

Jaye Rhee: Art in Motion

The work of New York-based artist Jaye Rhee resides somewhere between video, performance, installation, and photography. Her most recent projects include videos exhibited either on flat screen monitors or projected in large format. In either mode of display, Rhee's video work emphatically yet elegantly engages the architectonics of a given space. While this would certainly categorize these artistic endeavors as being at the intersection of installation and video, there is also a performative dimension to them that situates them within a distinct genre of video art. And here I am referring to a specific practice where artists use performance in their video or films in a myriad of contexts; some of these include Sooja Kim, Matthew Barney, and Paul McCartney, to name just a few. Like the aforementioned artists, Jaye Rhee's recent video pieces including *Notes* (2007), *Swan* (2007) and *Polar Bear* (2007), which the latter two are part of her Bathhouse series, are works in which the artist is seen engaged in a variety of activities. Her modus operandi that converge performance and video was, however, first preceded by work that was sculptural and conceptually-based and pivotal in setting the terms for the art that was yet to come.

An early piece titled *Artist Book* (2001-02), for instance, is a precursor to her process oriented video works and a telltale sign of Rhee's conceptual use of materials. It consists of simulated boxes for sugar cubes, such as the kind one finds at any grocery store. Rather than have the original label on the box, Rhee has replaced it with the title of her work. The box is repository for an object in book form replete with color photographs of words made out of sugar cubes found in the box. Another work that also teases out the relationship between language and the sculptural object is an untitled piece consisting of a bottle rack on which Rhee slowly, yet methodically places bottles on them to be dried. While Rhee adamantly cites Duchamp's famous *Bottle Rack* (1914) in her work, she inverts the readymade gesture by reinserting the work back into its initial context. And from a purely aesthetic perspective, it seems that her reconfiguration has not only created a kind of dialogue with the past, but has infused it with a wholly different gendered, if not political reading. Think of Rhee's intervention along the same lines as Sherry Levine's reworking of Duchamp's *Fountain*, but with a more critical framing. For Rhee's bottle rack has a slightly empowering subtext in the eclipsing of the bottle rack's stems by the bottles. More recently, Rhee has been using the pre-designed set as a kind of readymade locale, if you will, for her series of videos based shot on location in bathhouses. This on-going project has taken her around the world and is oriented around questions of public and private space, as well as the social aesthetics of bathhouse décor.

In the video *Swan* (2006), for example, Rhee has taped herself taking a leisurely bath in the bathhouse's pool. On the wall of the pool area are a series of swans painted in a somewhat offhanded style. As the camera pans across the bathhouse that includes the swans as simulated backdrop, Rhee appears on an indistinct floating device in the pool while wearing a headpiece reminiscent of the avian on the wall. Part synchronized swimming, water ballet and body art, Jaye Rhee's video emits a paradoxical air. On the one hand there is something poetically unsettling about this call and response between Rhee's feigned zoomorphism and the anthropomorphism of the swan teased out by the

artist's mimicry. On the other hand, the artist's subtle waddling and the temporal flow in water that feel like ripples, have a soothing meditative rhythm that is visually laconic. It is this ostensible sense of cadence and crescendo that also drives her recent video titled *Notes* (2007)

Notes is a multi-channel video that weaves together a plethora of artistic disciplines including performance art, audio-work, and the moving image; yet there is also a faint veering into other formal registers including painting and sculpture. The former genres are the crux of this ambitious work: what unfolds before the viewer's eyes are numerous videos played on flat-screen monitors on which are displayed individuals dressed in black and set against a backdrop of five dark horizontal lines in a white, spatially amorphous environment.

The actors in this performance-oriented piece feign a kind of animated musical notation, that is, they are human surrogates for notes that constitute a score; and through their movement, enact some sort of musical "composition" that is both translated into real time as well as heard. This activity is heightened within the video's contrasted setting produced by the black lines in tension with the white background; in other words, this minimalist stage-set serves as "sheet" music and the audio created is ostensibly triggered by the performers deployed as notes that move across it and seem to activate the music in the video. Interestingly, however, is the soundtrack that compliments yet offsets the bodies moving across the viewer's field of vision; vacillating between sonorous, atonal flourishes that crescendo and decrescendo as well as more harmonious passages, the work's audio has an uncanny interplay with the performers. Sometimes there a synchronous relationship between body and sound: as figures step shuffle, and prance, the music seemingly parallels the action undertaken both rhythmically and in syncopation. Other times the music harmonically meanders as if there is only happenstance that links audio with the visual. Further complicating *Notes*' aesthetic and conceptual strategies are the multiple screens on which it is played.

