

◉ Interview with Sung-Hwan Kim/David Michael DiGregorio by Max-Philip Aschenbrenner

Sung Hwan Kim was born in Seoul and is currently based in New York. Kim studied architecture, mathematics and art. He was a participant at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam. In his installations, Kim creates immersive environments by combining video and performance with drawings, light effects, architectural elements, and music. Kim established a production company “cheeks do coy, LLC” in July, 2014 with David Michael DiGregorio and Lisa Lightbody and the first production of it A Woman Whose Head Came Out Before Her Name for AAT will explore the impetus behind movement and how impetuses change and repeat over time and in different situations.

MAX-PHILIP ASCHENBRENNER Sung Hwan, you’re a Seoul born artist based in New York, now we meet in Berlin, where you work on your new project. How does it come, that we sit here at the river?

KIM SUNGHWAN Around the same time we started discussing our project, I was offered a DAAD Artist Residency here in Berlin. I knew this production would benefit from the active art and theater culture here. It also put me in closer proximity to my friends and professionals who could help me in Europe. It would have been a completely different production if I had worked on this commission in New York.

ASCHENBRENNER How does the city influence your work? Does it influence your work at all?

KIM Yes, I think so. For instance, the set in Korea has a version of the column that now stands in the middle of the space in which I am developing this piece. That column is not at all an iconic image of this city. I am, however, interested in

the initial setup where I develop my work. I study the landscape, the colours of a city, and the materials people use here. Lisa Lightbody[1], who came here with me from New York, first found this studio and hired the people with whom I am working in Berlin. This naturally gave me glimpses of the way Lisa communicates with different people in Berlin, who have their own way of organizing or dealing with their labor and time. One person's working method, or work ethic, is juxtaposed to that of another. For instance, David Michael DiGregorio deals with his time and labour, and this is again put into another context when I bring Hyoduck Hwang[2], a Korean artist, to work with me here. The first question Hyoduck would ask himself and me, then, is, "why are you hiring me instead of someone local?"

This book about Peter Stein written by Michael Patterson divides the chapters by each theater piece he developed in relation to what he was trying to do, with whom he worked, where he was working, and to whom he was showing. I found this writing by chance. Ari Benjamin Meyer, whom I met here, suggested I look at *Pélleas et Mélisande*, and one of the productions that I liked was directed by Peter Stein, who was the former director of Schaubühne, Berlin. Other references that I had for this production, such as Yun I-sang, Margarethe von Trotta, Daniel Schmid's *The Written Face*, etc., were one way or another linked to one another in this way. I can explain why one is linked to another based on my stay here in this city. In this way, a city is an index. I for the first time read Fassbinder's *Angst essen Seele auf* which I had watched several times before. So the language spoken in a city is also a big inspiration for me.

ASCHENBRENNER Language in what sense?

KIM Even though I don't know the language well, I read and re-watched *Angst essen Seele auf* in German. I enjoy the experience of learning language through a work that I like. I was curious to know how they speak in this Fassbinder movie, what the connotations are, the different forms of expression they use. For instance, the intended grammatical "error" in the title is rarely translated in Korean or English.

It's both strange and fascinating to use one country's tax money, use it abroad, working with people with such different backgrounds, and then to bring the final piece back to a place like Gwangju. It reminds me of the import and export of goods, or the migration of human resources. Trade, in a sense.

I have been looking at people dealing with a similar question, for example Mirok Li, a writer who left Korea in 1919, crossing the Yalu River, entering China and then ending up in Germany, never to return. He lived close to Munich during the 2nd World War. I find it fascinating that his first and only significant book was about his leaving, not the War or the experience in Germany. He also translated Japanese poems into German when the use of Korean was not celebrated in Korea as a Japanese colony. This also interests me.

ASCHENBRENNER Can you explain a bit more in depth, what you mean with language, I have the feeling you use the term in a quite unique way?

KIM For instance, if you read the biography of Yun I-sang written by his wife, Lee Suja, she writes beautifully, but the way of writing is not the way my generation writes. She starts the whole book by defining "fatherland." And that "fatherland" is inseparable from her husband's biography throughout. It is not difficult to notice that cultural productions focus on some particular concepts of the time relevant to specific areas. Who, or what kind of body, focuses on those concepts often determines their reception as well. I doubt that Yun I-sang would have gotten similar attention if he abused the word "fatherland" as much as he did in Germany in the 60's and 70's without wearing his particular skin and look. His status as a political exile or an immigrant allowed him to utter some things that would have been taboo for use by another group at the time. Some words are more communicative to utter in a different language. I mean "different" in that it is different from the language you are expected to speak. You could say that this is one of the motivations for including a Korean-German offspring in my production.

