

The milieu of poetry: Yuri An's 'The Unharvested Sea' and 'Sailing Words'

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For the past couple of years South Korean artist Yuri An has been producing a compelling body of work which closely relates poetry, moving (and to a lesser extent still) images, and a series of self-published books which feature her writing. In 2015 she was a recipient of the Seoul Museum of Art award for Emerging Artists (the latter label only making her work even more remarkable for the consistency of its formal efforts and of its literary ruminations), a program which supports early career artists in South Korea with the organisation of a solo exhibition, a workshop, and a matching session with critics and curators to nurture discussion around the work.

Yuri An's show took place at Pool, a non-profit space run by artists, curators, and theorists. Pool is located in the neighbourhood of Gugi-dong, which slightly sets it apart from nearby Tongui-dong, home to some of Seoul's most noted alternative contemporary art spaces including Gallery Factory, Audio Visual Pavilion, and The Book Society. Positioning itself as the inheritor of the region's historical avant-garde ethos and aiming at articulating a critique of the 'art system, a revisionist analysis of history' and the production of 'counter publics',[1] it is fair to say that its relative off-centeredness materialises this aesthetic, discursive, and institutional agenda, although ventures such as underground galleries always function as a kind of urban *pharmakon*, offering temporary cures for a poisonous process of gentrification they themselves feed. This process is particularly impressive in Seoul, which Franco Berardi has called the 'perfectly recombinant city'. [2]



Most commentators have emphasised the use of language, of the written word and poetry, in Yuri An’s artistic practice, often drawing the conclusion that she is essentially a writer and a poet. In her catalogue essay Pool curator Jaeun Jung describes Yuri An’s exhibition both as an ‘epic poem embracing a long journey’ and ‘a lyrical poem embodying the longing and sympathy of this journey’s every moment’.[3] Taking Jung’s remark in its most primary sense one might then want to interrogate (following debates regarding the exhibition as medium or meta-artwork) whether we can locate poetry not only within the continuum created by the artist’s protean production made of projected images (digital film, slides) and writing (poetry books and installations) but also as part of these relationships as a whole which constitute the exhibition.



Entering the main gallery at Pool one first encounters two films by Yuri An: *Floating Land Drifting Heart: From Texel to Jeju* (2015) and *The Unharvested Sea* (2015), the former also being the title of a slide projection made in 2014 and exhibited in the adjacent room. This process of rematerialisation and remediation through which a work, its material and semiotic components, (re)constitutes itself across media traverses Yuri An's oeuvre.[4] For instance this is also the case of the fourth piece shown in the *The Unharvested Sea*, titled *Sailing Words: A Dialogue with the poet Huh Sukyung* (2015), a text installation made of hanging panels reproducing the artist's correspondence with poet and archaeologist Huh Sukyung about the nature of writing in its relationship to the experience of exile. As part of a subsequent eponymous solo show *Sailing Words* was remade as a three-channel video installation, the text superimposed over sequences of quiet wavelets shot at night.[5] Yuri An seems less interested in a form of modernist critique or reflexive stance *vis-à-vis* the filmic apparatus and writing on the other (such as in the diverse strands of 'cinepoetry') than in creating a *milieu*[6] in which writing accommodates itself within a diversity of media apparatuses.



Fig. 1: Yuri An, *Floating Land Drifting Heart. From Texel to Jeju*, Single channel video, 2015 (reedited), 5'42".

The transmedia environments created by Yuri An unfold as interfaces where her narratives are written, which develop in a process weaving autobiographical elements, fiction, and historical investigation, haunted by the two interrelated issues of linguistic and geographical displacement and of the origin of language. *Floating Land Drifting Heart: From Texel to Jeju* is

composed of alternating sequences of blank black screens with an English voice-over and Korean subtitles,[7] also including coloured scenes of an empty beach and black and white images shot at sea. The film intertwines two actual journeys (of Yuri An herself and of the 17th century Dutch mariner Hendrick Hamel) into a meditation on language and the absence of a mother tongue, the quest for its origin being projected onto her own personal history. Displacement results in such a search in which the hiccup – believed to have resulted from the human amphibian past and the need to adapt to new milieus – echoes Yuri An’s breathing techniques for the acquisition of language which she inherited from her grandmother:

I was raised by her words

Her words

Gathered from where water meets land

Slowly, travelled from her mouth to my mouth

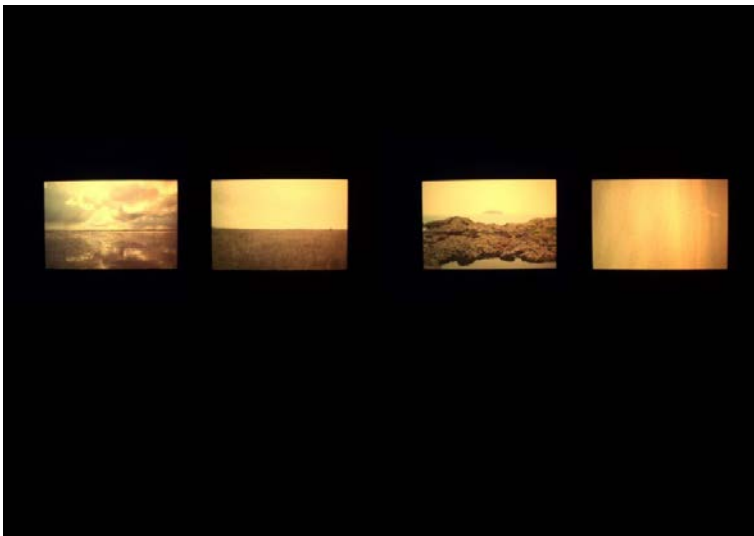


Fig. 2: Yuri An, Floating Land Drifting Heart. From Texel to Jeju, 20 Slides Projection Installation, 2014.

