

AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Hee Ran Lee
- Interviewer: Jeong-A Kim
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- Recorded and transcribed by Jeong-A Kim (AKAA Research Fellow 2017-2018)
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Jeong-A Kim (JAK): It feels as though the Korean avant-garde performance artists of the Sixties and Seventies are being forgotten. Why do you think that is?

Hee Ran Lee (HRL): Performance is based on the body, and I suspect that this trend of overlooking those artists comes from Korean society's taboo on the physicality of the body. The body is the center of art, and the acts that come from it can be aggressive, explicit, and reflect society's view of sex. That's uncomfortable. Something that is uncomfortable to look at is a difficult subject for discourse.

JAK: You majored in acting. At what point did you consider expanding beyond acting into performance?

HRL: There wasn't any specific incident. My interest changed gradually as to what I considered compelling work. Acting is something I cannot do on my own. There needs to be a person to act with, a producer, a script writer for the text. I wanted to create my own voice. I wanted to break out of the standards of an acting style or a traditional stage set up to freely make my own voice heard. That's why I approached the genre of performance art. Performance has two roots - one in art and the other in theater, but I was naturally drawn to the work that didn't stem from a text, but from one's own body, physique, act, or consciousness and thought.

JAK: Do you mean works such as Allan Kaprow's *Happenings*?

HRL: Yes. If you look at the Open Theater or the Living Theater which was active in the Fifties and Sixties, the actor becomes the writer. The producer becomes the writer, the actor becomes the producer, and the collaborative practice is taking shape. I wanted to do something like that.

JAK: You perform in your own works. Your body is crucial.

HRL: The performance art I think of starts with an action. Actions come from a movement of the body. It is important that the body movement stems from my thinking, my mind, and my sensation. One of the typical questions asked of artists is, "What's your inspiration?" or "What inspired the work?" I think my inspiration is tension. I don't mean tension as an emotional state of excitement, but something that becomes a basis for my bodily sensation, my emotion, or my action. For example, it may be something like an uncomfortable situation or an event that arises in my day to day life - something that could be very trivial, that could have happened in my private space, private relationships, or in my public situation as a woman, a Korean, or as an artist. There are things that invoke a tension in me, such as passing through U.S. immigration at an airport, which creates tremendous tension. I haven't done anything wrong nor am I an illegal immigrant, yet when I have to go through immigration control I find it so hard to bear. Also, when I have to meet someone in a position of power, I feel the tension. I am

sure it's because I know his or her power is unreasonably pushing against me. There are powerful people who have amassed tremendous amounts of money, and then that leads me to think about capitalism. If the person in power is a man, I think about women's rights, naturally. If we keep going like this to dig deeper into myself, the origin of this train of thought and what moves me is 'tension'. My practice expands on this motif.

JAK: Yet when you are composing your work, you aren't recreating that tension, but digesting it to express it in a different form. Do you consider the reaction of the audience when you do this?

HRL: The audience is very important. When I first started my practice, however, I didn't consider them all that important. My actions were more important. But as time passed, I realized that my actions, the objects I place and the given time and space collide to create an environment and that the audience cannot be merely spectators. The reaction of the audience exists, and that reaction is the tension I had when I created that work. It could be curiosity, but the source of the emotion, sensation, or action from the audience is my tension. My tension is now the audience's tension. I had to keep thinking, how can I make the audience eagerly participate so that their participation completes my performance?

JAK: One of your earlier works, *In Braids*, 2011, features your body in an extremely constricted space, a staircase, where you perform by yourself for 3 hours. What the audience can do in that situation is naturally limited, including showing any response. However, your most recent works are incomplete without the response of the audience.

HRL: The nature of performance calls for the importance of audience participation. You can't repeat the same action. The reaction of the audience is also an action. You cannot repeat that. Just as you can't put your feet into the same flow of water. Time keeps flowing. Time keeps flowing. Time keeps flowing. Even if I repeat the same words, these words are all different words. When a performance is repeated, I perceive it as a different performance and I want to put my thoughts into it. I want to show the audience how I see those who are with me there and that they are my collaborators.