We all spend time doing something or reading something or making something, but different generations are drawn to different issues. Right now, I'm not

focusing on one particularity, but on the time people invest in specific issues during a specific period of time and how that influences their way of doing certain things. Following this interest I've been reading books of Korean writers, who emigrated in surprising times and who are not well known, at least to me. A lot of these writers wrote in a language that is not their first language.

ASCHENBRENNER We heard the word "theatre" a few times now. For *이/녀는 노력으로 한* *A Woman Whose Head Came Out Before Her Name* you are moving into the theatrical space, even more specific into a proscenium theatre for the first time in your career. Why are you interested in this space?

KIM For one thing, theater production pushes me to be touch with different elements and different production methods. When I work with the people who deal with light, music, or set, I get involved with these people's mindsets and their way of negotiating labor and life. For instance, many light designers and technicians whom I met have relatively high hourly pay, but do not work for one production for too long. Understandably, not many can afford to pay them. In this way, in the contemporary theater circuit, there is little room for nurturing the light-content. Either one has to lower the wage they get—but who would?—or the other has to raise the budget with the expectation to gather back the investment. Their working habits draw a big contrast to more traditional forms that still fall under the umbrella of company or theater house. I always liked films and was getting more and more interested in opera, *pansori*, and *kabuki*. This kind of commission from AAT gives me the unusual chance to operate within the theater production system as a space.

ASCHENBRENNER Talking about the dispositive of theatre, let me quote something you said during a talk, that you recently gave in Seoul. You stated, that the visual arts space always takes the materiality of something really serious whereas in the theatrical everything becomes representation, you gave the example of gold, that is perceived as real gold in the visual art space but even if it's real perceived as representation, fake in a theatrical space. Is this system of representation something you are interested in?

KIM What fascinates me about theater is, that, while developing a piece, I have to make a constant and continuous engagement with every element. For instance, in film, once you have a cut, you can literally leave the actor, site, and performance. You need to keep the clip and the copyright afterwards. This aspect is problematic in *cinema vérité*, for instance, where the director is no longer responsible for the reality she has altered by her intrusion.

In theater, on the contrary, you have to convince your collaborators everyday to come together anew, so there's a completely different concept of labor. How much time do you want to spend there at what cost? People who partake in this production, are very aware of this and are questioning every moment. The audience on the other side is also aware of this and questioning. Is it worth it? For instance, in Peter Watkins' *La Commune*, he created a theater by having so-called real people of diverging interests in an intense production playing the people building up the first commune. The result is brilliant, but one knows from experience that most people who volunteer or audition for this kind of project are those who are interested in acting out, at least to some degree. The audience is aware of this. If an actor is good, then the audience is aware that he is an actor, but also a character at the same time. The set up of reality itself nowadays is similar to this. I don't feel the need to separate acting from non-acting.

ASCHENBRENNER You have to believe the lie, deliberately?

KIM In the contemporary theater, and in visual art too, the rule of thumb is to break the magic of illusion, to create more distance. I wonder if the highly produced art educational system didn't contribute to that. Sometimes I wonder if there is not too much distance in the context of our time. Distance has long become the norm in theater, as opposed to magic or identification for the audience. Even a commercial medium like TV often is interested in self- and cross-references. If the audience together with a majority of directors already expect the distance from outset, a device like a close-up could be shocking as it had been in Dreyer's films in another time.

ASCHENBRENNER In Jean Luc Godard's *Le Mepris*, there is a scene in which Fritz

Lang, playing himself and the producer sit together in a Cinema and watch some materials of Lang's new movie. The producer afterwards tells him, that there had been some budget cuts. Lang then coins the sentence: "If culture is the rule, art has to be the exception." Art does not exist outside of society, what kind of society, audience do you have in mind, when you create your works?

KIM This changes every time for each piece I make. Recently I was looking at a show on AfreecaTV, a Korean video streaming site. It's not unlike snuff films. It is incredible. For example, you can see a woman at home on her bed eating for one hour everyday. There is nothing else other than food to prepare for the show, and these shows get hundreds of thousands of views. In contrast, many art institutions I have worked with usually get a hundred visitors a month and it consumes around six months of my time to work on a piece.

