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Intercultural medium literature digital: Interview with YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES

By Hyun-Joo Yoo

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Abstract

The literary praxis and methods for its interpretation are relevant not only within a same language-area, but also as a medium of intercultural understanding. Resulting from the currently deep pervasive medial changes, digital literature comes to this arena. It is necessary for the reception of the digital literature to comprehend particularities of new media, which determines the form of the innovative literature. The media aesthetic, which is positioned in contrast to the mainstream research with more accents on fascination of technical innovations, allows to observe at a distance from its object. This point of view can be applied in the situation of other countries, above all in industrial nations, where there is e an asymmetry between the rapidly developing communication technologies and their philological, media-philosophical discussion. The works of YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, a net art group, which was founded in South Korea and is famous as well in Europe for their provocative digital-poetry, are located just in this area of tension. Their works are expected to function as an intercultural medium with double meanings, on the one hand they activate the unknown subject of digital literature in South Korea, on the other they help to an understanding the strange motives in Europe. Hyun-Joo Yoo talked with the artist duo from South Korea and USA about netart, teamwork, concret poetry, literature as movie, life and speed, the lack of interactivity and multimodality and about Sex in Korea.

1. General Notes

YOO: Please present YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES (YHC HI). Your known profile in Germany is that Korean Young-hae Chang works with Marc Voge - French? -- in Seoul.

YHC HI: Marc is American.

YOO: When and why did you form YHCHI?

YHC HI: We formed our company in 1999, for practical reasons -- Net art is relatively cheap to make, and you don't need a studio for all your unsold works.

YOO: "YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES" sounds interesting. Why did you choose that name?

YHC HI: It's pretty evident. YHC for Young-Hae and HI for Marc. We changed Marc into "HEAVY INDUSTRIES," because Koreans love big companies and Marc doesn't mind being objectified and capitalized on.

YOO: I thought the name HI was a statement against software in its relation to digital media.

YHC HI: Nope, never occurred to us. We live in a country -- South Korea -- that loves its big, powerful companies. We wanted to get some of that love.

YOO: YHCHI is known even in German digital literature circles. Do you do most of your work in Europe?

YHC HI: No, not really, but we're happy that quite a few European art and literature institutions are interested in our work. And Germany in particular has given us several opportunities to show our work. It's flattering.

YOO: How did you come about presenting your work in "p0es1s", the digital literature exhibition in Berlin?

YHC HI: It happened like most of our other participations -- an organizer, in this case Friedrich W. Block, e-mails us, and a collaboration begins. He translated CUNNILINGUS IN NORTH KOREA into German.

YOO: Have you participated in any similar type of digital exhibition in Korea?

YHC HI: No. Have you ever heard of one?

YOO: Yes, there are some exhibitions, as far as I know, but within a very little circle...

YHC HI: Since Korea isn't very interested in literature, it follows that it isn't excited by literary innovation. There's this assumption outside Korea that the country with the highest percentage -- 75% of the population -- of broadband penetration should somehow have an intense interest in digital art and literature. It's just not the case.

2. Work process

YOO: How would you define the work of YHCHI? Digital poetry or more, digital art? Or something completely new?

YHC HI: Actually, we wouldn't pin it down. No use making it easy on guys like you.

YOO: O.K., but for now, let's consider your work as digital poetry for the purpose of answering the following questions.

YHC HI: O.K., fine.

YOO: First, about the way you work. Making digital literature is a lot like making a movie these days. There are specialized roles for text, music, technique. The author seems to become the director or the organizer of the project. Does this description fit YHCHI?

YHC HI: No, not really. Our style is more, say, organic, or rather, disorganized, if not messy. It's not a pretty sight.

YOO: How do you make a text? How do you choose a subject?

YHC HI: We make a text out of bits and pieces of images and sounds. Subjects are never lacking. Some are suggested to us or commissioned by exhibition organizers, others we come up with out of a certain urgency, others are an effort not to conform to expectations, and still others appear out of nowhere, like a gift from Heaven.