JAK: I want to talk about two of your works, *50 Bulbs*, 2015 and *Blow It!!*, 2012. Both are works which are fairly uncomfortable for an audience. Why do you think they are so popular? In the case of *Blow It!!*, you are using a noisy and smelly leaf blower, you blow a balloon up until it takes over the entire space, and there is nothing comfortable about it. Why is it that you are requested to repeat this performance? What was behind your thinking in making this piece?

HRL: At the time I was very much concerned with my body. I saw my body as an Asian body. It wasn't a concern I had when I was living in Korea. It is because here, I am an

outsider and something is different that I started thinking about it. It was around 2010 when I was studying feminism at school and probably over-conscious about it. I am shorter than the average person. I am also told that I look very charming or agreeable. I heard things like how cute I was, or how feminine, especially when I was an actress. For female actors, the comments that other people make about your appearance are very hard to ignore because they stick to you like stickers.

When I was conceiving of *Blow It!!*, I was looking for a way to combine the body and architectural sites, or the body and materials, to find a method of either expanding my movements or enveloping those things into my actions. I wanted to find an object that would stand in comparison to my small body and that is how I found out about weather balloons. Meteorologists attach a camera to a parachute and a balloon filled with hydrogen to observe the weather. As the balloon goes through the air the camera takes pictures of the conditions. At some point in the atmosphere, it will burst. The camera will come down to earth on the parachute. It's a latex balloon. I experimented many times with the balloon, but I didn't foresee that it would burst during my performance. When it did, everyone was alarmed. I was too! That's one of the fun parts of a performance. You can't tell what the results will be. The object of *Blow It!!* was important, but what was more important was the element of control I had over the much larger object.

JAK: You were very scary in the performance. You were shoving the loud leaf blower towards the people, possibly deliberately to be aggressive.

HRL: It was acting. I look people in the eye. Some of them are uncomfortable, some of them find it amusing. I observe their reactions. It's a bit like I am holding a gun. I have short hair and boots on, so I don't look like a feminine woman, and I'm not just there to blow up a balloon. I wanted to make actions and movements that you could examine from a different perspective. People initially stare at me and the balloon out of curiosity, then they start getting scared. Some people were covering their ears while others left the room. What's so funny is that they were so scared but the minute I stop blowing the balloon and tied it up, the people relax again and start getting excited about the balloon, regardless of their age or gender. Just as they started to interact with the balloon like that, in a matter of mere seconds, the balloon burst.

JAK: Everyone screamed.

HRL: There were people screaming out of shock, but also people screaming with excitement. It's fun to have so many different reactions. There isn't one generalized reaction. Some people sympathized with me, others were extremely excited while some hid away. Each response was slightly different.

JAK: In comparison, *50 Bulbs* seems extremely dangerous. Fifty members of the audience each hold a lit glass bulb which is attached to the ceiling by a long string, and

they let go of it to hit you directly. The glass shatters. It feels like the set of a horror movie.

HRL: There are famous performance artists who have even shot at their own bodies. There are many artists who perform while their bodies are at risk, but there is a point to it. They want to deliver the tension, emotion, or sensation that arises from an extreme action. It's through the art that the tension is experienced together with the audience. *50 Bulbs* is the first work I created after getting the artist visa. At the time I kept seeing the American flag everywhere. I hadn't really noticed it in my prior visits to the States, and then after making up my mind to immigrate here, I would see the American flag in buses, in the subway and so on. It wasn't the America I had studied in as a student. Aren't there 50 stars in the flag? That's why I installed the 50 bulbs, and had 50 audience members. I said hello to each person and handed them a light bulb as they entered the space. The bulb emits light and heat to the point of it being hot. If you consider it being electrified, it is rather scary. When I take risks as an artist, I consider safety to be the most important thing. If I ignored the safety aspects of my performances and included an audience in them, I would be making irresponsible work. The trick is, I know that it's safe, but the audience feels it's dangerous. There's another seemingly dangerous work I made, where I was sitting on the rooftop of a building (*I Have Received Orders Not To Move*, 2011). People who saw it were terrified. But I knew I was safe.

