Choreography Against Cartography Three Movements on Nam Hwayeon

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Bodies

I am tempted to start with a bold claim. What is transversal in Nam Hwayeon[1]'s work relates to the body – to actual bodies – as well as to the multiple metaphors the term supports. What she calls 'choreography of thought' refers to both her methodology and to the subjects she explores and that are figured in her work, through single channel moving image works, video installations, or archival displays. Through Nam's choreography of thought several kinds of bodies are constellated. Those of the dancers, choreographers, singers and performers that populate her work; the bodies of knowledge that she surveys, themselves often seen as being passed and transformed through the corporeal bodies that carry them; and the body politic and its claims to ownership, truth and objectivity over information that Nam examines. These bodies each have their corresponding institutions – the theatre and the museum, the library and the archive, and the State. Official, sanctioned, conventional or normative forms of knowledge production operate according to a logic of border that names, classifies, categorises. In this sense, such knowledge is cartographic. But Nam, like the histories and the people she has been examining and is in dialogue with, is a border crosser. If there exists an anamorphic relationship between the 'good' body, knowledge produced from the archive, and the state-form, then what about choreography? What type of body enables it and what body of knowledge does it produce? What is the *corpus* that enables choreography to think? A corpus is a body – *un corps* – if we follow its etymology and French philosopher and musicologist Peter Szendy's ruminations on the term. For Szendy, if a corpus involves such an organic quality, i.e. a certain homogeneity, traditionally, organology – which has classically been embodied through the old figure of speech of *effictio* – is the discourse that describes a body from head to toe and renders the shape of a body *intelligible* through words. This exhaustivity is deceptive and is in fact the mark of the very limit of describing head to toe and the drive for complete capture that subtends it. Therefore, for Szendy, the very notion of a corpus should be rethought. In *Phantom Limbs: On Musical Bodies*, he does so by drawing on music history, through close examination of Thelonious Sphere Monk playing the piano, of Bach's fingers multiplying as he performs, or of the hybridisation of musicians with their instruments, among others. These moments reveal the limits of conventional organology and of perspectives based on a corpus what they repress or are unable to grasp,

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1 In Korean names, the family name precedes the given name. This text follows this convention.

namely what 'effictions' actually do, that is creating 'bodies made of fictions'[2]; and so, for Szendy, it is what he calls a 'general organology' that renders such effictions legible. In this regard, with her choreography of thought, Nam expands general organology, not only accounting for effictional organisms, but their movements – towards the fictional, the virtual, and multiplicity – as well.

Nam's methodology also invites us to rethink our understanding of geo-bodies, of conventional maps and of cartographic and border thinking. Actual maps and diagrams do appear in her work: a hand drawn map of the Bibliothèque de France's neighbourhood and a colonial map of Africa in *Coréen 109* (2015), or a map of Shinjuku metro station in *Imjingawa* (2017) are inserted as metonymy of the locations invoked. Diagrams drawn on the floor of dance studio for a piece to be performed serves as visual aid in *Throbbing Dance* (2017). Yet, such visualisations remain on the level of the representational. The navigation across gaps between the latter and the new spatial configurations emerging from an edited work as a whole choreograph new geographies beyond actual geo-bodies. Subjects referencing inter-Korean, inter-Asian or transnational histories are recurrent in Nam's oeuvre. Zainichi Koreans (the ethnic Korean population in Japan resulting from the Japanese occupation between 1910–1945) or the life and legacy of famed 20th-century Korean dancer and choreographer Choi Seung-hee's project of an 'inter-Asian dance' featured in Nam's *Against Waves* (2019) and other works reflect her interest in geo-political formations largely shaped by the imperial project of Pan-Asianism and of the question of 'Asia' itself.[3] To bring the metaphor of the organism again but in its capacity to make sense of space and geography this time, with regards Asia, one should be reminded of the association of a notion of organicity with grand civilisational and pan-regionalist imperialist projects. As Japanese scholar Naoki Sakai has convincingly noted, 'What is at stake in this persistent endeavor to distinguish Europe or the West from Asia is the very identification of the West, for its identity is in fact anxiety-ridden.' Moreover, he pursues, 'What must be kept in mind under the climate of fascist populism is that anthropological difference, the very distinction of European humanity and Asian humanity, is essentially and in final analysis a figure of ressentiment. However, as a matter of fact, the derivative character of the first statement in relation to the second is inherent in the designation of "Asia" itself.'[4] Centring subjects with multiple or no clear origins that interfere with the laws of land and identity, amplifying cracks, polyphony and paradoxes, Nam's choreographies reveal the phantom limbs of the geo-bodies without borders.

