial bars hanging from the ceiling, as well as words inscribed on them, construct the possibility and appearance of images that are not present here as a series of disappearances and

impossibilities. Between you and me, one imagines vanished gestures, its sound and sentiments within a closed form that the incomplete objects create while comprehending failed language as an (aesthetic) image.

III

Here lies the place of observation - the place to look at *Foot, Neck, and Shoulder*. This specific spot occupies a singular point, like a box while recalling the unclear form of an object, such as a chair or a shelf. Below the static trapeze that makes a ghostly movement in the air, maybe it continuously makes the mysterious mark, repeating the visual event of impossibility and disappearance on the floor of an empty space. What matters to us is the empty place, like the box. A void spot implies the absence of vision, and once we overlap our bodies with the surface of the box, you and I experience the absence of vision. "Nothing can be seen" presents itself in front of us.

Chang: Once I start to look, I know I have to make a decision.

The pressure to conclude on looking;

I wanted to keep some distance from this.

When I close in on physical distance, maybe I can look differently,

because of the psychological distance toward the work.

Looking sideways, looking from the side,

slightly challenging looking...

A photograph one cannot see; when the distorted object neglects our gaze within this visual event to an impossible state, what can we see? What should we look at? Absence. As he said, I look at the hole of absence. Sitting on the empty box, we look at the pure death of that object, which endlessly abandons our gaze. A photo with its surface mangled, a rolled-up photo, a photo that has disappeared, only left with the object in the photo, an oblique photo, a photo hiding in a hole.

Images that deny all sight reveal its visibility even more; the presence of weight, size, thickness, and depth that conceals something we cannot possibly see.

Chang: If the word “death” comes out of a little girl’s mouth, people will probably say that it’s very naïve or not so serious. I don’t think so.

For this reason, I just wanted to bring out the unfamiliar emotion that I saw beforehand.

Rather than seeing something, eyes headed to *Foot*, *Neck*, and *Shoulder* revolve around the interior of contemplation at a space where one cannot see. Forms of lost objects look at my absence as if to witness the lack of my gaze, in a state of silence that comes from the inability to see. (The failure of) looking represents the presence of all absent things. Therefore, the absence of my gaze, its silence, leads an imagination on the pure depth of empty things that lie below the horizon (of night that is isolated from sight), along with images-objects of loss. How can I talk about this?

Chang: The minute I uttered the word, I felt quite good.

That word, just seems true. A person with the truth should not say it so easily or tell anyone. Being silent, is close to an act of silently keeping it.

If absolute reality exists, I was wondering why

I couldn’t do anything amid this lack of reality,

and regarding poems that write about imaginary worlds, a poet has once said that the place where s/he writes poems is the true place.

She said that the poem was art’s place. A place like an empty box. A place to imagine absence. To look at the realness of silence (despite one’s failure), she carves small sculptural objects—which may be present in her photos someday—with her own hands and places them on a location that can

hardly be seen. She then seems to calculate the distance of the imaginary place of the moment of presence that will reappear in front of us.

IV

As an impossible place, in this artistic space that is horizontally divided into two, the two (or three) artists dig deep into the amusement of an imaginative contemplation that the "looking" generates. This horizontal divide proves the presence of a void as a vacuum that fills the space, as well as allowing one to imagine its physical depth and volume. In line with this, on the verge of all contradicting things, disputing things, and impossible things, they overlap the experience of presence that is related to the moment of silence, as well as the gestures, movement, sound, and rupture that silence engenders. While the remains that come out of language and gesture endlessly doubt the belief of an aesthetic moment revealed as a "truthful image" in an imaginary place, on this trip of silence.