

Inhabiting a Land of Tenderness

Barbara London, March 2023

We are living in a time of accelerated technological change, and face complex decisions about how to live responsibly. On a daily basis we make adjustments at different levels of our existence, caught up with making sense of today's "brave new world."¹

As a curator and writer with an insatiable curiosity, for decades I have engaged with artwork that often is off the radar. Interested in how individual artists articulate their vision, I seek insight into their subject matter and processes. My career began in the early 1970s at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. I started out by keeping my ear to the ground, and attended a range of challenging performances and art shows presented downtown in artist-run alternative venues, situated in storefronts and rundown lofts. This first-hand knowledge contributed to my understanding, and was essential due to the paucity of the underground activity's coverage in mainstream press and most art journals. Assembling information on my own, I experienced as much as I could by racing around in pursuit of experimental interdisciplinary activity.

Of great interest to me was the remarkable work of pioneering artists, who tended to run counter to the entrenched old boys' network so firmly in place. I observed how Yvonne Rainer (American, b.1934) experimented with movement, language, and film, and seriously considered her position as a woman. The many elements she utilized—repetition, tasks, and indeterminacy—gradually would become standards in the arts.

I learned a lot from stalwart individuals like Shigeko Kubota (Japanese, 1937-2015), a feisty artist who would boldly pronounce that "video is victory of the vagina." In the early 1970s, women like Kubota entered this wide-open new field of video-as-art, which

¹ To the author, the phrase "brave new world" refers somewhat ironically to a new and hopeful period in history resulting from major changes in society. *Brave New World* is also the title of a dystopian novel by the author Aldous Huxley, written in 1931 and published in 1932.

began with a clean slate. Kubota went on to expand video as a medium into the realm of sculpture, and addressed the place of video and the role of women artists in art history. What I appreciated most was Kubota's playful approach to both technology and to nature, especially the way she considered them as equal, a point of view that was unusual in the West.

Somewhat later Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (Korean, 1951-1982)—the former student of film theorists Thierry Kuntzel and Bertrand Augst at UC Berkeley—came to my office. We had a good chat, as she dropped off all of her single-channel videos and books for me to preview. I was struck by her fluency with her native Korean, English, and French, and by how she used video and literature to pull apart language in an intimate, yet spectacular manner. With the sparest means but in the most profound way, Cha elegantly found meaning, and created work that is unforgettable.

Regularly directing my attention to consumer technology and its perpetual upgrades, I try to understand how technical changes affect artmaking. In the area that has been defined as the electronic arts, nothing ever sits still, given artists' response to the present moment and the never-ending modifications of tools. When granted access to equipment, whether institutional or their own, artists have had the ability to adapt electronic gear to their needs, and create, generate, or amalgamate together moving images, sounds, and text; develop both databases and virtual worlds; build specific hardware and software; and now, work with virtual reality and what is labeled artificial intelligence. Art that previously was categorized as "alternative practice" is becoming standard. The possibilities afforded to artists today are due in large part to the pioneering work of early practitioners, who utilized some aspects of technology to create challenging statements. For them, electronic tools tend to make laboriously protracted tasks easier, and at the same time enrich the viewers' (or users') possibilities to perceive, synthesize, and infer meaning to the material presented. The work of respected figures from the recent past is growing in importance, and is now understood as transformational.

Change in media art accelerates through access to better and better digital tools, as well as with increased connectivity to impressive amounts of data mining and collation, coupled with the speedier flow of shared ideas through social media. Moreover, the ability to physically move from place to place has been another factor that has contributed to change. Artists, by their very nature, readily move about: they may be raised in one culture, pursue studies in another region, and then travel great distances to perform in festivals, or install their artwork in an overseas institution. Knowledge develops through both curiosity and travel.