Keepers of Knowledge?

In her work, Nam Hwayeon traverses the interstices between official knowledge and its agents, and spaces where the former are exceeded. The objects she investigate do not have stable identities and signal the limits and limitations of official, sanctioned or simply common conceptions and understanding of a phenomenon. One of the most compelling examples of Nam's interstitial surveys can be found in her video *Coréen 109* (2015). 'Coréen

2 As Peter Szendy writes: 'I cannot, however, stop myself from lending an ear to other meanings in the name of this outdated figure: I also understand *effiction* as the contraction into one word of fiction and its power, of its *efficacy*.' *Phantom Limbs: On Musical Bodies*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2016, p.15.

3 Choi's dance practices were rooted in her innovative integration of Korean traditional forms with influences from Japanese, Chinese, and Western modern dance. Her career spanned complex geopolitical contexts, including colonial Korea, Japan, and post-war China and North Korea, having been accused of self-orientalising her performances for a Western audience, of political alignment with North Korea where she defected in 1946, as well as of imperial sympathies, having performed for Japanese audiences during the Japanese occupation of Korea. For a discussion of Nam's project about Choi, see: Jihoon Kim, 'Inter-Asian Dance as Method, Artistic Research as Method: Nam Hwayeon's Work on Choi Seung-hee.' *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4, 2022, pp. 526–39.

4 Naoki Sakai, 'What Is Asia? On Anthropological Difference', in Mayumo Inoue and Satoru Hashimoto (ed.), *Beyond Imperial Aesthetics: Theories of Art and Politics in East Asia*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2019, pp. 201–18.

109' is the archival reference of *Jikji* which, according to its descriptor in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's catalogue where it is held, is 'the oldest Korean book printed in characters [scratched illegible] melted 1377' that is, the first book known to have been printed using movable metal type.[5] Containing a collection of seminal Zen Buddhist sermons, dialogues and letters compiled by Monk Baegun and predating Gutenberg's printing of the bible by 78 years, this first edition of the Buddhist anthology is a cornerstone in nationalist claims about Korea's contribution to intellectual and printing history. Indeed, as Korea only possesses a version printed with woodblocks produced a year later in 1378, several organisations have been demanding the restitution of the metal type printed edition to its country of origin where the Early Printing Museum in the city of Cheongju whose mission is to 'widely promulgate the significance of Jikji' even features a *Jikji* Pavilion in anticipation of the artifact's long-awaited return.[6]

For artists working today and whose work attempts to reflect on issues of cultural heritage, the widespread currency of Decolonial discourse within the contemporary art field and the acknowledgement of the necessity of repatriating objects appear as a paradoxical ally, both offering a convenient conceptual shortcut for what they try to convey while at the same time short-circuiting and overriding their aims by simplifying it. In a recent conference about the restitution of African objects held in Western museums, Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne reminded us that 'We live in a Westphalian world, which means that we have nation-states. This implies that when we discuss restitution, it takes place within the framework of UNESCO or another setting where we discuss international relations.'[7] However, as put by Nam herself, '*Coréen 109* was first shown in an exhibition on Korean print culture held by the Korean Cultural Center UK and the Korean Publishers Association' and what she wanted for it was 'to approach the Jikji in a way that didn't deal with questions of cultural property and their return.'[8]

