

## Prompting “A Dialog”

To experience Min Oh’s work is to be privy to remarkable and unusual moments of surprise, laughter, delight, and exclamation intertwined with suspense, violence and terror. As a curator, I have been fortunate enough to have worked with Min Oh on two occasions with the piece “A Dialog” which was first created when I commissioned the artist to do a performance as part of a series “All is One, One is All” for the “Free Store” organized by Double A Projects (artists Anna Stein and Athena Robles). Since its debut, “A Dialog” in various dimensions and variations has evolved into a sophisticated performance piece, traveling to the UK, Europe and Asia since its beginnings in a small store on Nassau Street, Lower Manhattan. As the piece alters to new environments Min Oh has been challenging and asking more of not only the audience but of herself in her artistic practice.

I was introduced to Min Oh and her work in my capacity as Executive Director of Artists Alliance, Inc. located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, NY., running the Lower East Side–Rotating Studio Program where Min was an artist-in-residence. At that time Double A Projects had invited me to curate projects as part of the “Free Store” with an emphasis on interactivity and “free” for all (hence, “All is One, One is All”). I had come across Min Oh’s work collaborative interactive work with artist Stewart Smith which seemed to have potential for the components I was looking for. Her website had fascinated me with her approach and her “Thirteen Public Secrets,” suitably ironic with the music that tinkled as you went over the titles, allowing you to make your own composition.

After discussion, Min Oh decided that this was a good point for her to produce a solo performance concept that she had been working on during the residency to accomplish a goal of re-introducing the performative aspect to her artwork (relating to her former training as a young pianist). With the focus on shared community and interaction, Min’s “A Dialog” was formed and debuted at the “Free Store.”

To formerly introduce the work, “A Dialog” is a combination of live performance and recorded actions with the artist in silent visual conversation with her recorded self with the scenes and actions being determined by the voting of the audience to series of questions. This means every time the work is performance it becomes a one of kind visual composition.

On the first time, the performance took place three times and each time a different narrative was created due to the make up of the audience. The organizers stressed the interactive component needed for the concept of the exhibition and for this Min Oh developed the voting system with balloons with questions posed for the audience to participate and direct the narrative with black and silver balloons. (Black – Yes and Silver – No). This provided a solution that was simple, effective, and a fun way for the audience to participate in the narrative of the work. Min Oh poses questions; want to play? Play harder? Played hard enough? As the audience is exposed to the play, a physical communication of the artist live with her recorded self that includes the use graphic black silhouetted birds and cows, there is an investment and ownership of the audience that becomes part of the experience and moment in time. This is revealed through the constant laughter and delight expressed vocally throughout the duration of the piece. In making demands of the audience, their participation required vocally ensures a unique group, a shared and communal experience that is both moving and enchanting. For Min, “A Dialog” took her work to another level, doing her first solo performance since deciding to concentrate on fine art after completing a graphic design MFA at Yale. This performance is one I encourage the reader to seek out live, writing or viewing the documented version only does slight justice to the emotions of experiencing the work in actual time and place.

In “A Dialog’s” first incarnation it was the location that made a significant impression on the structure of the piece for Min. Prior to the site visit to the store the work was in progress with the artist in dialogue live with her recorded self against a blank white wall. Viewing the fake wooden walls of the store and perhaps a little disconcerted at first, Min immediately saw the potential of the doorway and radiator beside each other that could serve as a architectural space holder for the performance, viewing it as form that could serve as a useful figurative element to further dramatize the work. Through the different variations of the piece, while the artist’s use of the blank white wall is now essential, Min has continued with the use of a single minimalist white chair as an essential structural component for the narrative.

It is Min Oh’s varied background that informs and sets her work aside with the use of visual graphic symbols and words written in the font she designed herself. The former music scholar’s architectural use of complex timing that is apparent in the performance, rehearsing the interaction with the recorded performer, knowing all the possible variations so none of the choices the audience makes leaves her unprepared for what is coming next. Min Oh operates and produces her

work with the eye of a perfectionist. This doesn't preclude or disallow spontaneity; the audience component of the work creates this element. In fact it is the very combination of the two that makes this performance so special in its character.