The multi-cultural and insightful artist Bang Geul Han recently caught my attention. I immediately recognized how her work is part of a lineage that includes Rainer, Kubota, and Cha, among others, which is something we discussed when we first met. Born in 1978, Han grew up in the dynamic city of Seoul, during a period when the city was transitioning from being vibrant, however regional, to being modernized and cosmopolitan, and on its way to becoming industrially affluent, albeit with increased levels of unemployment and income inequality.

Growing up in a male oriented, hierarchical culture, Han recognized she had no choice other than be outspoken, something of a survival tactic. As a result, she was both considered forthright and known for her wry wit. She entered Seoul National University to study painting, initially intrigued by self-portraiture, interested in how she could reveal the inner emotional state that was hidden beneath her skin. She became disillusioned by what she perceived as an overbearing obsession with questions of permanence, finding that the ephemeral nature of video offered a new mode of production as well as a way of critiquing this discourse. She added analog video to her skillset and received her BFA in 2002.

Han left South Korea around 2003 to pursue an MFA in Electronic Integrated Arts at Alfred University. In the tranquil environment of upstate New York, she was able to find herself at a school where painting and the electronic arts were taught together in the same department. She was motivated to take advanced computer programming

courses, which augmented her curriculum that leaned towards media art. Given that English was a second language, in seminar classes she sometimes felt inhibited and found it difficult to speak up, not knowing whether it was rude to interrupt a conversation. She realized that fellow classmates at Alfred considered her to be a little more meek and polite than might otherwise have been the case, and underwent a bit of an identity crisis. This led her to understand the power that language has on culture and on individuals. Confronting her identity as a foreigner, she started to work with linguistic barriers. When someone commented that although her spoken language was good, she made grammatical errors, such as omitting definite and indefinite articles, she began using the typos that appeared in her writing, regarding the process of self-correction as slippages. She considered her “typos” to be the external markers of who she was.

Bang Geul Han went on to become an acclaimed and accomplished artist. The depth and complexity of her practice is evident in the profound work featured in her solo presentation *Land of Tenderness* at The 8th Floor, organized by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation. The exhibition showcases Han’s activity from 2017 to the present. Most of her output is rigorously complex and labor intensive, in terms of concept and production. The realization of a work might continue beyond its first public display, which means that its evolution is as an “ongoing” project.

The interpretation of words and their connotations are at the heart of Han’s practice, and a good example is *Apology Bracelets (Harvey)* from 2017-2022. The one hundred and eighteen laboriously woven colorful macramé bracelets sit side-by side together on a low plinth close to the gallery floor, their untidy end threads trailing off. Viewers must crouch down if they wish to read the minuscule text woven into each bracelet. The barely decipherable words were ones penned by film producer Harvey Weinstein in response to allegations against him for sexual misconduct and assault. As was reported in a *New York Times* article, many readers were revulsed by his words, perceiving them as an equivocating, disingenuous half-apology that attempted to justify his behavior, as if he himself was simply the victim of changing social mores. His meaningless and readily forgettable words are indelibly fused into Han’s work.

Central is the fact that Han modeled this work on friendship bracelets, what adolescent girls make and give each another to be worn on a friend's wrist in a gesture that implies "never forget me." The symbolism of friendship and intimacy imbued in her delicate bracelets is also linked to the physical effort required of the viewer to bend down to read them. The intricate patterns were designed by the artist using her own custom computer software; each bracelet was then individually knotted following a particular sequence that spells out short snippets of text from Weinstein's apology letter.

The artist makes a connection between the gossip that young girls engage in to spread false rumors, and the deceptive words Weinstein uttered to the press. She is interested in gossip's status as a "lesser" or "tainted" form of ephemeral communication, and how these "lesser" registers overlap with sexist perceptions of women. While still acknowledging gossip's propensity towards fabulation and salacious intrigue, Han regards gossip as a powerful instrument and subverting strategy for disenfranchised voices within the asymmetric power dynamics of more "official" and established channels of communication and modes of representation. The bracelets, with all their adolescent connotations, are literally pulling apart the words of the then omnipotent media mogul.

