

*And verse* (혼잣말의 언어 그리고 *cosmos*)

**Jesse Chun**

March 17 - May 14, 2022

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Jesse Chun's interdisciplinary practice addresses language and its politics to uncover new translations toward poetry, opacity, and the untranslatable. Working with found bureaucratic documents, linguistic hierarchies and histories, Chun engages in various states of (mis)translation to decentre and reimagine colonial narratives.

At Gallery TPW, Chun presents an ongoing body of work that looks to the moon, and to *sijo*—a traditional form of Korean poetry<sup>1</sup>—as conceptual sites for "unlanguaging," a process the artist describes for unfixing language itself. Through video sculptures, film, abstract scores, drawing, and sound, Chun unfixes and rewrites forms of linguistic imperialism into nonlinear modes of language, poetics and being. In doing so the artist asks: what happens when imperialist narratives, the violence of language homogenization, and the bureaucratic documents that enforce this, are disrupted and (mis)translated through poetry, sound, and Korean folklore? Throughout the exhibition, the celestial and earthly are brought together to present language as a constellation of semiotics and sounds, incomplete but whole.

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Anchoring Chun's exhibition is the single channel video *술래 SULLAE*. It begins with audio of a woman repeating the sound "Shhhh," intermingled with voices repeating English consonants: "Ffff, Baaaaa, Dddd." Excerpts from the indexes of language instruction books appear, as the physical demands of learning another language is made audible; one has to contort their mouth, tongue, breath, and pitch in order to (properly) pronounce. This distillation of the sounds of English, the language of the Western empire and the global lingua franca, is paired with visuals of indeterminate landscapes and grids—subtle references to immigration documents and passports—and a playful mixing of English and Hangeul. The letter O appears and repeats across the screen and is mixed with the numerical 0 and Hangeul's ㅇ. They appear and disappear in their likeness and point to Chun's devoted interest in eschewing linearity for circularity and the wonder of the moon. The embodied violence of hegemonic language requirements that Chun makes sonic is remedied with *ganggangsullae* (강강술래), the ancient Korean women's dance that is enacted under a full moon. Here, women come together at night to sing, bellow, and chant, while dancing in circular formations formed by holding hands or touching shoulders. This pre-colonial matrilineal gathering was done to ward off invaders or welcome a bountiful harvest. For Chun, the most potent and important aspect of this dance is that it created space for women to release silenced anger, "so one can shout into the night."<sup>2</sup> This, coupled with their togetherness, provided respite, joy, and safety from oppressive power structures. However, in *술래 SULLAE*, rather than referencing the women's songs and voices, Chun's sonic landscape of voiced and voiceless consonants, white noise, and word censor bleep continues. At one moment, Korean folk drumming permeates the room - the percussion is loud, exciting, and could be read as the climax of the video, but it can also be thought of as music that aids the release

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<sup>1</sup>Sijo is a Korean traditional poetic form that emerged in the Goryeo period, flourished during the Joseon Dynasty, and is still written today. Bucolic, metaphysical and cosmological themes are often explored. "Sijo," wikipedia, accessed March 14, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sijo#Contemporary\\_sijo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sijo#Contemporary_sijo)

<sup>2</sup> Jesse Chun via <https://www.jessechun.com/sullae>, accessed February 10, 2022.

and projection of the women's voices, while providing them with an added layer of protection and opacity.

In the adjacent gallery is a new multifaceted video sculpture entitled *Sijo* (*And verse*, 혼잣말의 언어 그리고 *cosmos*). In a circular formation in the centre of the room, 8 ½ x 11 inch mirrors are placed on the floor on top of rocks, while a video projected from above casts them in the light of a zen pond, a musical score, and an index. The mirror's size and shape directly reference the formality of bureaucratic documents, but the wounds of interrogation that make up immigration, passport and visa applications have been dissolved. They have been rewritten with clouds, smoke, grids, footnotes, and misused letters—Chun's own lexicon and syntax—to create a cosmos of *sijos*. The artist's mirrored documents defy the intention to surveille, exclude, and dominate, their poetic form instead articulating untranslatable desires through reflection and light.

Mirrors feature prominently in the artists' work and extend Chun's interest in circularity. Author and translator Don Mee Choi reminds us that: "Mirrors have long been used in Korean shaman's rituals as armour, to intensify energies, to induce trances, or to light a path to the underworld during spirit-travel."<sup>3</sup> A mirror not only reflects, it deflects; it is the opposite of transparent. Like a circle, armour protects. It encircles the body, creating interiority; like a womb, we are shielded within. Chun weaves these elements together, employing mirrors as protective objects, as holding spaces for *sijos*, and as portals into other worlds. In contrast to *ganggangsullae* (강강술래), sounds and songs created through the togetherness of singing and dancing collectively, the materials in this room ask for a more private, individual meditation on one's relationship to language and the empirical forces that shape and alter it. Chun asks: Can my unlanguageing get me to a place where language feels interior and safe - like an utterance to self?

Set against the sky in the open air, two of Chun's hand-drawn scores take the place of billboards on the north west corner of Dupont and Dufferin streets.<sup>4</sup> On view for the duration of a moon cycle, the drawings—entitled *scores for unlanguageing*—replace the hyper-legible space of billboard advertisements with abstraction. Created through an unravelled alphabet and redacted watermarks, the shapes that Chun employs with graphite are repeated, layered and partially erased, building upon one another to form a softly (il)legible composition. Most often Chun's marks continue her reference to circularity as crescent and half moons appear: is this part of the score a repeating chorus or refrain? Or is the circularity a mirror for the moon, a song for the cosmos?

The etymological origin of the word translation is: *carried across*. For Chun, mirrors, unlanguageing, and poetry are forms of translation that carry and transfer us from one space to another, to a place where language diasporas live and eastern oral traditions remain, archived within. The rhythmic pulse of Korean sonic tradition<sup>5</sup> is based on the rhythm of breathing, in contrast to western music, which is based on the rhythm of the heartbeat.<sup>6</sup> To speak, sing, utter, to be heard, is to breathe - something the artist indexes throughout the exhibition. It is evident that for Chun where there is loss and untranslatability there is also irreducibility and continuity. Orality continues in shifting forms; the safety and wholeness of language is always there, like the moon, waxing and waning.

– Heather Canlas Rigg

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<sup>3</sup> Don Mee Choi, *Translation is a Mode = Translation is an Anti-neocolonial Mode* (Ugly Duckling Presse, Brooklyn, NY, 2020), 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> For the month of April, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> I have used 'Korean sonic tradition' as a broad term to refer to all forms of Korean folk music including singing, spoken word, instrumentals and other.

<sup>6</sup> Gina J. Yi, "Teaching about the Korean *Ganggangsullae* Folk Tradition in General Music Class," *Music Educators Journal*, Vol 105, issue 3, (March 2019): 46.