Evolving in my own curatorial practice, "A Dialog" was an important moment, prompting the initial idea of dialog being a focus for future curatorial concepts. Through the exhibition "Structured Simplicity," 1. this was reinforced through a conversation with artist Fabienne Lasserre over her piece Worldless 2. that was the origin of the exhibition "Word-Less" at EFA Project Space in 2010 3. This explored the premise of artists communicating narrative through veiling or abstracting symbols and text. Watching the progress and evolution of "A Dialog" it seemed logical to invite Min Oh to perform the piece again. In this version, Min Oh took on the challenging task of directing the audience participation and narrative through the use of symbols as opposed to words. Drawing upon her training in graphic design and how people respond to certain images and shapes, Min Oh was able to choose and design elements that would entice people to select one symbol in order to move the dialogue onward. The audience was asked to shout out 'left or right' in order to select the next scene.

An abstract layer and context was added to the performance for the first time, along with a subtle sense of the unknown as the subject of each choice, without questions that allude to the narrative, the audience had less knowledge of the content as opposed to earlier versions when the written questions denoted the essence of the story telling.

This allowed Min and her recorded alter ego to dictate the script. In this particular version with the constraints the physical interaction between the two characters was more dominant, if not leaning towards more violent, although her use of birds flying through, inside and out the balloons that remain constant throughout all the versions, sweetens this aspect. In many ways, Min's work operates in a fairy tale land, referencing the rich history of the surrealist and often violent sub-layers of the tales passed down by generations of Snow White or Red Riding Hood. "A Dialog" stirs up feelings of childhood and nostalgia that could tip towards sentimentality, the tension Min creates between the live and recorded self maintains a dramatic connection that distills this tendency.

While one might not expect the audience to have clear feelings about which element to choose, for instance a large circle on the left - a small circle on the right, the audience did express their sentiments and

opinions clearly. Once again, the communal community established in the spectators contributed to the momentum of the performance, making the 10-minute long performance a distinctive event. The shouting involved in the voting becomes part of the overall excitement and once over, after the applause, a deflated quiet moment takes over as people acknowledge the energy spent in their contribution to the piece.

As with many performances, the documentation while a physical record and trace evidence of the event cannot replace the actual moments in time especially in the case of “A Dialog” when the individual make up of the audience affects the narrative of the performance as a whole. As Min suggests in her description of the piece asking the question, is the narrative directed by the audience or is it? As each scenario is created by the artist and each choreographed moment, the spectator’s input is more about pulling the scenes together through the options provided to tell a tale related to Min’s personal and artistic story.

Min Oh’s physical energy displayed in her actions combined with the sedate and delicate graphic visuals seem deliberately incongruous and it is these kind of oppositions existing in Min Oh’s work that contribute to the work’s authenticity. To the observer it seems the interest in these contradictions are what drives the work. “A Dialog” is an impressive work that has carved out a particular space for itself and with Min Oh’s adventurous and determined nature in her young artistic practice, the work continues to expand in its scale and ambition. As willing participants in the ongoing story telling of Min Oh, we look forward to the next chapters whichever order they are in.

Felicity Hogan  
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1. “Structured Simplicity,” with Mai Braun, Hilary Harnischfeger, Elana Herzog, Fabienne Lasserre, and Amy Yoes, 20 June–9 August 2009, curated by Felicity Hogan, Dumbo Art Center, Brooklyn, NY.
2. Fabienne Lassere, Worldless, 2009. Felt, pigment, acrylic polymer, linen, molding paste, armature, acrylic paint. 54 x 21 x 19 inches.
3. “Word-Less,” EFA Project Space, Elizabeth Foundation, NY. Artists: Michael Paul Britto, Brendan Fernandes, Duron Jackson, Fabienne Lasserre, Jason Lujan, Rashaad Newsome, Min Oh, Roxana Perez–Mendez

and Carolyn Salas. June 3 – July 23, 2010