JAK: I recall Chris Burden's *Shoot*, 1971. I think *50 Bulbs* is similar to Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, 1964, which transfers the responsibility to the audience. They are asked: "Can you bring yourself to throw a glass bulb at this person?" but actually, the real question is coming from the concern of the artist, which is, "Should I really be asking this person to protect me? It is scary." It is a work that seems to come out of the tension of expressing fear against the unknown 'you'.

HRL: It is scary. The beginning of the work starts from the immigration process, but in that space and time, [what drives it] is that fear.

JAK: Your composition of works seem based in feminism.

HRL: It is important to me. The year before last, I was wondering whether we would be better off if we didn't even have concepts such as 'power', 'patriarchy' and so forth. I'm not sure. I was wondering if because I care so much that maybe in being extremely sensitive in my reactions to something I could be unwittingly oppressing someone else with my reaction? I have the authority of being an artist, and I have my own desires and wishes to express. These thoughts disturbed me tremendously. Recently, the #MeToo movement has spread to the Korean art world and I spent a couple of nights unable to sleep thinking about it. I was in the center of the Korean artworld, I was in theater, I personally know people who have been accused of misdoings. I was teaching at school.

I was that person's student, lecturer, assistant professor. I am deeply upset by it. I felt remorse for thinking that such concepts were unnecessary and how I had been turning a blind eye to it all. The victims must be able to voice themselves, and we must go against this, but is there a better, wiser way? I am still thinking about this.

JAK: There is an avoidance of the body in Korean society, but is it partly due to these kinds of reflections that you decided to move to the States?

HRL: My personal anguish or experience expands into the public eye through my performance. I finished my studies and returned to Korea in 2012. At the time, I received so much attention from my acquaintances and my teachers. Korea had a boom of interdisciplinary art as it was celebrated for its breaking of boundaries in dance and theater. It was a hot, developing area so my performance was perceived as unique. When my work went into the institutional realm, its format was easily accepted. But I found that hard to bear. My body, actions, the body of a woman, being a woman; when my work went back to those things, it was ostracized. Stories relating to those things were ostracized. Actually, instead of someone expressly ignoring those stories, it was more like there was no interest in those things at all. They were taboo and strange things. I didn't have colleagues to share these stories with or collaborate together. One becomes lonely in those situations. Whether it was the theater or the art world, the hierarchical structure of these worlds was very difficult for me to handle. Even teaching. I was very stressed in front of jurors who had come to evaluate my work to assess it for grants. I am still a bit worried about what I say, because I need to be tactful even now. It became so difficult for me to do my work, because I would keep finding myself in situations where I had to be mindful of other people's opinions. Will this person give me an opportunity? Without it I can't do my work, and if I get the opportunity I have to kowtow to this person's power. It's a structural issue for Korea's art world, theater and film industries. I think these structural problems are what is rising to the surface now. Last year there was the issue of the cultural 'blacklist' [editor's note: in 2016, it was widely reported that President Park Geun-hye's government had blacklisted approximately 9,700 people who had either voiced their support for the opposition candidates in the coming election or had criticized the government's handling of the Sewol ferry disaster in 2014. Those on the blacklist were removed from government-supported programs]. If you criticized the institution you were in, or satirized society with a negative point of view, you were blacklisted and couldn't get grants. It left artists in a great quandary.

I can't go into detail about every single thing that I experienced, but if you look at the overall framework, you can see why I was so uncomfortable there and why I was so stressed. I am actually reminding myself about why I came back to the States by talking about this.

JAK: There are some pieces in your practice that you can't perform in Korea.



HRL: There are many.

JAK: What performances drew praise in Korea?