This belief in the transmission of words was shared by the French poet Edmond Jabès, which he considered to be the ‘mission of the writer’: ‘she interrogates the words which interrogates her, she accompanies the words

which accompany her'.[8] In Yuri An's films words become quasi-physical entities, part of a nexus where the boundaries between signifying language and the sonic realm are questioned through her use of speech and sound, enmeshed and circulating between feminine entities (her grandmother, the sea, the land, the moon). The beach and sea sequences never quite represent deep waters but rather the liminal space and the threshold between shifting sands and shallow waters. Also, through this amphibious phenomenology unfolds a complex network of references.



Fig. 3: Yuri An, *Sailing Words: a Dialogue with the poet Huh Sukyung*, Text Installation, Pool Art Space, Photo by Eunsoo Lee Courtesy Yuri An and Art Space Pool, 2015.

Mouth to Mouth (1975) is the title of a video by the American-Korean artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha; it addresses Korean language and its loss through a basic physiological action (the video consists of close-ups on the artist's mouth closing and opening, forming an 'O') in her exploration of exile. Yuri An's own experience as a migrant living in Holland reverberates with Hamel's history recounted in his *An Account of the Shipwreck of a Dutch Vessel on the Coast of the Isle of Quelpaert Together with the Description of the Kingdom of Corea*. His journey with the Dutch East India Company from Texel to Jeju (which left him stranded in Korea from 1653-1666) is the exact reverse of the artist's, who started the project after a visit to the Dutch island.

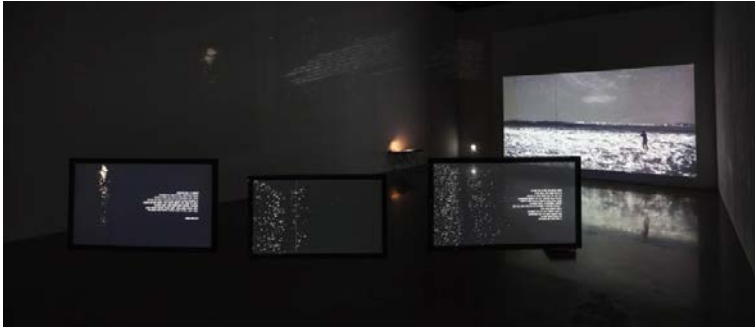


Fig. 4: Yuri An, *Sailing Words: a Dialogue with the poet Huh Sukyung*, Video Installation, Cheongju Art Studio, Courtesy Yuri An and Cheongju Art Studio, 2015.

In her cogent analysis of the intertwinements of cinema and language loss and of linguistic disturbances as a vexed ontological factor in filmic thought, Tijana Mamula cites novelist Hector Bianciotti, for whom ‘geography [...] is only the apparent, purely superficial, form of exile’. Mamula continues, stating that ‘language, and its inevitable disturbances, is instead its deepest and most intimate’.[9] In Yuri An’s work both geography and language are profoundly entwined. As if consciously willing to work outside of any totalising nationalistic spheres (in this case South Korea and the Netherlands) from which language’s sovereignty equates that of the state, her experience of geographic and linguistic deracination is of a differential nature, taking place between two islands. Jeju and Texel function as allegories for the possibility of poetry. To the same extent one could contend that while being transnational her geopoetics of islands and alienation is inscribed outside of the realm of the discourse of ‘global art’ and its recoding of multiplicity into undifferentiated singularities and the *telos* of art history. Yuri An’s art remains fundamentally exploratory and open to contingency.

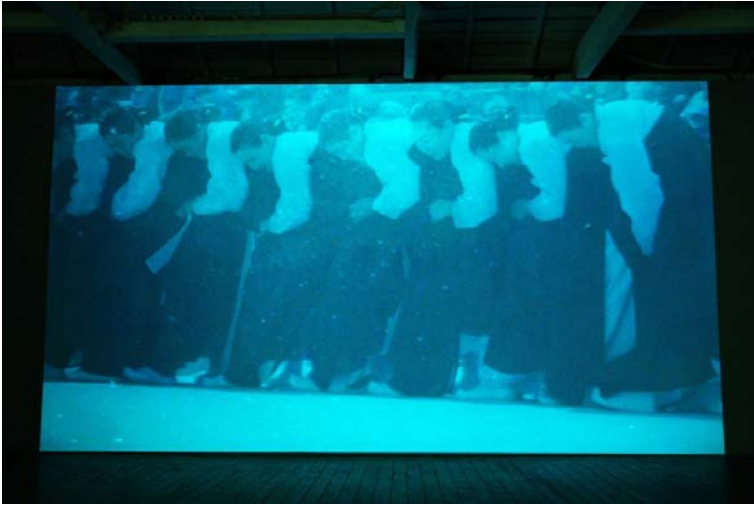


Fig. 5: Yuri An, *The Unharvested Sea*, Pool Art Space, Photo by Eunsoo Lee, Courtesy Yuri An and Art Space Pool, 2015.

