

Non-exploitative Art for the Sake of Continuation

Sylbee Kim

Video artist

Abstract

Recognising that the mainstream art market and art institutions actively exclude a vast range of existing and possible practices, this essay presents strands of thought concerning the reinvention of modes of sustainable practice with a focus on production as a video artist. In conjunction with the *Song of the Wind* project, initiated by Sunyoung Oh, I revisit some of my projects in the contexts of the ethics of working with others, artistic labour and approaches toward technology. Questions that arise from my reflections include: Can we test community models in different ways that play with their limitations? Who might be the subjects of such interest and how do we meet each other? And, how do we deal with the accelerating development of technology? In a search for answers, imagination, idealism and dreaming arise as persistent necessities and ones that we need to incubate together as a community, instead of remaining scattered in myriad spaces of powerlessness.

Non-exploitative Art for the Sake of Continuation

Sylbee Kim



This essay is an extension of two previous ones: 'The Price of Body and Art for Dwelling on Uncertainty,' *Visual*, vol. 17 (Seoul: Center for Visual Studies, Korea National University of Arts, 2021) and 'Rewarding Art: The Privilege of Art and the Value of Cheap Experimentations', *Sustainable Museum: Art and Environment*, ex. cat. (Busan: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2022).

What I propose is the practice of diffraction, of reading diffractively for patterns of differences that make a difference. And I mean that not as an additive notion opposed to subtraction (...) Rather, I mean that in the sense of it being suggestive, creative and visionary (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2012: 50).

SCENE #1: IN THE CAVE

The last last hunt failed; many of us were killed by the animals and swept away by unprecedented storms in the last season. We couldn't secure enough food for the winter. Our children are still too young to assist in the preparations for our next hunt. To avoid dying out, we need to join forces and to be more ingenious about how to sidestep attacks and invent meticulous ways to win despite our reduced numbers. After discussion and recapitulation on our status quo, the bright-eyed one, who can distinguish pigments from soil and minerals, lays out our improved plan on the walls of our cave. The drawing leaps from the here and now and brings us to another time and space. It is a simulation of the future, told as a story. The wisest gathers us in front of it, illuminated by our common fire in the cave. Under this dimmed yet never extinguishing light, we repeat body movements that variate from the failures of the last hunt. The tools we designed are polished and ready. We do all this together, to distract ourselves from desperation, to strengthen our wills to continue in life, to reconfirm the community for survival, or to die in dignity – a communal dance of individuals in a loose, yet-to-be defined formation.

Sylbee Kim, *Hand-to-Mouth Salon*, 2021

Your return is delayed.
Deep down, I have a feeling you won't be coming back.

The fire has almost burned itself out
And we are running out of wood.

Before dusk falls
We'll have to go collect more
And carry it back to our cave.

Our bellies are always flat.
After sharing the last piece of dried meat
That sustained us since the last grand hunt,
You finished your preparations with the tall ones
And departed with the promise
Of returning with a major haul
Before the first snowfall.

During the winter months
Crops will hibernate
And will only begin to sprout
When touched by the first rays of sunshine,
Growing taller with every raindrop.

While snow falls outside
I bind together reddish soil
And use it to draw your irrevocable absence
Onto these dimmed walls.

Were you standing next to the wise one?
Was your spear-tip
Sharp enough?
Or did it snap off
Upon impact with the thick animal hide?

Did the fleet-footed run away
And leave you behind?
Where to?

Was the beast so humongous
That everyone was forced to scatter?
Or did you form a circle around it
And bring it down together?

Here, at the widening corner of our cave
The gray-haired one gathers us and leads the chant,
Calling out the names of the unreturned:

The one with the protruding forehead.
The thick-handed.
The tall one.
The wise one.
The fleet-footed.
The one with the loud voice.
The one with broad shoulders.
And the one with the sharp spear.

Each of us inherits one of those names
As we assemble into an unprecedented formation,
Knowing it will soon be our own turn
To venture out and risk our respective names.

I am the bright-eyed with the clumsy spear.
This is the small-fingered, who succeeds the broad-shouldered.
That is the short one, who succeeds the loud-voiced.
And over there is the sleepless one, who succeeds the fleet-footed.
Each of us augments our ponderous identity
To compensate for our vulnerable bodies.

I neatly chip a spearhead out of stone
And affix it firmly
Atop a hand-stained stick.