HRL: My work in Korea was mostly based on the format of theater. There are many reasons for this, but one was that unlike the States, there aren't that many spaces dedicated to performance. The reality was that theaters were the usual venues. Another reason was that it was difficult to perform a work that relied on interaction with the audience. I also needed time to identify the tendencies of the audience who flinched from being directly inserted into the performance or would be at a loss as to how to participate in one. In 2013, I made a gesture drama of images that I made during a solo performance, called *Ego*, which the audience liked. In *Ego*, there is a violinist playing the violin while hanging upside down from the ceiling, a guy in a suit embroidering, a tortoise, a woman fighting with her ego, and her ego. I use the weather balloon I normally use in *Blow It!!* as the main object installed in the center of the stage. In the last scene, the woman shouts as she is blowing up the balloon, and she stops just before it bursts. The balloon takes over the stage. It's quiet, then the lights dim. The balloon suddenly bursts! It's the same object, and there are similar actions in the work, but it is a completely different work from *Blow It!!*. There is no dialogue but the audience follows the visual narrative of the work.

JAK: I don't know if your newer work such as *We Hear Them They See Us* would be able to be performed in Korea.

HRL: Why not?

JAK: I feel the audience won't leave the performers alone. You only did works that were within the limited space of the theater stage in Korea.

HRL: That's right. I had to adjust my work to fit that space. I felt very restricted.

JAK: In the case of your nude performances, where did those originate? I feel it may have made it difficult for you to work as a teacher. Maybe it made you agonize more over the #MeToo movement.

HRL: Everyone has their own set of beliefs. When what one believes clashes with one's surroundings, you have to decide whether or not to modify your principles, or live your life according to them. Artists commonly use their principles as the foundation for their work, as something that is not exchangeable for anything else. If as someone who makes performance work based on the body and its movements I see my naked body or exposure of any part of it as an essential material to a work, then I consider it as a tool for making my work or as part of the work's theme. I don't think about anything else.

For me to conduct a nude performance is not simply an act of exposing my body. The minute I reveal my naked body, it is not my personal body. It's an Asian body, the body of a woman, and the body of an Asian woman in her thirties. The space and time that my performance is located in makes my body no longer a private body. It is a cultural and political body.

JAK: In that respect, would you consider that nudity is even more important? If you think of your body as an Asian woman's body, then it becomes representative of that. For an identity that severely lacks representation in culture, it may be important to reveal it further.

HRL: In my first performance, *Melting Ice*, 2010, I was in Chicago naked and hanging upside down from the ceiling. There were about 20 pieces of ice surrounding me, and each ice shard contained a picture of myself crying. It was about 30 minutes long, and as time passes, the audience can see the ice melting and myself hanging upside down. As I was preparing the work, I was wondering, "What should I wear?" "What should I wear to perform this? Why do I have to worry about what to wear?" It occurred to me that maybe what I was wearing wasn't that important. So I didn't set out to be nude, it just became a situation where it was inevitable. My skin and my body had to be revealed. There were other works I did afterwards in the nude, such as *I Received Orders Not To Move*. My first performance of that work was in Shanghai, and I realized that the image I projected when I was wearing something on my body was unnecessary for the work. There are works where taking things off my body, that is, the act of removing the things that were covering me was very important. Last year, I performed a work at Panoply Performance Laboratory and I didn't manage to title it yet. The work involves me coming in drenched from head to toe. I am wearing a hat, glasses, shoes and a bag. I start with taking off my hat and hanging it on the wall and strip off everything down to my underwear to hang them up.

I have works that are funny. I don't know why, but it seems hard to make humorous work. But I do want to make more of them, works that are fun, pleasant, and joyful.

JAK: *Ping and Pong*, 2012, is a fun piece of work.

HRL: Yes, that featured my mother. My mother has been suffering from Parkinson's disease for the past 10 years. Before she was ill, she was a very active person who enjoyed sports and had a strong body. She was an amateur table tennis player. She was great! That work was my MFA thesis. Parkinson's disease afflicts the nervous system so one's movements become stiff and strange. The body creates strange movements that appear suddenly as part of the symptoms. I was working with my mother, and it was ridiculous to have a table tennis match between me, who had never played before, and my mother who had played it every day for over 10 years, and me who is so healthy and my mother who is sick. I can't perform that work again. Time has

passed and my mother's condition has changed. It's the natural course of things. That piece meant a lot to me. I didn't explain in the performance that my mother has Parkinson's. It was just a match between a mother and her daughter. My mother came to Chicago to train me for a month before the match. I learned table tennis from her for that time while working over how the performance should go with her. Honestly, that time I had with my mother, sharing why I was making such art, that was more important to me than the actual performance.

