

Silent Dialogues

Thoughts about the Performative Works of Kyungwoo Chun

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Two people shake hands—this form of greeting is customary in many countries, principally in the West. It is an expression of openness and mutual respect. Upon a first encounter, the physical contact creates a certain closeness, yet preserves the necessary respect. The handshake thereby numbers among a multiplicity of rituals which help to organize our daily life, mostly in an unconscious manner. Conventions have an enduring effect on our association with our fellow men; they regulate the manner in which we communicate and live together. The Korean artist Kyungwoo Chun is interested in these relationships and makes them the theme of his works. From time to time, everyday activities and gestures are the point of departure for performances which he has been initiating for more than ten years now. These are temporally limited processes which may be carried out by individuals or groups. As a rule, the public is actively involved.

During the summer of 2009, the performance *Greetings* was carried out for the first time in the forecourt of the Bremer Kunsthalle. A total of twenty persons were asked to select from among the participants a partner who was unknown to them. Thereupon they were supposed to share a handshake for a period of twenty minutes. In addition, their hands were wrapped in plastic foil and firmly connected with each other. There were no further instructions. With the simplest of means, the greeting was transformed into a moment of unusual closeness and intensity. What was crucial for Kyungwoo Chun was not the subjects of the conversations which took place. Instead he was concerned with a conscious perception of the mutually shared time. The participants were supposed to experience with their own bodies the manner in which they approach a stranger—how they behave when they talk together for the first time; how it feels when one's gaze is returned, when one feels the warmth of another hand.

Already two years earlier, Kyungwoo Chun had carried out a performance which adhered to a comparable concept but was more intensive in its impact. *Versus* could be seen in various countries and cities from 2007 to 2012, among other places in New York, Barcelona, and Zürich, and has now come to a conclusion in Seoul. The procedure was identical each time. The participants were requested to sit down upon two benches placed opposite each other. They were supposed to place their head on the shoulder of their respective partner and to remain in this position for fifteen minutes—wordlessly, their eyes closed, and with as little movement as possible.

Viewed from the outside, the group seemed to be an island of calm and contemplation. At Times Square in New York, the performance stood in remarkable contrast to the vast city with its loud traffic and numerous pedestrians. But what appeared at a first glance to be harmonious and could be misunderstood as a communal reconciliation in fact represented a genuine challenge for the participants. The physical contact required by the artist generally occurs only among friends and close acquaintances. In the case of strangers, one is always inclined to be discreet and automatically to maintain a certain distance.

Whoever was ready to become involved in this sort of a violation of borders had the opportunity of experiencing the person sitting opposite in a special manner. But that was not all. As time passed, one perceived not only one's partner, but also oneself with increased intensity. There was a growing sensitivity to one's own body odor, to the slow rhythm of inhalation and exhalation, to the heartbeat felt in the ear, and to the tiring burden imposed by the limbs of the body. Many people had a positive response to the intimacy of the encounter, while for others the situation was linked to an extreme inner tension. These diverse reactions and sensations are also one of the reasons why Kyungwoo Chun repeatedly realizes his performances in various countries and cultural contexts.

The work *Versus* is inspired by the Chinese character "Ren" (人) and is translated as "human being." The form of the character resembles a walking figure but can also be viewed as two persons leaning against each other and thereby maintaining their equilibrium. This concept is the basis for the performance. It presupposes that everyone needs a counterpart in life, someone in whom one recognizes oneself as a human being with all one's strengths and weaknesses, individual emotions and desires. An encounter with the Other is always a confrontation with oneself. The art of Kyungwoo Chun is exemplary in this regard. The very presence and cooperation of the participants already gives rise to a space of thoughtfulness which endures for a short while and then disappears forever. Photographs, videos, and stories document these moments only to an insufficient degree. But the experiences leave behind multifaceted traces in the memory and hence can continue to have an impact.

At the latest since the avant-gardist movements of the nineteen-sixties and -seventies, performances as a form of artistic action have been an integral part of the international production of art. One needs only to call to mind the Happenings of Allan Kaprow, the numerous festivals and concerts of Fluxus, and not least of all, the projects of Joseph Beuys along with his famous, often misunderstood dictum "Everyone is an artist." The delimitation of art, individual participation and social sharetaking, and the interrelationship of art and life are only a few important keywords in this context. Various aspects of Kyungwoo Chun's performances are related to these historical positions. And yet his oeuvre resists a classification within this sort of developmental line. Instead his performances have their origin in a special form of photography with which he has meanwhile gained international recognition.