In *The Unharvested Sea* (2015), the second film on view at Pool and a sequel to *Floating Land Drifting Heart*, a new place (Jindo) is added to the journey between Texel and Jeju. The work extends the artist's quest for the place of birth of poetry and intersperses it with actual tragic events she encountered, most notably the sinking of the Sewol Ferry in 2014, when more than 300 teenagers lost their lives drowning off South Korea's southwest coast. The event provoked public outcry and criticism towards president Geun-hye Park and her government's mismanagement, pointing to deeper dysfunctions in Korean politics. *The Unharvested Sea* weaves sequences of the peregrinations of people looking for traces and remains of their lost ones, of shamanistic rituals for the deceased and of superimposed slow motion shots of water and smoke. Here the literary, the aural, and visual embrace the process through which the living mourn the dead as much as it enacts it. It is more a document of this event than a monument for those who passed away, producing an active tension between the event and its recalling, between memory and the many presents of unfolding within the gallery space. As far as its documentary dimension and its (oblique) engagement with politics is concerned *The Unharvested Sea* participates in what media theorist Jihoon Kim has identified as a 'post-vérité turn of experimental documentary', under which falls a hybrid body of work between documentary, experimental cinema, and contemporary art. These works have broken from

the participatory mode of documentary film, exploring a whole range of other formal experimentation, including ‘poetic observation’.[10] Everything in *The Unharvested Sea* – the work of mourning, politics, the worlds of the living and the dead, the crossover between nature and culture (the sea and the ferry) – converges towards the following words: ‘[t]hey said if you enter the sea / You can return to the place where your words were born’.[11]

‘體’(tǐ) is the space that cannot be expressed through language and letters.

‘用’(yòng), the wave created in that space. Perhaps, from the beginning,

this book was made for the departure of words.[12]

Islands and words. Islands as the *milieux* of words. Yuri An draws a continuum between the environment, geography, the imaginary, and the symbolic. This is a nexus reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze’s aesthetic and ecological thinking about islands. For Deleuze

the essence of the deserted island is imaginary and not actual, mythological and not geographical. At the same time, its destiny is subject to those human conditions that make mythology possible, further probing this potentiality of islands, suggesting to ‘get back to the movement of the imagination that makes the deserted island a model, a prototype of the collective soul’.[13]

If we also understand the island as a milieu, namely the product of a co-determination between a physical environment and the symbolic and representational spheres, and the milieu literally as a medium (what is in between), one might say that Yuri An’s exhibition probed these notions anew, the island acting both as figure and motif as well as model to think about the post-medium paradigm.

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Notes

- [1] As mentioned in their mission statement: http://www.altpool.org/_v3/en/about/mission.asp.
- [2] Berardi 2015, pp. 191-192.
- [3] Jung 2015, p. 10.
- [4] I borrow the term 'rematerialisation' from Pavle Levi and his analysis of the processes through which 'cinema' unfolds in the form of multiple materialities and apparatuses, using as case studies a range of Yugoslavian avant-garde works such as the 'written films' of the Hypnist and Zenitist movements active in the 1920s, or the 1970s experiments with the physicality of film. See Levi 2012.
- [5] *Sailing Words*, 3-13 December 2015, Cheongju Art Studio, Cheongju South Korea. Curator Gaheung Park considers both solo shows as chapters of the same exhibition, the second being a reiterated attempt (by way of a search for equivalence between text and image) at affirming the status of poetry in the field of contemporary art. Park 2015.
- [6] In a seminal chapter of *Knowledge of Life*, Georges Canguilhem traced the genealogy of the notion of 'milieu', sometimes translated into 'medium'. Drawing on Canguilhem's formulation, along with Yuk Hui, I have formulated a non-substantialist account of the 'exhibition as medium' understood as 'modulation'. See Canguilhem 2001; Hui & Mey 2016.
- [7] The original version made in 2014 as part of the artist's graduation work at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam has no Korean subtitles. The 2015 version was re-edited for the exhibition at Pool.
- [8] Jabès 2006, p. 64 (my translation). This reference was discussed by Yuri An throughout our numerous exchanges, including a public discussion as part of the film program *Body Languages* curated by Maxa Zoller for the World Script Institute at Cine Code/Art Sonje, Seoul, 22 October 2015.
- [9] Mamula 2013, p. 6.
- [10] Kim 2015.
- [11] *The Unharvested Sea*, single-channel video, 2015, 09:00.
- [12] *Sailing Words*, exhibition booklet, Cheongju Art Studio, Cheongju Museum of Art, 2015.
- [13] Deleuze 2004, pp. 12-13.