The second work I performed with my mother, *Insook*, 2015, was made when my mother came to New York. I wore an acrylic bubble over my head and came in carrying my mother on my back. My mother painted over my bubble with oil paint until I couldn't see. Eventually, my mother tries to leave while carrying me on her back but collapses and we exit together. I can't really explain the meaning of that work in words. We're family, we are mother and daughter. Its meaning is indescribable. Everyone has a mother, so I think there is a wider sympathy for the work. It's not my mother's actions that were important, but the fact that she was there that matters. A Korean woman in her sixties who knows nothing about art, performance, or culture came to New York to be in her daughter's performance art. I think that's enough to expand the private meaningfulness into something shareable by the general public.

As I was studying feminism, I was thinking about myself as a woman and as a female body, and it was impossible not to think about my mother. I agreed with the theories and I could think about the concepts, traditions, and customs that collided with me - I can definitely be part of #MeToo if I voiced my experience - and all of those things were what my mother endured and yet wholly passed on to me. You can say it was what was done in those times, but it was my mother who taught me.

JAK: Please tell us more about your most recent works, *We Hear Them They See Us* and *A Humble Action To Feel the Meaninglessness*.

HRL: I wanted to perform *We Hear Them They See Us* with my mother. You start by talking about what you can see in front of you, but because of the things you are saying, your perspective is getting harder to see, and then ultimately the strong sense of seeing disappears to activate the other senses - your hearing, the sensation of air on your skin - and you have to still talk about your surroundings, but now you have uncertainty because you can't see, and that causes anxiety. I thought it would be great fun to perform this with my mother but she couldn't be here. I still wanted to perform it. The interaction with the audience is important for this work, so what I hear, who I see, who does what all feeds into what I do. The work was performed at a gallery's opening. It was good because there were so many people. The second time I performed the work was at Fergus McCaffrey Gallery, and there weren't as many people, but I increased the length of the performance. The gallery was very spacious and once someone came in, they stayed near us for a while. So the interaction continued.

I received a grant from the Franklin Furnace Fund for Performance Art for my proposal to create *A Humble Action To Feel the Meaninglessness*. I will start that work soon. My initial performance of it was while I was the LEIMAY fellow and participated in the Soak Festival. I was given 15 minutes. During that time, I greeted members of the audience and put a pulse oximeter on their finger. The machine makes a sound according to your heartbeat and records your heart rate and how much oxygen is delivered to your blood. It's easily obtainable and it is very small. Each audience member's entrance enhances the chorus of beeps generated by the oximeters. Even if no one does anything, their presence becomes a very important component of the performance. Against this sound, you can see the questions I receive when I go through U.S. immigration, my replies and the tension I experience and the actions I take. The audience is sitting in a circle around me as I perform, and the questions are projected onto the ceiling as I reply and move.

When I encounter situations that make me feel this tension, it becomes a motif for my practice. Is my practice meaningful to society? Is it a truly meaningful work? I am an artist, so I work and have my art practice, but there are people at the front committed to changing the world. There are truly meaningful actions and voices. There are actions to rouse many people's sympathy and get them to commit to meaningful change, but does it mean anything for me to say these things in the performance art arena, which no one is really interested in? That's why I titled it '*A Humble Action*'.

JAK: You mentioned earlier that you find documentation to be a crucial part of performance art. Do you have plans to change how you do that for your future work?

HRL: I always ask someone who knows what they are doing for my performance documentation. I have to explain thoroughly my actions and what the purpose of my performance is, and really hope that my work is not distorted and accurately depicted to the fullest extent possible through the documentation. It can only be done by someone who knows me and my work very well. But, of course, the moving image and photography are very different.

JAK: It's difficult to understand the context immediately in a soundless photograph.

HRL: With photography, at least you can ask me about the parts you didn't understand. Then I can explain in my own voice. The problem arises when it is understood differently from my intention, if the interpretation is done from the audience's point of view or if one is attempting to understand my work from just one photograph. Photography is a more comfortable means of documentation for me.