Since the mid-nineteen-nineties, Kyungwoo Chun has been working with photographic series as well as individual images, mostly portraits, all of which are characterized by a relative blurriness. This effect arises through an unusually long exposure time of sometimes several minutes all the way to hours and even days. That which, at the beginnings of photography during the nineteenth century, was still necessary for technical reasons is now the outcome of a fundamental artistic consideration. Kyungwoo Chun does not seek the "decisive moment" in his pictures. Nor is he concerned with a supposedly documentary image. What matters to him is the experience of time and duration. Photography is a suitable device in this regard.

Sometimes the people whom he invites into his studio are requested to talk about something personal during the taking of the picture—about their daily routines (*Six Days*, 2003), or about their mothers (*In/finite*, 2006); it may be that a person who has been blind from birth is asked to imagine how he or she might look (*Believing is Seeing*, 2007). In most cases, no words are exchanged. Thus there arises between the photographer and the portrayed individual an extraordinary interconnection characterized by mutual perception, concentration, and reflection. These are silent dialogues which inscribe themselves into the photographs in densified form, and which may be sensed subsequently by an attentive viewer. Chun himself speaks of "performances for photography." Against this background, it seems a logical step to expand his personal experiences and encounters within the studio into public actions. Indeed, it is no longer possible to distinguish clearly among the media which he utilizes. Performance, video, photography, and installation are interrelated in many different ways; they mutually determine each other and sometimes give rise to hybrid forms.

For example, a new video work is based on a performance. *Perfect Relay; Citius, Altius, Fortius* (2012) was created on the occasion of the Olympic Games in London. Differently than the title and context would suggest, the theme is not extreme athletic performance. On the contrary, this is first of all a matter of a quite commonplace action which is disturbed by a simple but significant alteration and is thereby experienced in a completely new way. Kyungwoo Chun invited children from various countries to write in their native languages the familiar motto of the games, "further, higher, stronger," on a piece of paper. The pen was passed around like the baton of a relay race until it was finally returned to the first child. A special difficulty, however, was that the children were supposed to write with the "wrong" hand. That which normally would have been possible in an intuitive manner and with little difficulty now required enormous concentration. Mistakes crept in, and the writing could not always be easily read. Kyungwoo Chun thereby thwarted in a subtle manner the ambitious striving for perfection and the ceaseless will toward accomplishment. Shortcomings and errors sometimes serve as productive impulses, not only in the realm of artistic work. They can be the start of innovative realizations and creative processes. *Perfect Relay* thereby generates a powerful image of tolerance which indicates an alternative to the principles of our society glorifying relentless achievement. Competition is replaced by exchange and affiliation within a community.

The most recent work, *Gute Nachrichten* ("Good News," 2012) was able in this sense—past various national borders, cultures, and time zones—to bring together people from Seoul and the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen. These are the two cities in which Kyungwoo Chun has lived and worked for many years. Twenty citizens of Bremen were requested to name a piece of good news which they would gladly receive. From these wishes, translated into their native language, twenty Koreans in Seoul selected the one with which they could identify the most. On the day of the performance, the participants encountered each other for the first time via a live video link without, however, speaking with each other. One after another, the Koreans called the personal mobile phone numbers of the German partner whose wish they had selected, and who thereupon let fly a paper airplane and thus symbolically sent the good news on its way. At this precise moment, the partners saw each other, and only they knew what was the wish which connected them—independently of age, gender, and social situation. Here as well, self-recognition is not a one-sided process.

The oeuvre of Kyungwoo Chun explores the preconditions which allow human contact. His works are deeply rooted in humanism and combine concepts of Western and Eastern philosophy. Kyungwoo Chun is not concerned with a simple-minded world view filled with harmony and uniformity. His works transform a

silent gesture into art and acknowledge therein the value of randomness. They show people with all their differences, contrasts, and weaknesses—qualities which are not necessarily supposed to be overcome, but whose contradictions should be considered to be a precious abundance. The task of art, as Kyungwoo Chun understands it, accordingly consists of sharpening our perception, of altering our awareness, of sensitizing ourselves to the thoughts and actions of others, and thereby of considering a transformation of ourselves to be possible. This endeavor sometimes begins with a handshake.