

Still Alive

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Through works that employ various mediums such as video, installation, and performance the artist Jeong Ahram explores the potentiality of individual as a cultural producer. Particularly in this solo exhibition, *Speaking For Myself*, the artist focuses on women's voices in relation to gender issues generated by recent hate crimes and incidents in South Korean society. She works with an interest in the relation between media and its sociocultural contexts (an area in which individuals today are situated). Although it is certain that the exhibition's central axis is the issue of the survival of individuals and gender, the artist states that the boundaries of her works should not be confined within particular issues.

This exhibition presents three projects. First, the work *Accidental Survival* focuses on ways of speaking through the condolence messages left in tribute to a female victim of the incident commonly known as the 'Gangnam murder case' in 2016.* The artist was interested in the fact that among the post-it note message archive many of those who left tributes to the victim used the expression, 'I survived.' The artist thought that this repetitive word that appeared in anonymous messages conveyed empathy for the victim, and expressed an awareness of the sacrifice that someone else had made in connection to their own life. The artist thought of this as a current generation's way of speaking, and created a script by appropriating the words from the anonymous individuals. The script is then performed through the voice of an immigrant woman; and the video documentation of her performance is played inside the exhibition space. On a screen depicted in the video documentation there is the flow of text from a teleprompter from which the person who speaks in the video reads. Furthermore, the somewhat unfamiliar and unnatural speaking of the immigrant delivers the content of the script, but simultaneously reminds us that the speaker is a social minority. This multilayered structure, or layers of relations proves that this work can expand to stand in for the voices of survival in other power structures beyond the original context of the authors of the post-it note messages — perhaps speaking for the collective identity of Korean women.

The work *Peer to Peer, Woman to Woman* (2017–2018) appropriates the cubicle structure of public bathrooms which have become a place of anxiety and surveillance through the crimes of illegal photography and filming (this has become a recent social problem). The artist constructs a kind of spatial representation in the exhibition space and invites the audience to participate in an (trivial) act of stopping the illegal photography and filming. The artist describes that it “presents a space for potential collaborations by multiplying the contact between individuals who resist the gendered gaze that monitors one's body in both offline and online spaces.” In addition to this, inside and outside of the cubicle structure in the exhibition space, Jeong rearranges anonymous interventions women have made, such as blocking the holes inside the restroom with toilet paper or videos that reuse and reinterpret the videos and photos uploaded online, and appearing in public demonstrations with pickets while wearing armor or masks.

Public Body Protocol (2015/2018 ~ ongoing) is a video work that documents an all female performance that took place in a downtown area of Seoul, South Korea. The artist constructs a performance manual that is, first of all, based on observing acts of repressing public demonstrators—ironically, their gesture becomes the performance of a life-saving manual during an emergency situation. The artist says that in this work she translates acts into “relative actions among collaborators through the reciprocal and mutually assisted contact of bodies of performers.” First of all, this work makes us think of how the subjectivity of women is spatially situated in our

society, relating to Nirmal Puwar' s analysis that "the presence of women and racialized minorities continues to locate what are now insiders as outsiders. Being both insiders and outsiders, they occupy a tenuous location. Not being the somatic norm, they don' t have an undisputed right to occupy this space. Yet they are still insiders." [1] Puwar argues that certain types of bodies are set as tacit occupants in social spaces; even though "social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy" , "there is a connection between bodies and space, which is built, repeated and contested over time" and "it is certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific positions. Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespasser," "Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders," and "the coupling of particular spaces with specific types of bodies is no doubt subject to change; this usually, however, is not without consequence as it often breaks with how bodies have been placed." [2] Are we insiders or outsiders in social spaces? Puwar points to the complicity of the positionality of spatial invaders who occupy social spaces, particularly in "how outsiders are simultaneously insiders." She says that some people move easily due to their social trajectories and habitus, and especially in institutional narratives of professionalism, where there is an ontological denial of the embodiment implicitly.[3]

In addition to the artist' s comment that this exhibition deals with the survival of individuals and gender relations but is not limited to particular issues, during a conversation with the artist at the artist talk and while writing this article I have come to similar ideas. Gender or minority issues cannot be easily understood through an emotional approach. A depth of understanding significantly differs depending on the degree of the academic discourse or the humanist knowledge surrounding the issues. Due to the markedly different levels of knowledge of an individual or group, each insists on their own feelings of absurdity, inconvenience and injustice. As Puwar states, according to the social trajectories and habitus of the individual the sensitivities to the survival of the other can have very complex aspects. Therefore, when countless 'I' speak of having 'survived' in a self-deprecating vein, another 'I' speaks up that is 'still alive' [4] in another sense — that is: 'I will not die.'

Footnote

*Translator' s note: In this incident a 23-year old woman was murdered by a stranger in a public bathroom near Gangnam station in Seoul, South Korea, on May 17th, 2016, igniting heated debates about misogyny, hate crimes and gender equality in South Kroeaa.

[1] Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, trans. Kim Miduk (Seoul: Hyusil Publishing, 2017), 23.

[2] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 23.

[3] Puwar, *Space Invaders*, 29.

[4] In recent video games, artificial intelligence is given female personalities while being depicted as a sinister, evil character. For example, in the video game 'Portal,' the artificially intelligent computer system GLaDOS appears in a female voice. 'Still Alive,' the song that plays alongside the ending credits of the game after the protagonist Chell kills GLaDOS suggests that GLaDOS is still alive