For *Warp and Weft* (2022-ongoing), Han turned to an unusual form of weaving, developing a series of hand-woven tapestries constructed from paper printouts of official, legal, and governmental records used to process and track pregnant teens in immigrant holding shelters. The artist sliced the selected files into slivers of text, then glued them together to create the long threads of "textual" yarn that make up the primary material of the work. For example, in *Warp and Weft #03*, the vertical, warp threads are drawn from state codes regarding abortion; the horizontal, weft threads are constructed from opinions of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Warp and Weft revolves around Han's interest in the rights individuals have over their bodies, teasing out a more complex dynamic between the corporeal and the

incorporeal. She was thinking about how physical legal text-based documents also engender their own bodies or entities and subjectivities, each with their own boundaries and modes of experience, with women, in particular.

Rights issues are complex and have polarized society for ages. Human rights are defined as moral principles (or norms) for certain standards of behavior and are regularly protected in municipal and international law. The artist assiduously studied legal records, including state codes concerning abortion, anti-immigration memoranda from government agencies, and rulings from Supreme Court opinions over the last decade.

For Han, there were two entry points into *Warp and Weft* that caused her to begin critically exploring the intersections and understandings of class/racism/sexism and xenophobia built into the fabric of the legal system. First was Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court hearing, and concerns that his appointment might lead to the end of federal abortion rights, specifically the intertwining of immigration and reproductive autonomy.²

A second point was an online misogynist rant she discovered during the first wave of the backlash against the perceived excesses of the "MeToo" movement in Korea. The man in question posited that there were no structural impediments to women succeeding on an equal footing to men within Korean society; inequality was due to women's innate laziness and lack of ambition. For Han, this had a clear resonance with well-trodden racist arguments that attempted to explain pervasive social inequalities between races and ethnicities.³

Accompanying the tapestries is a series of framed photographs of the unclothed artist at home as she slept, meditated, read, and sat on the toilet, the private parts of her naked

² Previously Kavanaugh had a role in preventing a seventeen-year-old unaccompanied immigrant from accessing an abortion.

³ From an email exchange with the artist, February 25, 2023.

body concealed by the selfsame woven fabrics that are on view nearby. Han thus makes legible the often obscure and invisible relationships between the legal texts and the individual's body.

In a recent conversation, the artist noted an interest in *My Mother Was a Computer*, a book written by N. Katherine Hayles⁴ that, according to the publisher, “explores the impact code has on everyday life and has become comparable to that of speech and writing, and how language and code have grown more entangled. The lines that once separated humans from machines, analog from digital, and old technologies from new ones, have become blurred... There is the possibility that human consciousness itself might be computational, and that of the subjective cosmology wherein humans see the universe through the lens of their own digital age.”⁵

Han went on to further investigate human and machine interfaces, when in 2019 she answered a call for artists from Project Amplify⁶ to respond to a class action suit initiated on behalf of children separated from their families and held at the southern border of the United States. She painstakingly read through transcripts from the children's accounts, drawing upon excerpts to create a text that became her next elegiac piece.

Working alone in her studio, Han carried out the staggering task of learning new software development environments and adapting them to her subsequent piece, which again incorporates massive amounts of information into what is known as virtual reality and generative video. Simple in its form, *Ø (Island)* (2020-ongoing) consists of two parts. Projected onto a screen as a seascape is “Flotsam, 42 U.S. Code § 265,” the code that addresses public health, social welfare, and civil rights, a previously rarely-used clause of the 1944 Public Health Services. The water level depicted on the screen rises up, as if to engulf and drown the viewer. The water level then recedes.

