

Silent Dialogues

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 distance. 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 fifteen years now. These are temporally limited processes which may be carried out by individuals or groups. As a rule, the public is actively involved.

This process-oriented character and the encounters between extremely different persons are aspects which the artist considers to be crucial. He bases his works on cooperation and participation. In this sense, he creates situations which, with a surprising degree of self-evidence, take into account and include the perspectives of others, even making those points of view an essential element in his aesthetic practice. Even if the encounters are often only fleeting, the performances leave the participants with an enduring impression which points past the here and now.

Unusual Encounters

In 2009, the performance *Greetings* was carried out for the first in Madrid. 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. 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.

Performances for Photography

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 share taking, 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" (Henri Cartier-Bresson) 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 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.

Aesthetic of Absence

Most performances of Kyungwoo Chun do not leave anything behind that would remain permanently visible at the site. But is art in fact obligated to take on a material form in order to have an impact on public awareness? At the latest since the 1960s, we have been confronted with artistic strategies which decline to be seen directly. One could speak of an "aesthetic of absence" (Peter Weibel). And in fact, numerous works of contemporary art operate within the dynamic field of presence and absence. As is well-known, there are conceptual works which are based on a single idea or a simple set of instructions. So, it can be presupposed that art is not inherently required to take on a concrete shape that is perceptible to the senses. One only needs to recall Sol LeWitt's theoretical observations on Conceptual Art: *Ideas can be works of art* (1969). But also, the works of Lawrence Weiner and

Michael Asher are early examples of an aesthetic practice which does not by definition aim at the production of visible images and objects. The blank space thereby becomes the actual artistic event.

With *Die Unsichtbare Worte* ("The Invisible Words"), Kyungwoo Chun integrated these aspects into his artistic considerations. Everything created over the course of the project literally disappeared beneath the cobblestones of the city. The location of the actions consisted of the municipal electrical lines and water pipes of Bremen, a city in northern Germany where the artist lived and worked for several years. The municipal utilities have laid out a dense, subterranean network to which all households are connected. Today a basic supply of electricity, water, gas and heat is presupposed as an essential element of public infrastructure. Only when there are breakdowns does the utilities network come to light, mostly in an unpleasant manner.

Chun issued an invitation to 2,700 employees of the local utility company. The point of departure was a simple question: "What words give you and other people power and heat?" The answers of the participants were collected and glued to the utility lines for electricity, water, gas and heat. Then the words, in accordance with construction plans, were buried underground in the city. It can be assumed that someday the words will be excavated and freshly viewed. That could occur in the near future or only in several decades. Until then, they will remain hidden underground.

This communal process gave rise to a structure within and beneath the city and thereby led to an altered perception of the urban environment. In a certain sense, the participants inscribed themselves into the urban space, took over and described, through the possibilities of language, a *terra incognita* lying beneath their feet. In this way, they added to the actual energy channels their own flow of thoughts and ideas which await discovery by a future generation. Viewed in this way, the invisible words are simultaneously also time capsules which establish a dialogue with the future. Through the cooperation of many participants, there arose in the city a linguistic texture which spreads out like a rhizome. The buried words thereby form energetic points of intersection. Although they have left behind no physically perceptible traces above ground, they continue to be present in the awareness of the participants. One could say that the city has been charged with symbolism in such a way that it can be experienced as a living environment that undergoes various changes.

Concluding Thoughts

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 as a precious abundance. This attitude may be considered, if one is so inclined, as the plea for an open society in the sense of the philosopher Karl Popper. In 1983, the German artist Günther Uecker put it this way: "Art cannot save people, but by means of art a dialogue becomes possible which issues a summons to actions that are supportive of humanity."

So that there be no misunderstanding: Kyungwoo Chun's artistic oeuvre is in no way a political manifesto. But it does fulfill an exemplary function with regard to an expanded notion of art which

does not emanate from an artist with a sense of mission but, quite to the contrary, focuses on each and every individual, values him or her as part of a community, indeed of a polity. Only in shared dialogue, even if the conversation is silent, does space arise for mutual understanding. This includes an acceptance of other points of view as well as an embracing of respect and tolerance. 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.