

“Writing leads to reading and reading encourages hearing. Hearing triggers writing.”

-Quote from interview with Kim On

In “Costume Play” performed at Sanwoollim Theatre in 2009, Kim On takes a seat in the audience and begins to read out Starck Explications (Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2003) written in French by the designer Philippe Starck for 20 minutes. Unable to understand the text read in French, the audience only intuitively accepts the rhythm as either a language or a sound.

As a major in Object-Book (book crafting) at ENSAD Strasbourg, France, Kim On’s work is about a form that is a book, activities (reading, hearing, and writing) that take place between people and the text, and ideas that interact within and through such activities. She separates or deconstructs signifiers and signified, the elements of semiotics, and studies independent communication methodology of the two elements. Kim experiments with signifiers—that is, the materialistic element which enables signs to be perceived and delivered—in reading, writing, and hearing and signified, a concept that is intended to be expressed, as two inseparable yet uncombinable elements that are neither superior nor inferior over one another but are rather related, albeit with different functions.

Borges Borges Borges

Kim’s works originate from the unusual experience she had in college while reading the book of Jorge Luis Borges. Just as what Kim has said, Borges’ writings “distract and disconnect the reader’s thoughts.” Non-linear structure that continues to disconnect the story and the potential of such structure is reenacted by Kim who alters signifiers and deconstructs signified in an endless repetition. She selects an arbitrary text from Borges’ Collected Fictions and repetitively types the text with an electric typewriter. She then attaches to the wall the black magnetic tape on which the text is typed. In the end, the magnetic tapes on the wall form a shape of bird wings. With the alteration of the signifiers, the signified is also altered, the text changes its form, and the magnetic tape carrying the text takes on the shape of bird wings, creating a new meaning system. The experiment of altering text into a different substance is also found in “Livre Parallélépipède ni Ouvert ni Fermé (Hexahedral Book that is Neither Open nor Closed, 2002).” Kim types the text of The Library of Babel from Borges’ novel Collected Fictions on a single piece of A4 sized paper with an electric typewriter. As the text is typed over the other, the overlapped texts become incomprehensible.

“There Is No Such Place” in 2009 is Kim’s another experiment on continued deconstruction and combination of signifiers and signified relating to the text of Borges. She reads out A Weary Man’s Utopia from Borges’ Collected Fictions that begins with “He called it “Utopia,” a Greek word which means “there is no such place.”” At first, the single voice of Kim is heard. The voice is then repetitively heard in each ear in turn and the voice increasingly overlaps in two, three and more layers. Gradually, the overlapping of the voice declines, returning to the single voice that ends the story. In the process, the context of the story becomes

incomprehensible. The overlapping sound of the book reading makes the primary function of the original signified in the book, which is to deliver the meaning, completely non-existent. On top of that, Kim deconstructs the visuality of Borges' written work by erasing the text of *A Weary Man's Utopia*, only leaving the title and the footnote. The text is erased in black and what remain are space and its fictitious meaning.

Non-productive Creation

Kim's experiments in deconstruction and combination of signifiers and signified are non-productive activities focused on creating new tension, not capitalistic use-value or exchange-value. The non-materialistic nature of sound as a medium is exhibited particularly when signifiers and signified in a text are reengaged.

"I Walk into the Restroom (2002)" is a piece which uses a children's chair and a text, silk-screened on a wall that carries 16 processes of urinating in the restroom. The audience will sit in the small chair and try to read the small text. According to Kim, at the very moment that the audience sits in an uncomfortable position and concentrates on reading the text that begins with "I walk into the restroom," and ends with "I dream of sitting on the toilet for an indefinite time," and "Like the towel hanging on the wall that should never become dry," the time stops and an indefinite "time" opens up.

The work of creating an incomprehensible text, which is a non-productive outcome, is based on the incredulity toward the subject of enlightenment as assumed by metanarrative. Metanarrative is a totalizing schema which explains historical experience or knowledge. As Jean-François Lyotard has said, metanarratives are created and reinforced by power structures and ignore the variety of human existence. The moments of obsolescence of metanarratives that Kim persistently attempts to create in her work deconstruct the elements of normative and explanatory narrative language. The great goal, great hero, and great dangers sought by metanarratives are lost. Kim's works embody unacceptable components of historical development and exudes various non-productive passion of human hidden within.

In "Literary Revolution of Biscuits (2008)," Kim reads out every single text on the biscuit package in a non-stop, line-by-line manner for about five minutes, using sound to equal out the letters in different sizes printed on the fancy package that promotes consumption. The performance, which is also a piece of sound poetry, is an experiment that deconstructs the consumeristic value of the text's literary style on the consumer produce of capitalism through the act of reading.

"Livre à fumer –devenir- (A Book for Burning, 2004)" is a performance in which Kim repetitively writes down a word "devenir (meaning "to become")" on a thin piece of paper using a sharp-nib pen. During that time, the image of the paper with the text written is projected to the audience. Once the writing is completed, the paper is rolled up and smoked as a cigarette. At that very moment, the letters of the word disappear with a smoke in a person's mouth—"devenir" becomes the word "venir (meaning "to come") without "de," and then finally turns into ashes and disappears in the air when the paper is burnt out.

Sharing of Creation

Kim demands continued participation of the audience in the process of creating a non-productive outcome through alteration of signifiers and signified of a text. As she has said, the “autistic nature” of her work, on the flip side, involves communication. For “215 Minutes and 44 Seconds of Intimate Hours, Here and Elsewhere,” Kim sends out an invitation to advertise her work with a message, “For those who enjoy “reading” out a book, I am pleased to invite you to visit the recording studio with a book of your preference.” In the “book reading” project, that began on November 29, 2002 and ended on May 22, 2003, 34 people using 11 different languages are invited to participate in her work. The participants are given the liberty to choose the book and read it out for as long as they wanted, and the recording takes place on condition that the author’s name and the book title are not read. Through difference voices, stories, reading styles, tones, and languages, the participants experience audio-cohabitation. The audience listens to each of the story ranging from the Buddhist Scripture, Homer’s Odyssey, Romeo and Juliet, the Bible, to slang dictionary, chatting text and self-confession for 215 minutes and 44 seconds.

“ㄱ (Gi-yeok)’ Sound Intervened in Him (2007)” is the work that began when Kim returned to Korea after studying abroad and took interest in audio-visual composition of consonants and vowels of the Korean alphabet Hangul. In an architect’s office named “HIM” located in the southern part of Korea, the audience writes down the consonants and vowels of “ㄱ (Gi-yeok)’ Sound Intervened in Him” separately using a calligraphy pen on a piece of A4 sized paper. The work is based on a language game using homonyms—the word “power” is pronounced “him” in Korean, which is also the name of the architect’s office. Memory (“gi-yeok” in Korean) and “ㄱ (consonant of Hangul pronounced “gi-yeok”)” are also a homonym. With such methodological yet entertaining language game, Kim engages the medium “sound” and participation of the audience into the text creation.

Prologue

Kim On is an artist that experiments with “writing,” “reading” and “hearing” of a book, through which signifiers and signified are deconstructed and altered. The experiments are temporary works that take place in a specific space and are materialized with participation of the audience or a variety of media encompassing sound, performance, sound poetry, installation art, and video in order to create a moment of sharing non-productive and non-capitalistic values.