⁴ N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

⁵ University of Chicago Press website accessed February 25, 2023.
<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo3622698.html>

⁶ Project Amplify is a national nonprofit (501c3) created in 2019 to establish legal protections for child migrants in government care. <https://www.project-amplify.org/>

The second part involves a private experience for one viewer, who is encouraged to put on the VR headset placed near the screen. This person encounters six small birdcages set in a pale grey virtual sky, where hundreds of alphabetical letters freely fly around in the manner of birds or insects, which when experienced in nature might either be benign or become threatening. As the letters swoop by near the person, the sounds of the phonemes corresponding to each letter become audible. Once the VR headset-wearing participant moves close to one of the small birdcages, a light clicks on, and the adjacent letters suddenly flock together and form a paragraph, the text that Han adapted from sworn declarations made by detained migrant children separated from their parents or guardians, outlining their treatment and experiences.⁷ In all, the work excerpts around 700 stories from over 200 declarations.

In effect, *Ø (Island)* functions as an immersive public archive for the stories of these children. Meanwhile, the visual representation alludes to ideas about freedom, entrapment, and incarceration, a charged topic related to the handling of millions of migrants crossing the southern border of the U.S., an overwhelming and politically charged ongoing situation.

As Han repositioned the children's scenarios, she was also trying to figure out her own boundaries emotionally in relation to the content. Although one step removed from the originals, to whom do the stories she adapted from the children's transcripts belong to? She also wondered whether empathy was possible. And what is empathy anyway? Is it something tribal, learned from the values of one's own community? For the artist, there is an underlying question of the limits of identification—for self and other (both seen as

⁷ The declarations were filed as part of the class action lawsuit *Flores v Barr*, which contested child separation and detention practices under the Trump administration. The artist noted to the author that Title 42 was consciously weaponized during the Trump administration in 2020 (after the *Flores* class action lawsuit was filed), using the backdrop of the pandemic as legal justification for a draconian tightening of immigration and detention policies. This use still continues under the Biden administration, and has been bolstered by the Supreme Court rulings last December, which continue to follow a long-standing historic trend (stretching back to at least the 1800s) for the court to side with the plenary power of congress when it comes to borders vs human rights.

individual, and collective, or “tribe”)—and if, and how, we can genuinely transcend and work across these representational barriers.

Ø (*Island*)’s title is somewhat of a puzzle. On the one hand, Ø in Danish means island. On the other hand, the use of Ø could represent zero, or null as the signification of nothing, something worthless with no value. It could suggest null and void, an invalid fact having no legal or binding force.

Meaning changes when Ø is paired with the word island, which could mean cut off or isolated, captured, or even a safe haven. Or the title might bring to mind the presumed innocence of the migrant children who have had to grow up too quickly.

In her latest project, Han continues to pursue ideas around migration with *Terre de Tendre* (2023-ongoing). Similar to several of her technically and conceptually complex works, she will continue to develop *Terre de Tendre* over time. One aspect of the piece is comprised of a large wall-based video projection, which features what appears to be an endlessly scrolling text, documenting hours-long conversations the artist had with various iterations of the work’s central character, Alma. The exchange is based on a large-language-model AI trained on declarations from the Flores v Barr class action lawsuit,⁸ as well as philosophical texts about politics of care and otherness.⁹

In the second area nearby, audience members are invited to have a more intimate, virtual experience. Upon putting on a VR headset, the viewer will meet Alma, a curious

⁸ In 2019 plaintiffs filed suit seeking to enforce a 1997 settlement agreement, incorporated into a consent decree, requiring immigration agencies to hold such minors in their custody in facilities that are safe and sanitary. The district court found that the government violated the Agreement by detaining minors in unsanitary and unsafe conditions at Border Patrol stations; ordered enforcement of various paragraphs of the Agreement; and directed the government to appoint an internal Juvenile Coordinator. In this case, the parties agreed that this court has jurisdiction over the appeal of the post-judgment order only if the district court modified the Agreement.