YOO: YHCHI is known for its beautiful jazz. How do you put text and music together? Which comes first?

YHC HI: Sometimes the music comes first, sometimes the text -- but you expected that answer, we're sure. The truth is that any two things when put together take on a synthetic meaning. There's nothing inevitable about our text and music combinations. We try to make this point by changing the music that goes along with certain texts.

YOO: The songs that you use are very professional...

YHC HI: We invite you to click [here](#), where a lot of our music is listed. If a song isn't listed yet, we apologize. We have to update the list. Thanks for your patience.

3. "Fine-tuning" of languages

YOO: Many of your pieces are done in different language versions. Which language is your first language?

YHC HI: English, these days, although some of our first pieces were in Korean, still others in Japanese or even Swedish.

YOO: One of the originalities of YHCHI's work is that different language versions are more than just a translation of the original. You seem to be very attuned to these different languages.

YHC HI: Not as much as you suggest. We work with English, Korean, and French, but need help with translators for the others. It's hard to fit a different language into the same musical and rhythmic mold as the original piece, so we often compose different music to go with the translation. That creates a different feeling for the text in question, but not one that we're consciously pursuing.

YOO: Your piece SAMSUNG comes in five or six different versions, each one slightly different, it seems, particularly in your signature countdown. Is there a particular reason for this?

YHC HI: No, not really, although we're pleased you noticed the differences.

YOO: To take a concrete example, in the German version of SAMSUNG, the words "LICHT," "FEUER," and "KUSS" in a scene with the phrase "SAMSUNG, LICHT MEINES LEBENS, FEUER IN MEINEN LENDEN; KUSS AUF MEINEN LIPPEN" are emphasized. In the Korean and English versions, on the other hand, they seem less so.

YHC HI: That's interesting – no, we weren't aware. We can only thank our German translator here in Seoul. That said, we think that in Korean and English the phrase from which you quote, "SAMSUNG, LIGHT OF MY LIFE, FIRE IN MY LOINS, KISS ON MY LIPS," still packs a punch. After all, we were only citing from memory the famous Nabokov beginning of "Lolita"

YOO: In all the language versions of SAMSUNG you use the Korean word "ahjuma" to denote a certain kind of Korean woman. In general, "ahjuma" is used both disparagingly and affectionately. And in your text?

YHC HI: We use it to denote a Korean woman who is married and conventional, which includes just about all Korean women from a certain age on.

4. Connection to concrete poem

YOO: If you hear about a digital poem, you associate it immediately with a combination of the moving images and text, one that is often animated in a Flash program. But YHC HI only uses pure text, also in Flash.

YHC HI: In the beginning of Net art, we were struck by how ineffective Net artists were in communicating information – words, images, sound. This was in the mid-90s, when few people had broadband. Typically, Net art was an image with some words that took an eternity to download and appear in the browser. Music? Forget it, it was too heavy. And when it came to streaming media such as Flash and QuickTime, the image became tiny.

We wanted to use streaming media and audio – to use the Internet to the maximum – probably because we wanted Net art to be as entertaining as TV. The relationship is there and can't be avoided. As for Net art's interactivity, we thought it was laughable, not unlike channel surfing. By eliminating the image and just using text, plus the small miracle of mp3, we were able to create Flash pieces of from one minute to 25 minutes that fill up the browser and start playing after just a few seconds via a 56K modem.

YOO: Your work, which uses only word as a material for expression, resembles the concrete poems popular in the last century.

YHC HI: We're familiar with French concrete poetry beginning with some of the typographical liberties of Apollinaire, if we recall correctly. The comparison seems inappropriate. We've never found much enjoyment or meaning in concrete poetry. A better comparison might be with Mallarmé's "Un Coup de Dés."

YOO: In the June, 2001 issue of the Web magazine "dichtung-digital," the well-known concrete poet Reinhard Doehl, who also creates digital poetry with Johannes Auer, praised your work in an interview, saying that it has played a decisive role in understanding the text in a world invaded by animated words. I myself see your work evolving from a flashier initial style to one that emphasizes a more sober text presentation. Is there a reason for this?