But I cannot make a piece for one space and just transport it to another space for wider distribution. Not all works are compatible with an encyclopedic site like YouTube. I do not have one formula that applies to the whole body of my work. Each piece has its own answer to what it is for, who it is for, where it is being shown, and what will happen to it. Not all want to last long, and not all want to be distributed the most. Likewise, not all want to be marginal. My process resembles that of solving a Rubik's Cube, where you face one side—that is the side that is facing your face—all the time but at the end all six sides have to come together in six collective colors. In this way, solving one side is related to solving five remaining sides. This process is irrelevant to keeping a universal goal or unilateral goal, but more relevant to entering a space that has different entrances although what I am facing is only one entrance.

ASCHENBRENNER Your way of working is very collaborative. We are sitting here together with David Michael DiGregorio, your collaborator for the music. Can you tell me a bit more, how you work together?

David Michael DiGregorio We have been working together for nine years and have built up a certain work rhythm. This time the process started with some short poetic texts, which Sung Hwan wrote, and this sparked discussions about

structures, to which I responded on a daily basis. I was trying to come up with a small song for each one as a first gesture. This method naturally transformed, and now we are working more with specific gestures, for example the idea and sound of lamentation. We are investigating how that might weave into each piece of music for this work in a different, yet unifying manner, considering that the different pieces of music being developed for this work have various styles yet belong to the same body. We have been talking about mirroring and also the idea of repetition, structures in canon.

For instance, Sung Hwan and I discussed how in New York in the 70's and 80's, Korean immigrants strongly developed certain industries, for example, dry cleaning, or wholesale and produce retail. As generations progress, a new branch of people forms, looking for a different kind of career, and those people also have children. I had difficulty in the beginning of this process because Sung Hwan was not working with a set or one story yet. But through Sung Hwan developing work with people like Igor Kretzu, who moved from Moldova through the Czech Republic, eventually arriving in Berlin, who built the set and whose character is contained in it, and now who will come to Gwangju to perform in the piece, I obtain something to hold on to.

Regarding the instrumentation I am thinking a lot about gliding movements, *portamenti*, the *ondes martenot*, as well as sobbing gestures in operatic voice. The different branches exist in parallel, and as more waves of people come, interweaving, repetition, and permutation create gesture. An abstract idea such as "hard work," or "피나는 노력," starts to ground itself in seeing live rehearsals with people brought together by Sung Hwan.

KIM When David is talking about different occupations of different branches of immigration throughout generations it is not just a specific Korean thing, obviously not. In the US, for example, there were Puerto Ricans, there were Irish, Italians, and there were Africans.

In terms of our collaboration, it differs fundamentally from hiring a person to work on a specific task. For instance for the last few years, we've been going to

operas, not knowing that we were going to do this project at AAT. I wouldn't call this production an opera, but a lot of the elements are inspired by the insight into that field.

I was always intrigued by the fact that opera today is disengaged from the general public despite the high production value starting from sophistication in its original composition. If you go to the Met in New York, there is a certain age group, and they also make productions geared toward that age group. Between the 19th and 20th Centuries, the connotation of opera in the culture changed, and this resulted in a series of generations especially in Europe and in the US that do not buy or jump into this field. In contrast, in the 90's you could see many Korean students studying in major classical music institutions on these continents. It is analogous to the thriving Christianity in Korea. This delay intrigues me.

I am not from the classical music field, but my sister was. One can learn a lot about, for instance, how to layer things by looking at a score. Then between different productions and compositions of the same text, layers add up. Many elements in this field indicate their link to a more complex system than individual artistic production. Because the whole production system is already set up in this specific way in opera, mechanically, not mechanically but...

DiGregorio Maybe mathematically? Going back to the idea of distance, I think you can bear yourself in these histories or in the personal experiences you had with them. This translates into the work, in a sense. Music on stage or under the proscenium setting has this special power, it can propel an essence out toward the audience quickly, in a different way than a person speaking or projecting her voice. This musical layer belongs to a larger set of gestures, for example time moving forward, or the lights breathing, or having their own life.