<https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/ca9/17-56297/17-56297-2019-08-15.html>

⁹ Joan Tronto, *Ethics of Care*, <https://ethicsofcare.org/joan-tronto/>, and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

being comprised of a cinder-block rudimentary house with human legs. Her shack-like body refers to architecture, particularly the security attached to place or home, and the ownership of a static object representing safety. The character is both subject and avatar. Using hand-tracking technology, the participant is invited to physically engage with Alma as she shapeshifts into other entities and objects. Interaction turns the person into the custodian of the character. Alma is a fictitious immigrant from a non-specific border, and embodies the migrant's journey, charting her internal shift from empathy to antipathy.

By entering into *Terre de Tendre*, the audience members find themselves in an arena of shifting identifications, where the conceptual gaps separating empathy from antipathy are precariously fragile and unstable. Despite Han's humanitarian concerns, and her use of themes of interdependency, memory, and care between human and non-human agent, the work seems to hint at troubling contradictions inherent to notions of empathy. As a relatively recent immigrant living in the United States, the artist sees herself as someone who oscillates between insider and outsider perspectives. In paraphrasing the Spanish theorist Paul B. Preciado,¹⁰ Han speculates about the liberatory potential of radical forms of dis-identification, and whether it is possible to step outside frameworks predicated on identifications and representation.

It is interesting to note that *Terre de Tendre* is a simulated reconfiguration and play on *Carte de Tendre*, a map of an imagined land created by a group of women in 17th century France charting the path towards true love.¹¹

¹⁰ Paul B. Preciado is a writer, philosopher and curator whose work focuses on applied and theoretical topics relating to identity, gender, pornography, architecture and sexuality. <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/is-the-future-of-french-feminism-female/> accessed March 1, 2023.

¹¹ *Carte de Tendre* grew out of the lively conversations and playful word games carried out by *les précieuses*, the intellectual, witty and educated women who frequented the salon of Catherine de Vivonne, the marquise of Rambouillet. Her *Chambre bleue* salon offered a Parisian refuge from the dangerous political factionalism and coarse manners of the royal court during the regency of Louis XIV. Wikipedia accessed February 25, 2023.

Looking back over Bang Geul Han's productive career spanning two decades, categorizing her work is not easy. She works across mediums, and presents a kind of disciplined minimalism. Still, she manages to preserve a sense of rawness, which makes her work seem that it just came to be.

In this dynamic moment of a changing world and evolving tools, neat narratives do not fit our fragmented and technologically mediated lives. Diving into complication, Han asks how one might actively blur the boundary between the self and other. Is it through experiencing the limits between identification and representation? Is it through increased empathy with circumstances outside of our understanding? Or could it be through encountering the restrictions placed on physical autonomy and freedom of movement? Han's elegant audiovisual elucidations embody these and many more questions, boldly standing out and capturing our attention.

Barbara London is a New York-based curator and writer, who founded the video-media exhibition and collection programs at The Museum of Modern Art, where she worked between 1973 and 2013. Her recent projects include the podcast series *Barbara London Calling* (barbaralondon.net), the book *Video Art/The First Fifty Years* (Phaidon: 2020), <https://www.barbaralondon.net/writing>, and the exhibition "Seeing Sound" (Independent Curators International), 2021-2026, <https://www.barbaralondon.net/exhibitions/>. London was the first to integrate the Internet as part of curatorial practice, with *Stir-fry* (1994), <http://www.adaweb.com/context/stir-fry/>; *Internyet* (1998); and *dot.jp* (1999). She organized one-person shows with such media mavericks as Laurie Anderson, Peter Campus, Teiji Furuhashi, Gary Hill, Joan Jonas, Shigeko Kubota, Nam June Paik, Song Dong, Steina Vasulka, Bill Viola, and Zhang Peili. Her thematic exhibitions at MoMA included *Soundings: A Contemporary Score* (2013); *Looking at Music* (2009); *Video Spaces* (1995); *Music Video: The Industry and Its Fringes* (1985); and *Video from Tokyo to Fukui and Kyoto* (1979). London's writing has appeared in many catalogs and publications, including Artforum, Flash Art, Yishu, Leonardo, Art Asia Pacific, Art in America, Millennium, Modern Painter, and the Guardian.