

The Abundance in Emptiness

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Neuroscientists pointed out that an average human being uses only 3% of their brain in their entire life. This obviously puts focus on research and proposals for using more of the brain, as this signifies accessing a world of an inconceivable level of capabilities. The first steps to stimulating the brain and putting it to full use is to turn away from things that are familiar. This means that one can be ahead of others if they think in new ways and attempt at creative problem solving. Suddenly, we now live in a world that demands competitive creativity. Humans are not rational beings but beings who can create meaning through rationalization. Humans are irrational beings, but precisely because they are so, they can be the pioneers of creative meaning. In fact, artists are the authentic creativity professionals.

An artist produces things that are unique and uncommon. The role of the artist is to accept information in the world through the senses, process the information, endow them with meaning, and allow this to be shared by others. However, artists are interested not in competition but sharing. The social function of contemporary art begins by disseminating thoughts and emotions through creative ways. Making new attempts comes with the risk of hindered efficiency, in the sense that it can temporarily drop the productivity which has been secured through an already familiarized method. Furthermore, as one of human instincts is to desire to not change and maintain the present state, it's extremely difficult to deviate from what is already set. Therefore, there is a need to sometimes face the risks, and push oneself in a state that's denied by human nature. Unfamiliar environment, whether it's a place one's never been or people one's never met, allows people to take off from fixed behaviors and biased patterns of thinking, and ultimately transforms into an environment which enforces creativity.

For Jasmin Schaitl, who visited Seoul for the first time, the night was not only strange but even somewhat frightening. Her fear was due to a sound, which at times sounded like machines, and at other times like unregulated noise. By the time the frightening nights of

insomnia passed and the artist realized that what she was hearing was the sound of cicadas, her story on familiarity had already begun. Cicadas are summer insects, and the sound produced by a male cicada, to lure female cicadas to mate, is about 70-90 decibels. In the past, cicadas made sound mainly during the day, but now, with the city as bright with all the lights at night as the day, cicadas make sound throughout the night. It's understandable how a countless number of cicadas crying all at the same time can evoke an ominous aura. However, cicadas vanish without a trace as soon as the summer passes. The chorus of the cicadas might sound strange, but once the nature of the sound is grasped, it's not as frightening as to make one insomniac in fear. The strange and unfamiliar transforms into what is familiar. The fear of the first night in Seoul which the artist experienced was like a joint between the unfamiliar and the familiar. As if the trace of sewing has been left at one point in the flow of time, a seam has been left in memory. On either side of the seam, sensation and cognition, actual and fictional, presence and absence hover.

The exhibited work (*speak*) *volumes* consists of three parts: a sculptural work made of thread, an ink-pen drawing, and a live performance on the opening night, which left as a remnant ~~balls~~ a pile of thread stretched down from a bobbins hanging from the ceiling. The three parts seem to be connected to each other. The sculptural work of the crouching human figure is given shape through thin wire, over which black thread is looped and glued over. The figure made of entangled black thread squats in a crouched position which is common for Asians who are used to sitting on the ground. Emptiness is felt in between the gaps and openings on the surface of the figure. The sculpture in thread seems lighter and more versatile than hard and heavy sculptural works. The figure is charged with a sense of non-threatening tension, not only because the figure is squatting in an unstable position as if it could fall over with a shove, but also because it has a sense of volume filled with air. Schaitl explains that such sense of tension comes from pursuing the balance between the presence and absence of the body. The drawing connected to the sculpture shows an overlapping of several layers of ink pen drawings which makes the reading of a definite shape beyond grasp. It takes the motif of the shadow form of the squatting figure, which is drawn as a negative image, and hung at a position that is higher than the figure. If someone was actually sitting under the sun and a shadow of the body is cast, the gaze wouldn't rest on the shadow. The space occupied by the

sculptural figure formed through the suspended drawing of the shadow greatly expands. The drawing is then connected to the clusters of thread again. The clusters of thread, which unravels with a slight pull, suspend from the ceiling above the head of the figure, and the audience carefully reach out and unravel the thread and piles it on the pedestal. The moment the audience puts their hand on the hanging thread, the audience enters the space created by the work as if to partake in a reverent ritual. The black thread creates the boundary, which divides the inside and outside of the work. This boundary is very clear, but it's not strong. It shakes and unravels. It's hard enough to not easily break with the pull of a hand, and organic as to create various forms and textures. Thus, thread symbolizes an open possibility of space.

In the performance carried out with the exhibition, the story about the unfamiliar sounds of cicadas and the lines made of thread expand as a mediator for other ways of communication. Schaitl audio-visually renders, through the gestures of pulling a thread, the countless possibilities that lie dormant in between the beginning and end of a story. The hand gesture of pulling a thread within the context of the performance leaves open the room for interpretation on temporality and relationships. The lines that gradually increase, slowly or quickly, clearly or splendidly, visualize stories that accumulate within time. Through the artist's words and movement, the audience shares a distinctive experience on space and time. The artist's gesture is goal-oriented like a finger pointing at Polaris in the sky, but doesn't request a definite answer, and only when we grope at the end of her finger and seek for whatever that's in the sky can we see the stars that may or may not make up Polaris. From the beginning, the artist's role was predetermined to stop there, to direct the audience to a point where they merely see the clusters of thread. To the audience who's leaning over with wide open ears, the artist is merely telling them that there might be a possibility of something beyond the story. The very slack sense of command becomes manifest through the lines of the thin lengthy thread. All that constitutes the story which the artist gently presents us is a slackness that just barely portrays the boundary between the inside and outside, an outline created by the repetition of minimal gestures of primal shapes, and the forms that are completed through them. As such, the line becomes a boundary as well as a lack of it.

Schaitl drew in the sounds and scenes she collected from unfamiliar places, into a world of

metaphors. Through a process of analogical thinking in which seemingly irrelevant elements become related, she asks us to shed ourselves of the fear of the unfamiliar and the helplessness of everyday life, and leads us to a world of the heart of abundance. This seems to reflect the artist's interest in Buddhist attitude of pursuing the order behind the visible, questioning the corporeality of being. Here, Buddhist approach does not so much originate from Buddhism as a religion and faith, but a philosophy or attitude on the relationship between the self and the world. The philosopher and neuroscientist Paul Thagard asserted that religious faith can also be a type of emotional ritual because, in a broad sense, religion and artistic gestures can be understood as a ritual which pursue the meaning of life. Schaitl's interest in the meditative world reflected in her work reminds one of the famous saying of the Heart Sutra: "Form does not differ from Emptiness, and Emptiness does not differ from Form. Form is Emptiness and Emptiness is Form." Her work shows the will to pierce through the world of anguish of 'form', and arrive at the enlightenment of 'emptiness'. Schaitl's work awakens our consciousness through the senses, and pursues the balance and abundance in the coexistence of presence and absence. Thus, in a friendly yet firm voice, the artist asks those who forget to find meaning in the monotonously repetitive daily life, to rid themselves of their own doubts and skepticism.