KIM In the US, for example, there is an Alan Lomax recording of Erwin Webb leading a prison work song, which has a specific meaning in that culture and is usually sung and claimed by a certain group of people. Of course if we play that song in Gwangju, it will have a different meaning. Who claims the right to sing this song, why, where? I did once have a character that can be depicted to have

black skin in my script. One way of putting this idea on stage is to cast a black person, but I don't think that's necessary to convey the idea. Furthermore, the act of looking for a black body generates different connotations. We can also carry meanings from one place to another by highlighting the similar elements between the two through metaphor. It is insightful to juxtapose two cultures through cross-analogy rather than through excavation or translation. One can be both the metaphor and the origin of the other, and vice versa.

ASCHENBRENNER Let me reframe this a bit. You are interested in the question, who is allowed to speak or sing about what? Who has the right to represent certain topics or themes. At the same time I feel there is an investigation into the gap, that is created by a linguistic structure of speech and its melody that we hear at the same time?

KIM I think that's an important point. Speaking in terms of classical music, as I know you like opera [laughter], looking at Mozart's *Queen of the Night*, when she is arguing with her daughter, there is only one sentence she sings, but she breaks it down for a big portion of the aria. Most of the meaning is conveyed in the in-between-space, through coloratura and other musical devices. It's similar to slow speaking or stuttering, there is a friction between musicality and structure in language. When I was living in Amsterdam, people would tell me that the Korean language is loud or noisy. But I heard Germans say the same thing about the Dutch. Koreans about Chinese, or Mandarin-speaking people when they talk about the Cantonese. There is always an in-between and an interchange between the linguistic structure and its musicality.

DiGgregorio There is a constant shifting, almost like a battle or a different kind of counterpoint. One beautiful thing about music is that there is a text or a history and a way it is delivered. In school I remember being repeatedly taught that there is a difference between program music telling a story and absolute music being pure, which I think is outdated.

ASCHENBRENNER When I look at your works they are usually environments, if I can call it like this. There is not one specific piece or singularity, but there is

relationships in the space, that create it. How do you work on these relations, how do you create them?

KIM In one of my recent shows in London the Tanks at Tate Modern, the common denominator of the four films installed there was the setting of each film. All four films were shot at different times and for different purposes, but they all took place either in Hyundai Apartment or in the summer house in Pocheon. In that way the show is similar to an architectural plan. If you have a section or a façade and then you have elevation or a perspective shot, you can show different angles of one thing. Similarly, it's common for film to show angles to compose the whole instead of following a singular shot.

There is a practice or a push, especially when you work in Europe and in the US, to conclusively describe your way of working or how you represent your work after it's been made. I tried my best to keep a little distance from that manner of making a claim. Some of the works to which I am drawn resist this. If you read *By Night in Chile* by Roberto Bolaño, it is fragmented, but continuous at the same time. The entire book is divided into two paragraphs, and the second paragraph is the last sentence. I cannot simply sum up the first paragraph.

ASCHENBRENNER The proscenium stage is usually a tool to favor central perspective. It is built for this way of perception: How do you relate this to your multi-perspective practice?

KIM One of the things I am interested in is the way the audience sits in the theatre. In a cinema even if you have different angles in the space, you still see one flat surface, namely the screen. Everybody sees the same image, so to speak. Whereas in theatre, everybody has one, unique angle, although the stage is one. I find that interesting and beautiful. In this piece for AAT, I'm exploring the whole stage by using the wings, stairs, cameras, and different sound devices. The difference between the two views for the audience members sitting on left and right sides will be pronounced in this production for AAT. The representational quality of bodies and objects are constantly turning and transforming throughout the process.

ASCHENBRENNER There is a Fassbinder Movie *Beware of the holy whore*, which is about a movie crew shooting a movie. The cast, the gang around Fassbinder, who lived as a Commune, plays each other in swapped roles. So it's a movie about making a movie, but at the same time a kind of psychogram of the group. It's interesting, that after a while it's completely irrelevant, who is playing whom, there is just mechanics coming out and in that sense issues moving through different bodies, entities.

KIM Already in the days of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, for example, there is a lot of doubling, where brothers are playing sisters and vice versa. It's even more interesting if we take into consideration that all characters were played by men at this time. The question is, once there are many brothers and sisters, whether to line them up in a grid, modules, circles, or shifting planes.

[1] is a member of cheeks do coy, LLC. Lightbody worked for a Federal District Judge and a Federal Appellate Judge before working as a prosecutor at the New York County District Attorney's Office. Lightbody edited Kim's book talk or sing.

[2] participates in the new production of Kim Sung Hwan, '피/나는 노력으로 한 [A Woman Whose Head Came Out Before Her Name]' as a performer and a technician of the production team.