

Performing Art, Performing Life: Jaye Rhee at the Picker Art Gallery

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The work of Jaye Rhee comprises diverse media—video, photography, dance, music, painting, and sculpture—making it a prime example of the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art. While some scholars, critics, and curators have compared Rhee’s performance-based video installations to the experimental multimedia work of such internationally recognized artists as Bruce Nauman, Matthew Barney, and Kimsooja, her oeuvre resists easy categorization.¹ Engaging with both still and moving images, Rhee addresses multiple themes concerning the body’s movement through space, the relationship between aural and visual stimuli, and the gap between reality and illusion in the viewer’s perception of everyday life. In her solo exhibition at Colgate University, Rhee transforms the Picker Art Gallery into a site of performance, engaging audiences in a series of moments that explore the role of the performer as artist, dancer, and storyteller.

Going Places (2005; fig. 1), an early video work originally captured on 16mm film, demonstrates Rhee’s preoccupation with deliberately inserting herself into her work as the performer. This single-channel projection shows the artist jumping through a forest of white balloons. With her body crouched and arms thrashing, Rhee wrestles to break through this barrier, which slowly disappears as she passes from left to right and back again. Installations such as *Tear* (2002; fig. 2) also deal with themes related to the human condition and physical impediments.² Here again, Rhee is the focus, this time across four video screens that depict the artist tearing through a large expanse of cloth with her body. The exaggerated sound of the fabric as it rips lends an unsettling, almost violent atmosphere to the work—one that clearly references feminist performance art of the 1960s and early 1970s, particularly Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964).³ Just as Ono implicated her audience by allowing them to cut off pieces of her clothing on stage, Rhee makes the viewer witness to her vulnerability as she willingly submits herself to the struggle at hand. Perhaps invoking what Ono and Rhee were attempting to achieve in these works, performance artist Catherine Elwes’s description of what it means to be a female performer is especially germane: “Performance is about the ‘real-life’ presence of the artist. She takes on no roles but her own. She is author, subject, activator, director, and designer. When a woman speaks within the performance tradition, she is understood to be conveying her own perceptions, her own fantasies, and her own analyses.”⁴ While Rhee does not speak to us with words, her body language conveys an internal battle that suggests issues surrounding gender and performance previously addressed by Elwes and Ono.

¹In the monograph *Imageless: Jaye Rhee* (Seoul: Specter Press, 2010), curators Raúl Zamudio, Sara Reisman, and Edwin Ramoran associate Rhee’s work with earlier examples of video and performance ranging from Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s choreography for *Revelations* (1960) to Paul McCarthy’s *Painter* (1995).

²Sara Reisman, “Performed and Crafted,” in *Imageless: Jaye Rhee*, 63.

³For a discussion on and bibliography of Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, see Kathy O’Dell, “Fluxus Feminus,” *TDR* 41 (1997): 53–54, 59–60.

⁴Catherine Elwes, “Floating Fertility: A Look at Performance Art by Women,” in *Women’s Images of Men*, ed. Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau (London: Pandora Press, 1985), 164.

Rhee's attention to what has been characterized as "choreographed movement" is also explored in later works such as *Notes*, an eight-channel black-and-white video installation from 2007 (fig. 3).⁵ In contrast to *Going Places*, *Tear*, and works such as *Swan* (2007) and *Mediterranean* (2009), where the artist is the main subject, Rhee has here cast a group of female dancers and set them in a white, impalpable space defined only by the existence of five black horizontal lines that call to mind a musical staff. The figures leap over and under the lines—or, as it turns out, strings—accompanied by composer Elliot Sharp's cacophonous piano. Rhee not only references musical composition in *Notes*, but also taps into memories of a favorite childhood pastime: Chinese jump rope.⁶ In a 2013 interview Rhee explained that the game "requires memorizing all the steps and jumps from the beginning till the end as rules with repeated practice. That, I think, is methodologically similar to playing music...because learning a musical instrument also requires both brain and body memory."⁷ However, there is something not quite methodical about the way the dancers' movements engage with the soundtrack. The aural and visual elements appear at first glance to correlate, but after more careful examination, it becomes clear that there are many instances where the jarring, staccato rhythms of Sharp's score directly oppose Rhee's choreography. Rhee's dancers become stand-ins or signs for what they are intended to represent—in this case, musical notes.⁸ Yet, the lack of synchronization between these "human notes" and the music gives these signs an ambiguous character. *Notes*, thus, is as much an illustration of sheet music come to life as it is an example of navigating what Raúl Zamudio has described as the "poetics of performance" in Rhee's work.⁹