YHC HI: Thank you, that's very flattering. We have a lot of respect for their work. The evolution in our work that you describe is indeed there. We like to think that we're moving into a more mature period. And with maturity comes calm. Unless it's just advancing age and a stiffness that prevents us from brusque movements? Another reason for less razzle dazzle may be that we've been making our own music for the past few years now, and our drumming is unfortunately not as brilliant, complex, and explosive as the drumming of Art Blakey and Max Roach.

YOO: Concrete poems rearrange words and letters to make images. Does your work try to use words differently from the printed page?

YHC HI: It doesn't have to try, it's done for us by a software program (Flash) and a medium (the Web) that imposes this difference. To be precise, our role was to make the decision to adopt them and adapt language to fit them.

5. Cinematic factors

YOO: There is an important cinematic element in your Flash work. And in the piece OPERATION NUKOREA the sound of solo piano reminds one of silent movies. Are you aware of this?

YHC HI: We suppose that you're referring first to the cinematic-like countdown at the beginning of our Flash pieces. We mentioned that we've tried to make our work resemble TV in its entertainment value. How close we can get to the grandness and intimacy of movies, to its spectacle and emotion, is a different story. We'd like to, but that may depend on us leaving the environment of the Web and creating something in real space. One of our recent installations, for a show called "4 from Korea," at the East Asian Art Museum, in Berlin, is an experiment with the large scale of cinema, but without sacrificing the particularities of the Web -- interactivity, immediacy. We include a couple of installation shots.

Photo 1, 2: "4 from Korea", the museum of eastern Asian art, Berlin (09.23.-11.20.2005)

YOO: Digital cinema lacks, according to Pech or Roloff, the *zwischenraum*. This erases cinema as a medium and prevents us from reflecting on it. If this kind of reflection is possible, where can it be found?

YHC HI: Are you saying that digital media invite less thoughtfulness than analog media?

YOO: Yes, that's right.

YHC HI: We agree, more or less. Life is faster today. That's the first point about digital media. The second point is that there's a tsunami of digital information on the Web, which, for us, at least, is demoralizing, when you consider that in the days of analog media there was already enough information for a lifetime of thought. As for digital art, well, it's the opposite of digital media. There's very little digital art compared to analog art. And the encouraging thing is that if, like analog art, 99.9% of digital art is dismissible, then there's nothing really to worry about.

6. Not-multilinea, not-interactive

YOO: In his interview, Reinhard Doehl mentioned that it's a pity that YHCHI doesn't use interactivity. Why don't you?

YHC HI: Because we don't know how. (By the way, we're pretty sure that nothing is too bad in art and literature. They're happy worlds that make do with anything and everything.)

YOO: Unlike Doehl, I think that the absence of interactivity in your work is one of its most interesting traits. Enthusiasm for the interactive hypertext comes most of all from the equation choice equals fantasy. What do you think of that?

YHC HI: Well, for us, choice doesn't equal fantasy. Or rather, you could argue that a lack of choice equals fantasy. After all, it's societal strictures and problems without evident solutions that inspire our longings and musings. People equate choice with democracy, but no one ever said that art and literature were democracies. We would like our own work to exert a dictatorial stranglehold on the reader.

YOO: Dictatorial, the word could be fitting for the next question. In your work, there's only an interaction – the back button, leaving one with the thought that the essence of digital media is really a powerless spectator.

YHC HI: Well, we think there's something more essential than the back button. The spectator is far from powerless. She is still the one who decides whether or not she will watch the piece, or having clicked on it, whether she'll click away from it. That's the same power that she has when she considers any other art and literature. Clicking away is one of the essences of the Internet. It's no different from deleting. It's rejection, it's saying "no." That's ultimate power.

YOO: What does YHCHI have in store for us in the near future? More of the same?

