

Relative Relations

Min Oh describes herself as a storyteller. And indeed, her medium is language; her works are narrative and communicated via her website or in exhibitions. Yet in her short videos, artist books and the (life) performance project which she's been developing for years, visual and acoustic images and symbols play a far greater role than written or spoken words. This may be due to Min's dual education as a graphic designer and pianist. She certainly has a profound knowledge of both, which, artistically speaking, she employs extremely well. What is most interesting about Min Oh's works is the interplay between WHAT she says and HOW she says it.

Although the episodic and engaging videos tie everything together both visually and acoustically and even offer a plot of sorts, the viewer is confronted with a more associatively constructed message than a linear one. First, Min Oh shows us things that do not normally warrant a closer look (such as an electric plug adaptor, concrete stairs, file cabinet drawers or flash cards). But in her video works, they play leading roles. Their conventional function or usual purpose, which they could certainly fulfill, is of lesser importance. For instance, Min Oh depicts the plug adaptor inhaling and exhaling in a black (outer?) space, while solidified gas bubbles in the concrete step blink and tinkle as the camera pans across them. The scraping file cabinet drawers open and close by themselves, revealing index cards, which, when combined as mathematical equations, produce perplexing results. The same applies to the eerie singsong that accompanies the children's vocabulary flash cards. Obviously these clips have nothing in common with commercials for ordinary objects with ordinary characteristics. Rather they show ordinary objects that exhibit unusual characteristics (depicted using a few CG magic tricks), which nonetheless – and this is truly startling – appear ordinary and acceptable, perhaps even obvious. In other videos, Min Oh treats living creatures as things and objects. In one, a cow becomes a milk machine. In another, two human ruffians appear in Min's virtual notebook as jumping jacks. Not only does she herself physically imitate objects of daily life, but also abstract ideas such as colours or right angles. In her performance project, she faces off against herself as if she were a part of an analogue, interactive computer game.

As we know, metaphors and symbols are just as much rhetorical devices as personification and reification. However, it is quite possible that the poetically-educated among us (of all people!) would not understand Min Oh's proverbs and limericks.

For this is the experience of inadequate language, and that serves as the basis and inspiration for her works. It is an inadequacy which cannot be avoided, even if one speaks five languages, including one's own, perfectly. The Korean-born Min Oh, who lived for many years in the USA

and now resides in Europe, is certainly no stranger to the classical “loss of language”. But perhaps she didn’t necessarily experience the loss as something negative, but as a liberating “reset”, in the sense described by Roland Barthes, who with that wonderful image of a ray of light, searching for a symbolic relationship, claimed that the relative meaninglessness of occidental symbolism (in particular, French symbolism of the 1960s) could be found in the Far East (in particular, that of Japan of that same decade).

Even if one has mastered the dialect of a language, when confronted with other languages including one’s own native language, gaps are bound to appear between the signifier and the signified. This is exactly what Herta Müller masterfully described – in words – and concluded (with reference to Jorge Semprún): “Home is WHAT is spoken”.

These gaps and abysses, in which Min Oh enjoys fishing in and wading through, surround the words, their visual symbols and images, and by extension, those items and objects which they “signify”. Tom Friedman happened to stumble upon such a gap during his artistic action of self-discovery in an emptied, freshly white-painted studio, whereby the White Cube formed a neutralising foil like a foreign language. Moreover, the piece he made immediately thereafter, *Untitled* (1990, ill.), “speaks” to that which Min Oh conveys in her works – especially in *A Murder Investigation in New Haven on Sept. 25 2007* (2007) – a work like an abstract image, from which its artistic strategy can be “read”:

“...I didn’t really know what I was doing at the time [during the second year of the two-year program at the University of Illinois in Chicago], but one day I poured honey on the floor [of the studio] and when I was away from this space someone asked me if I had urinated on the floor. They thought the puddle of honey looked like urine. This incident enabled me to see the potential meaning of this experiment [emptying out and whitening the studio]. I started to think of something I could do in the space that related in a way to this activity. I thought about putting together a jigsaw puzzle, as a metaphor for what I was trying to do: to piece something together. [...] But when I got to the point of almost finishing the puzzle, I thought what I’d do is to separate the pieces like three-quarters of an inch apart from each other (*Untitled*, 1990). So they were in the right order...as if the puzzle was stretched apart. This seemed to redefine the puzzle in a way. You had to look at each piece to construct the total image.

Cooper: Can you define how you knew this piece was a success?

Friedman: I think in the way it was read by people, which was very similar to the way I was thinking about it. There was something irrefutable to me about it. It wasn’t about a particular thing, but it seemed to branch off into possibilities of meaning. And these possibilities didn’t limit it...”