The disjunction between what we hear and what we see is apparent not only in *Notes*, but also in *The Flesh and the Book* (2013; fig. 4), in which the artist's fascination with relationships among the body, performance, music, and text is further explored. The title is based on the first line of the poem "Brise Marine" (Sea Breeze) by Stéphane Mallarmé: "The Flesh is sad—and I have read every book."¹⁰ Although the poem has no direct association with Rhee's work, the words "flesh" and "book" assume new meaning in her video installation: "flesh" refers to the body and dance and "book" to the physicality of sheet music.¹¹ Once again, dancers move individually or in groups within an empty space traversed by five black horizontal bands. The audio is composed of various instrumental sounds by Sharp that have been rearranged by Rhee. Unlike *Notes*, which employed anonymous, nonprofessional dancers, *The Flesh and the Book* features a cast of trained dancers from the recently disbanded Merce Cunningham Dance Company. In this four-channel installation, Rhee clearly celebrates Cunningham (1919–2009) and his influence on avant-garde performance. Although retired from Cunningham's company, the dancers

⁵Reisman, "Performed and Crafted," 60.

⁶Caroline Picard, "Geometric Qualities: An Interview with Jaye Rhee," *Bad at Sports: Contemporary Art Talk*, June 14, 2013, <http://badatsports.com/index.php?s=jaye+rhee&x=0&y=0>.

⁷Ibid.

⁸According to semiotic theories proposed by C.S. Peirce in the nineteenth century, a "sign" is something that is interpreted by someone as a stand-in for something else. C.S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 99.

⁹Raúl Zamudio, "Jaye Rhee: Art in Motion," in *Imageless: Jaye Rhee*, 46.

¹⁰"La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres." Numerous English translations of Mallarmé's "Brise Marine" exist; this one is taken from *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E.H. and A.M. Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 24–25.

¹¹Picard, "Geometric Qualities."

continue to dance, their bodies becoming “recorders of history.”¹² The rise and fall of bellowing instrumentation is broken up by periods that are silent but for the tapping of the dancers’ feet and imparts a sense of anticipation and drama throughout the duration of the performance. Music and choreography are intertwined in *The Flesh and the Book*, but they also function independently—a quality, coincidentally, also found in the work of Cunningham and his frequent collaborator, John Cage (1912–1992). Cunningham described how in creating a new performance he and Cage initially agreed on specific beginning and end points for music and dance, but each would be created independently, allowing for what Cunningham called “freedom for the dance.”¹³ Rhee and Sharp seem to have executed *The Flesh and the Book* in a similar manner: Sharp provided Rhee with a number of sound files, from which she chose ones that would work best in relation to the dancers’ choreographed movements.

In addition to video, Rhee utilizes the medium of photography to explore the spaces of performance. The artist’s photographs add another dimension to her video installations, further complicating our perception of bodily movement—and stillness—within constructed space. While stills from *The Flesh and the Book* such as *Untitled* (2013; fig. 5) capture the dancers frozen in mid-motion, we are still able to discern the dynamism in their actions. As past members of the Cunningham company travel across Rhee’s musical tableau, their bodies recall Eadweard Muybridge’s photographic studies of human and animal movement.¹⁴ Other photographs, such as *Movement for Colors and Lines* (2013; fig. 6), also depict former Cunningham dancers in various stages of movement. This time, however, the musical staff assumes a more architectonic form. The rectangular, rainbow-colored shapes that give the staves their three-dimensionality evoke the mathematical, repetitious movements of Cunningham’s choreography and suggest possible connections among music, harmony, and color.¹⁵

Narrative and the role of memory are other important elements in Rhee’s work. Traditions in the history of modern dance are to a certain extent memorialized in *The Flesh and the Book*, yet the spontaneity and freshness of the dancers’ movements give new life to Cunningham’s past. In her most recent video installation, *The Perfect Moment* (2015; fig. 7)—produced specifically for the exhibition at the Picker Art Gallery—Rhee delves further into themes of memory especially as it relates to a dancer’s career. Here Rhee juxtaposes two storylines, one of a middle-aged woman reminiscing about her early days as a modern dancer in New York City, and the other of a young girl re-enacting her elder’s words through movement. Played simultaneously, the two videos create an unusual dialogue.¹⁶

¹²Jaye Rhee, discussion with Sarah Horowitz, June 2015.