YHC HI: Yes. We're never going to change. Life is easier that way. It's like opening the bedroom closet in the morning and finding just one set of clothing to wear that day and every following day. There's no decision to make. One computer program, one recipe. Simplicity is a virtue. (Unless we change, or close up shop, which is O.K., too.)

YOO: Do you see any opportunity or danger in the digitalization of literature?

YHC HI: It's hard to see how literature can be any more endangered than it already has been by book burning, book banning, censorship, blacklists, and so on, all of which happened before the digital age. Not to mention dwindling readership. Philip Roth said somewhere that there are 20,000 serious readers in the U.S. In the same vein, there are very few readers of poetry of any ilk, let alone digital. How digital poetry fares is probably of no consequence to anyone but its writers and their mothers.

7. Korean problematic

YOO: At last, we come to the point about content: Probably one of the most noticeable themes in your writing is sex.

YHC HI: Uh, thanks.

YOO: Is there a strategic reason for this?

YHC HI: Well, um, let's see. Because sex is beautiful? Because the human body is beautiful? But wait a minute. Except for CUNNILINGUS IN NORTH KOREA and SAMSUNG MEANS TO COME, there isn't much sex in our work. There are about 60 other pieces on our Web site. Could you be overreacting? Seeing something that you want to see?

YOO: It's hard to ignore something like CUNNILINGUS IN NORTH KOREA, don't you think? It doesn't go unnoticed in Germany, where it's made a name for you. Perhaps you're the ones who are seeing something we failed to see.

YHC HI: Uh, thanks again, but we were just as blind as anyone. "The Dear Leader [the head of state in North Korea Jong-Il Kim]" brought it to our attention. For us, CUNNILINGUS is a humanistic work. We wanted to help put a human face on North Korea, so we accepted the Dear Leader's offer to collaborate.

YOO: I understood. It means, you combined your text and music with existing text from "the Dear Leader". Whereas CUNNILINGUS IN NORTH KOREA combines sex with totalitarianism, SAMSUNG MEANS TO COME describes a world of sex and economic hegemony.

YHC HI: We suppose that's one way of seeing those pieces. To us, SAMSUNG MEANS TO COME is a paean to a dominant and attractive lifestyle in South Korea.

YOO: Could it be more concrete? All artists say something directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously in their work. How aware are you of what you're saying in your work?

YHC HI: Not very aware. We're not inclined to do the work of the literary or art critic. We stick to our job, which is to create something that otherwise wouldn't have existed, then marvel at what we've done and hope others do, too.

YOO: For instance, I see like that: There are a lot of Korean situations in your work, but there is also a media understanding of Europe - besides, you guys stayed a long time in France. You're the first ones to make digital literature in Korea. This combination allows Korean readers to step back from their ordinary lives. It also brings together two worlds. In SAMSUNG, there is something recognizable for European readers and something to be culturally translated. Yet the atmosphere of

the piece is strange. On the other hand, Korean readers may see the context clearly but the form as strange.

YHC HI: That's a nice analysis. We embrace it fully.

YOO: I have a question on it. SAMSUNG implies that the big Korean conglomerates control the economy and, consequently, penetrate into our lives ultimately. We are powerless to resist them. On the other hand, here in Germany, "Samsung" is just another global company. Its image isn't oppressive. Do you think that Germans can see what we Koreans see in a work like SAMSUNG?

YHC HI: Well, again, maybe you're supposing that what you see in SAMSUNG is what other Koreans see. From what we see, though, no one in Korea is oppressed by Samsung or by any other big Korean corporation. On the contrary, Koreans love Samsung and the other big corporations. Could it be just the opposite, that you're thinking like a European?

YOO: (laughs) Thanks for answering my questions. May you meet with ever greater success. One final question. You make the strange statement in the p0es1e catalog that there's a computer chip by Samsung implanted in one of your abdomens. Can this possibly be true?

YHC HI: Yes, but are you sure you read this in the P0es1e catalog? For those of you who don't know what the question is referring to, we invite you to click on [this](#). Thank you for your provocative questions and for inviting us to be in "dichtung-digital".