Min Oh seems fascinated by such indefinable, loose and indirect relationships between the sometimes contradictory characteristics and meanings of things beyond their names.

Consequently, in this ambiguity, she has found her own universal-global language, which – like the film – contains no grammatical structure. This language is a vehicle, but as such, it is only reliable up to a certain point. Indeed, she takes a risk that her works will not be understood by everyone. The limits of language or the inability to express ourselves either verbally or nonverbally, when putting words to emotions and feelings, or their (non-) verbal communication

is something that almost everyone experiences at some point in their life. This is the starting point of Min Oh's newest video, in which she no longer merely presents the unfamiliar functions of ordinary objects, but also demonstrates their potential communicative function.

Mother (2011) begins with a close-up of a small, blond-haired girl, standing practically motionless in front of a static camera. Metallic tones are hammered in time to a montage of medium to near shots, repeated in quick succession. The expression on the girl's face appears – as far as conventional analysis allows – puzzled and perhaps even frightened. Suddenly, white, rotating plates appear on a superimposed plane, adding additional noises to the harsh cacophony. The images and sounds are dramatically heightened until at the end of the short sequence, one of the plates, which, though no longer flying about her head, covers up her face. And that's it – which is quite a lot.

Even though there is no direct reference to the title in terms of the images shown, it does provide a key to the puzzle. It describes the person who is communicating with the child via the plates. What we see and what we hear are evidence this *mother* is certainly not singing a lullaby. In this video, Min Oh depicts a childhood memory of the “discordant” mother who fails to express her feelings verbally, because, on one hand, she is lacking the necessary words, and on the other, social rules and norms – especially those pertaining to her role as a woman and mother – hinder her from doing so. Yet the way she (invisibly) handles these fragile dishes, i.e. how they clatter, conveys something to the sensitive child, and although it's nothing definite, she can sense there is something “wrong” – and not only acoustically.

Min Oh doesn't tell the kind of stories that are easily read. Images do not flow in gentle succession and the sounds are not music to one's ears. Clearly, the viewer/listener must activate their fine skills of association and translation (in Novalis' sense of the word). In the end, Min Oh's stories resemble small but valuable lessons taught by a master in the art of “reading between the lines”. Perhaps it would do us good to practice such lessons in this age of headlines. As the artist demonstrates, it works especially well if you keep your sense of humour.

Silke Opitz

“...East and West should not be regarded as “realities”, between which one tries to find historical, philosophical, cultural or political similarities or differences. I do not gaze at all things “Far Eastern” with enamoured eyes; I’m indifferent when it comes to the Orient – it only provides me with a supply of moves which I can put into position and, once the game is invented, can use to “ogle” the concept of an incredible system of symbols, completely different from our own. When studying the Orient, we should not strive to reveal different symbols, different metaphysics, a different wisdom (although this certainly might seem worthwhile), but rather the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the character of the symbolic system. (...) There are certainly thousands of things we can learn from the Far East today: an enormous amount of understanding is necessary and will remain necessary (the lack of which can only be the result of ideological blindness). But if we accept the large expanses of darkness on both sides (capitalist Japan, American accumulation, technical development), then it is essential **that a fine ray of light search not for other symbols, but for the symbolic relationship overall.** (...) This is the situation, in which the individual begins to break down, the ancient writings are overthrown, meaning is shaken to its core, torn and exhausted to the point of irreplaceable emptiness, without the object ceasing to be meaningful and desirable...” Translated from Roland Barthes, *Im Reich der Zeichen*, pp. 15-16, Frankfurt 1981ff (*L’Empire des signes*, French first edition 1970).

See Herta Müller. *Der König verneigt sich und tötet*. Frankfurt 2009, 3rd ed., pp. 24.

Tom Friedman in an interview with Dennis Cooper. In: Bruce Hainley, Dennis Cooper, Adrian Searle: *Tom Friedman*. NY (Phaidon, 2001), pp. 10-11.

...68 Translation can either be grammatical, transformed or mythical. Mythical translations are of the highest style. They represent the pure, individual character of the original work of art (...). Greek mythology comprises, in part, such a translation of a national religion. The modern-day Madonna mythology is another example. Grammatical translations are translations in the usual sense. They require a great deal of scholarly endeavour, but only discursive skills. (...) The true translator of this sort, in fact, must be an artist who is able to give a greater idea of the whole in whatever way possible – he must become the poet’s poet, expressing both his and the poet’s ideas in the translation. **Not only books, but everything can be translated in these three ways...**” Translated from “*Vermischte Bemerkungen*” (“*Blütenstaub*”) 1797-1798, in: *Novalis Werke*. Edited and annotated by Gerhard Schulz, Munich, 2001, 4th ed., p. 337.