As the story of Jikji goes, in the interval marked as the Korean Empire (1897–1910), the book was extracted from Seoul, its locus of origin, by the French diplomat Victor Collin de Plancy. Removed and re-inscribed into a different archive, it would eventually come into the hands of jeweler and Asian antiques collector Henry Vever, to be later donated to the BnF in 1950. Forward to the 2000s, when requesting to view Coréen 109 at the BnF, the institution referred Nam to the digitised document available online, the physical copy being accessible to 'researchers only'. Faced with this obstruction, the artist set to retrace the journey of the book, a boundary object as it were, investigating the many gaps – temporal, spatial, conceptual – that shape its various modes of existence, as a physical object out of reach, and as virtual one, omnipresent. As she put it herself, by retracing its trajectory, Nam 'thought of collecting the time related to the book and its surroundings'.[9] Notwithstanding the fact that recent research has demonstrated that other books printed with movable metal types have been found to predate Jikji, here, again, a choreography of thought provides an alternative paradigm. Nam does not offer a solution to the problem of provenance and repatriation. Collected, catalogued, classified, Jikji-Coréen 109 also appears to be lost in preservation. Safeguarded, it remains suspended as spectral body, caught between the right to return and the right to remain a memory.

5 'Coréen 109. 백운화상초록불조직지심체요절. 白雲和尙抄錄佛祖直指心體要節. Päk un hoa sañ č′orok pulčo č′ikč′i simč′e yočōl (1377)', Bibliothèque nationale de France, https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc78021m

6 'Cheongju Early Printing Museum', https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/cheongju-early-printing-museum

7 Souleymane Bachir Diagne, 'Objets africains «mutants» et la question de la restitution', YouTube video, 1:07:32, published by MEG Musée d'ethnographie de Genève, 30 May 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IX3KbB85K8M. My translation.

8 Hyunjin Kim and Hwayeon Nam, 'Conversation with the Artist', Hwayeon Nam. Time Mechanics, Seoul: Arko Art Center, Arts Council Korea, 2015, p. 181.

9 *Ibid*.

The Choreographic

The intersection between dance as a medium, statecraft, the body-politic and the politics of the body constitutes a major terrain of investigation for Nam. Works like *Throbbing Dance* (2017) and *Against Waves* (2019) foreground how choreography operates as a tool for nation-building, propaganda, cultural identity formation, and how specific dance pieces act as political performance. Presented as a three-channel video installation, *Throbbing Dance* (약동하는 춤, yagdonghaneun chum) stages what seems to be the rehearsal of a contemporary dance performance in a dance studio. The piece is made of alternating shots of each of the three young female dancers performing specific moments of a choreography with sequences in which they dance together. Interspersing these contemporary scenes is historical footage of a television dance show. Pixelated and at times unfolding in freeze-frames and emitting sound beeps, the interaction between the contemporary and archival footage progressively reveal that the former is a response to the latter. But this historical piece, as the soundtrack signifies, is a remake, the song the dancers perform to being none other than the 1980s pop hit *Flashdance… What a Feeling* (1983) co-written and performed by Irene Cara. The version in the pixelated found footage was from a TV broadcast by North Korean musical ensemble Wangjaesan Light Music Band, known for its frequence media appearances where it mostly performed gyeongeumak (경음악) or 'light music' in English and which in North Korea consisted in blending traditional Korean melodies with modern instrumentation. As scholars of the DPRK have noted, the hermit kingdom is a theatre-state that stages its status, power, and governance through mass performances, public spectacles, art, film, museums, and monuments. Public culture serves as both a tool of propaganda and political indoctrination, reinforcing authority through orchestrated displays and repetitive narratives.[10] In this regard, *Throbbing Dance* not only retraces choreography through processes of transcultural appropriation and adaptation. It also looks at how bodies take part in the production of statecraft and how similar body movements can be reconfigured according to opposing ideologies.

But as curator Hyunjin Kim rightly notes, 'While choreography usually is seen in terms of stage directions and movements within the genre of dance, we could have a "choreographic" mode in an expanded sense'.[11] Indeed, in Nam's practice, the Korean, Asian and World histories she explores unfold in their diversity and sensoriality, choreographing spaces where multiplicity, memory, and speculation are (re-)set in motion and rhythm, never quite staying in place.

10 John Connell, 'Tourism as Political Theatre in North Korea', *Political Geography*, no. 68, 2019, p. 34.

11 Hyunjin Kim and Hwayeon Nam, 'Conversation with the Artist', *op. cit.*, p. 185.