¹³Merce Cunningham, “Four Events That Have Led to Large Discoveries (19 September 1994)” in *Merce Cunningham: Fifty Years*, ed. David Vaughn and Melissa Harris (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1997), 276.

¹⁴Zamudio also compares Rhee’s *Notes* to the work of Eadweard Muybridge: “As the figures pan from one side of the screen to the other, they are contained within the individual monitors yet the repetitive movements create the illusion of continuity.... Think, for instance, of a cross between Eadweard Muybridge and virtual space.” Zamudio, “Jaye Rhee: Art in Motion,” 45.

¹⁵Relationships between music and color have been explored by artists ranging from Renaissance masters such as Leonardo da Vinci to modern painters such as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. See John Gage, “The Sound of Color,” in *Color and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 227–46.

¹⁶As in Rhee’s earlier work—*Notes* and *The Flesh and the Book*, for example—the older dancer’s verbal narration in *The Perfect Moment* does not always correspond with the younger dancer’s choreography.

The Perfect Moment reads as a performance within itself: each of the narrator’s memories is analogous to a scene in a play or a movement in a musical composition. Rhee carefully arranges the two channels of the video so that the impact of both the young dancer’s improvisational movements and the mature dancer’s story are taken into account. At times we see and hear only the narrator; at other moments we observe the young dancer in silence; and then there are instances when the separate narratives play off each other in a striking combination of spoken word, motion, and street noise. Here Rhee elaborates on *The Flesh and the Book* by more explicitly visualizing the disconnect between text and image yet *The Perfect Moment* becomes its own poem—a verse-by-verse, frame-by-frame recitation of a dancer’s life as an artist and performer. As the older dancer recounts her experiences as an emerging artist, specifically her first concert as a member of the Judson Dance Theater, the movements of the younger dancer increasingly enact the former’s words as her memories become more and more vivid. The two channels grow more in sync toward the end, when the older dancer describes one of her favorite solos she performed during an opening night production of a piece entitled “Bleeker to West 80th Street.” She recalls that the performance was composed of a number of sharp movements accompanied by “a score of subway sounds.”¹⁷ The viewer watches the older dancer lift her right shoulder just as the young dancer does the same. She continues to act out the progression of gesticulations articulated by the narrator until the climactic moment in the story when the older dancer felt a moment of perfection, balancing on the ball of her foot with arms above her head in a the shape of a “W” (cover ill.).¹⁸ The young dancer’s final positions flicker before us as visual reminders of the nostalgic feelings expressed in words by her older counterpart.

Rhee’s exploration of performance through video and photography challenges us to think more precisely about the body and its movement through space. It also asks us to consider the potential of narrative as a textual and visual medium. Rhee’s ability to capture the ephemerality of her subject matter—to make transparent the element of illusion in performance—reveals an implicit theatricality that shapes the way we perceive the various tableaux she has staged. As this exhibition demonstrates, the evolution of the dancer as performer is an intrinsic facet of Rhee’s work. Rhee’s attention to the physiological and psychological aspects of her actors complicates our understanding of what it means to perform—in life and in art.

CAPTIONS:

Figure 1 | Still from *Going Places*, 2005. Single-channel video installation. Cat. no.1.

Figure 2 | Installation view of *Tear*, 2002. Four-channel video installation with sound.

¹⁷The sequence described occurs at 6:52–7:07 of *The Perfect Moment*.

¹⁸The moment described occurs at 10:43–11:50 of the video.

Figure 3 | Installation view of *Notes*, 2007. Eight-channel video installation with sound.

Figure 4 | Installation view of *The Flesh and the Book*, 2013. Four-channel video installation with sound. Cat. no. 3.

Figure 5 | *Untitled*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. Cat. no. 5.

Figure 6 | *Movement for Colors and Lines*, 2013. Archival inkjet print. Cat. no. 4.

Figure 7 | Installation view of *The Perfect Moment*, 2015. Two-channel video installation with sound. Cat. no. 6.