The horizontal, sequential configuration of flat-screens that are divided by their frames and the support wall on which they are mounted, give *Notes* a sculptural presence that veers into the painterly as well. 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 that offhandedly evoke a palpitating phantasmagoria. Think, for instance, of a cross between Eadweard Muybridge and virtual space; or, could these polymorphous mise-en-scènes be the equivalency of some sort of digital, magic lantern; or maybe a new media zoetrope? Another trope that Rhee works with great effect is the disparity between the various videos that constitute her singular work. For the work, so far, has taken more than one form of installation.

In an early version the flat screens are exhibited in sequence and the video is displayed in a more conventional manner. In the most recent installation, Rhee has installed flat screens in two rows, one row above the other where the videos seem to play off of each other as if they were reflections. Both modes of display have, interestingly enough, different artistic results. The horizontal installation can almost be read like a text from left to right,

or in the manner that one may read sheet music. What Rhee does to undermine the teleological nature of this earlier incarnation is to have the figures move in different directions within the individual monitors: from left to right, right to left, as well as posing as “notes” both frontally and in profile. Occasionally, the artist also populates her “sheet music” with a varied number of “notes.” When the music seems to play harmonic clusters, chords or even arpeggios, which are broken chords played in sequence, the figures seem to be the cause of the composed sound. With the most recent version of *Notes* there seems to be, however, a whole new set of effects created that by way of displacement created from the mirrored effect caused by the two rows of monitors. The top sequence of *Notes* consists of performers moving right side up, while the bottom series of videos they are upside down. This sets up a plethora of conceptual and narrative possibilities.

One of them being is that whereas the performers that are right side up could allude to the treble or upper register of a musical score, those inverted could be the bass or lower register. But even within either set of “scores” Rhee’s multi-channel piece emphasizes the poetics of performance or of movement in time. Tempo is germane to *Notes*, albeit that it often feels to be both in concert and against the meter of the performers. The call and response between audio and visual components are polymorphous; the body in *Notes* is, if you will excuse the pun, fleshed out to where sound becomes an extension of it, of movement, and vice versa. For though the relationship between performers and the area they move within the screen as sheet music is overt, it is concomitantly obviated by their autonomous, poetic rhythms that resist reading body movement as strictly about the transliteration of sound.

The formal citations of Rhee’s *Notes* run far and wide. One can see elements of the avant-garde dancers Merce Cunningham as well as Trisha Brown. There also elements of video work oriented around movement such as the early, experimental pieces by Bruce Nauman. The beauty of *Notes* regarding bodily movement, however, resides in the unique and innovative way that Rhee choreographs as a director would guide actors on a film-set; but there is also a formal dynamic that she creates that extends the performance aesthetic into sculpture. *Notes* is not only about sound and movement and their convergence into an artistic whole, for Rhee also has a unique ability to exploit the absence of mobility as well as the importance of silence. As much as *Notes* contains movement and is formally and conceptually integral to it, stillness is just as ontologically imperative. The same thing could be said of the video’s audio and the breaks of silence in between sound. The adage that silence is golden is intrinsic to music in the same way that the negative background on which a positive mark is made is crucial to painting; or the empty space surrounding sculpture is necessary for its perceptual concretization and cognition.

Paradoxically, the array of disciplines in *Notes* that run the gamut of dance, music, video, installation as well as painting and sculpture never feels excessive, but is conceptualized and formally executed with finesse and aplomb. *Notes* is a crisp, sharp, and precise work, while at the same time it feels spontaneous and energetic. And, in essence, is testament to Jaye Rhee’s artistry; an artist whose work in multi-channel video, new media, and

photography, is beginning to establish her importance in the field of international contemporary art.

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