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Hye Yeon Nam - From Disabling to Creative Displacement

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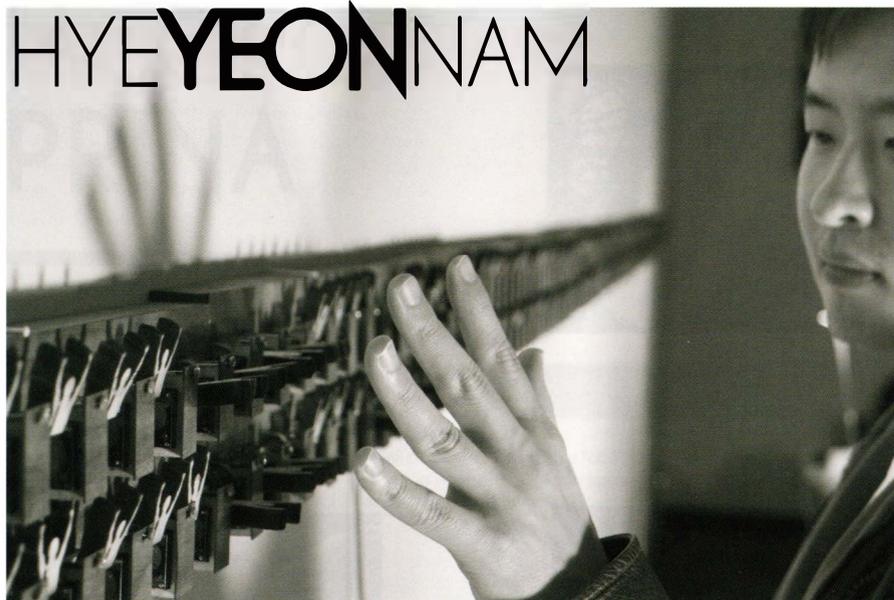
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HYEYEONNAM



"Hooray (man-Se)" 2012

FROM DISABLING TO CREATIVE DISPLACEMENT



interview by LEDA CEMPELLIN

Associate Professor of Art History at South Dakota State University.

"Space takes on multiple definitions. For me, I understand space as the sum of cultural and social forces that act on me (...) When I moved from Korea to the United States, my body became a gauge that felt my displacement" (Hye Yeon Nam, *In-Between*, MFA Degree Thesis, Rhode Island School of Design, 2006, p. 32).

With a solid background in digital media from the Rhode Island School of Design (MFA) and at the Georgia Institute of Technology (PhD candidate), Korean-born artist Hye Yeon Nam explores her physical and psychological navigation of a space that is personal, cultural, social, and political. Her 2006 *Self Portrait* displays a four-video installation showcasing four improbable situations, intended as metaphors of displacement and consequent feeling of uneasiness. It is a new portrayal of cultural displacement as a kind of 'foreign disability,' expressed in the extreme fatigue that even the simplest daily tasks demands on someone programmed to function in a different culture. We cannot forget the sense of visual disorientation provoked by a male urinal turned by Duchamp into *Fountain*, but we also remember performance art chronologically standing in between the two artists to push the sense of displacement from the object towards the surrounding environment and social relations through the body.

A close-up of Hye Yeon Nam shows the artist trying to eat cherry tomatoes with a dysfunctional instrument, flat and long; she leaves a perfect triangular posture, which we remember having seen in the figure of Christ in Leonardo's *Last Supper*, to bend forward and ease the pain of numerous failed attempts in the right shoulder

with her left arm; her frustration is unleashed in a puff, as the tomatoes slip out of the useless spoon and one falls in the tablecloth. In another situation, Nam is trying to have her meal in a restaurant; she is sitting on a lopsided wooden chair that is bent forward, and as she eats, she needs to constantly adjust her posture, to prevent herself from falling. Everyone around her is comfortably sitting in normal chairs and seems not to notice her uneasiness. In another video, the artist tries to walk around the city with shoes carrying appendages similar to fins. When descending down the subway stairs, movements slow down, right when other people must hurry: she is completely out of place, and even gets in other people's way. In the last video, the artist tries to drink orange juice from a glass, whose bottom has a hole. She pours the liquid from a carafe held by the other hand in the glass and quickly bring it to her mouth, being able to just have a small sip as the rest is spilled out. All these actions seem to require the artist immense amounts of energy, without being compensated or fulfilled accordingly; when the artist is around other people, it also seems to alienate her further. Close-up scenes, presenting her alone, alternate with wider spaces that include more complex social contexts.

The 2008 video *Wonderland* features the artist walking slowly in the streets of Times Square towards us, while everybody else seems to move backwards. Originally, the artist was the one walking backwards, she was the 'strange' one; by reversing the video, the audience is confronted with the strangeness of the others through her eyes. A very subtle psychological dynamic can be experienced, if we stand in front of the video long

enough to become part of it. With the rigidity of an avatar navigating in *Second Life*, the artist walks slowly in opposite direction than the rest of society, looking like a disoriented zombie. Sometimes people hurriedly appearing to us from behind the artist and giving their shoulder to us, seem to feel intimidated by her slow but determinate walk, and try to get as fast as possible far from her. Those seen frontally and passing from us backwards behind her seem not to even notice her, their indifference being marked by the absence of eye contact. As people move in two opposite streams at the sides of the artist, two reactions are noticeable: people either are indifferent to her, even though her moves are disabling, or feel intimidated by her strange behavior and try to escape from her. This video stretches our perception of culturally codified behavioral responses to situations, to the point that we ask ourselves what is the 'norm'.

Nam's most recent work adds her expertise in robotics to be merged with a still performative component. The high-tech human-machinery dream is not new in the contemporary art world, from Rebecca Horn's painting machine *Lovers* to Wim Delvoye's pooping machine *Cloaca Turbo*. However, new is Nam's personal experience of cultural disorientation becoming more universal and generalized through involvement of human-machinery interaction and the introduction of a stronger participatory component. Now she is the one in control of our reactions. Among these pieces, *Please Smile*, 2012 deals with prejudice towards uncomfortable diversity turning into friendliness: when face-tracking software intercepts a human smile, the index fingers of five robotic arms, pointing to the visitors, open into a cheerfully saluting hand. *Hooray*, 2013 makes a visual comment on hierarchies that are socially and politically shaped. From the monitor in one side of the room, the artist repeatedly bows for several minutes trying to keep smiling as a sign of a culturally determined expectation of her gender's submissiveness; in the other side, a long double row of miniature wooden figurines shaped like humans bow in sign of respect, as soon as the shadows of a large and intimidating museum visitor are intercepted by light sensors, which activate their motors. The two-part piece speaks about how we socially codify deferential behaviors in front of power inequality.

Why and how did this shift occur from the artist-centered world of displacement to the more participatory dimension of human and machine interaction involving the museum visitors? Perhaps it is a shift occurred in Hye Yeon Nam's existential paradigm, as she progressively adjusted to her new life in the United States: once she has found her own place in a culture that was formerly disorienting to her, she is ready to shake our world. Two 'strange' creatures, the bicultural artist and the pointing finger turning into a waving hand, live among us and want to teach us how to accept diversity in every form.

Unfamiliar Behavior: Works by Hye Yeon Nam, Jepson Center for the Arts, Savannah, Georgia, January 30 – April 28, 2013. More on the artist's work at www.hynam.org