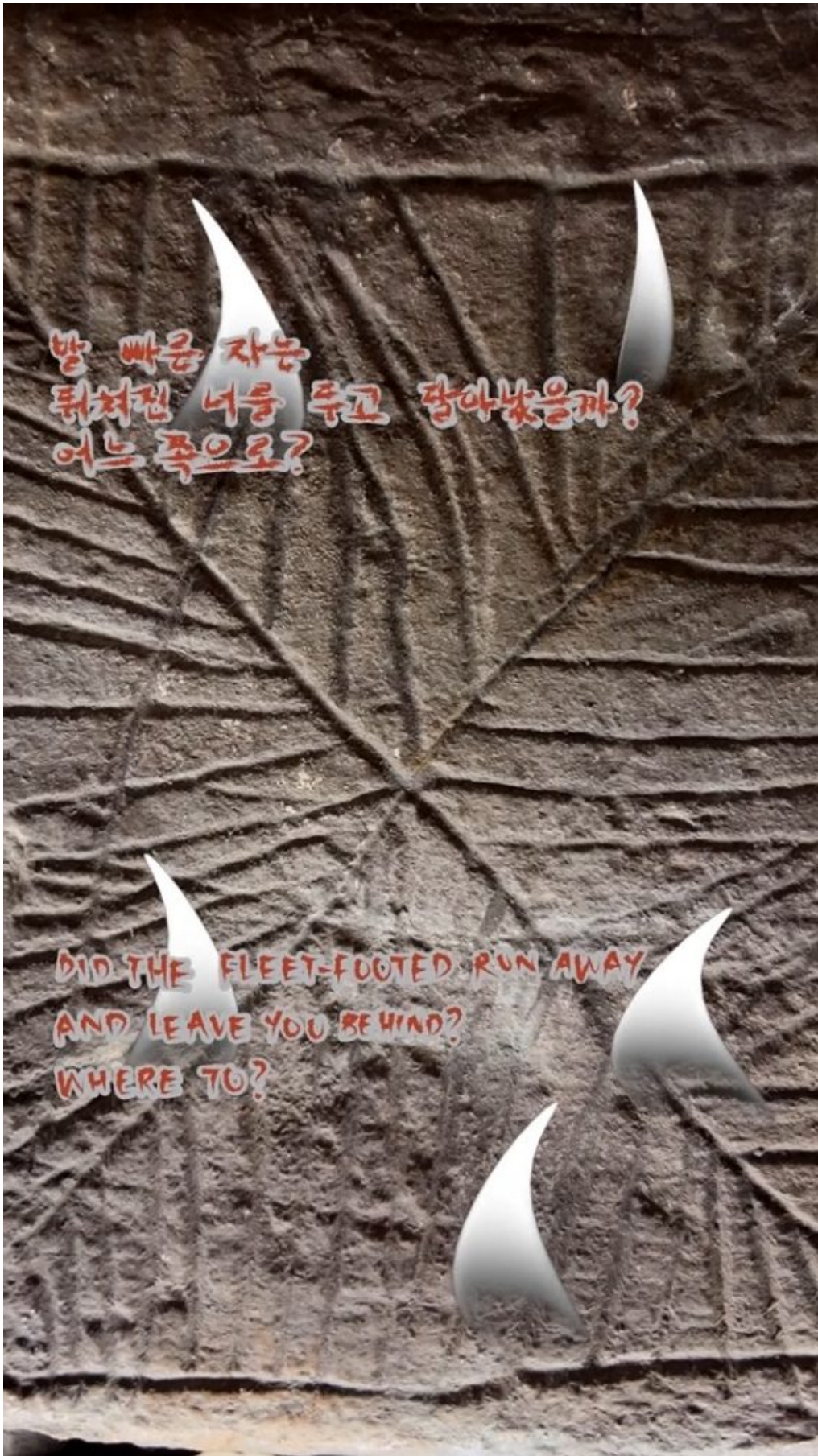
Hand-to-Mouth Salon was produced for the inaugural exhibition of Space AfroAsia in Dongducheon, a town north of Seoul. The script was inspired by a 45,000-year-old Sulawesi cave painting, one of the first

examples of narrative art in human history. Discovered in Indonesia in 2014, it greatly precedes former examples of such representational art found in France and Spain. The video script above is written as a monologue delivered by a cave painter who simulates an upcoming hunting scene. In its aim to psychologically enhance the flawed body and aspire to communal survival, it tries to resist the current reality of isolation. The narrative of revisiting prehistoric cave art addresses a simulation of the future, where pluralistic encounters and gatherings can find a place.

The video is accompanied by a spatial arrangement of objects that were informed by a research phase in Indonesia, where I met self-sustaining art communities and artists in Jakarta and Jogjakarta. In the installation, the mood of a salon as a potential space for formless gatherings was suggested by the structure of two circular glass side tables. On each of their transparent layers, digital prints, biological models and mythical objects, burning incense and video playback devices were arranged. The time and space of the cave is redolent of contemporary creative communities where many live from hand-to-mouth and are hence destined to share labour, resources, time and space for the sake of continuation. Here, continuation innately includes the idea of a community as prerequisite, because it is more than obvious that individual artists cannot survive without helping each other.



Figure 1: Sylbee Kim, *Hand-to-Mouth Salon*, 2021, 2-Channel HD video, colour, no sound, 5'16" (tablet), 1'48" (projection); 3-tier glass side tables, tablet holder, digital print, incense, polymer clay, acrylic dental model, printed adhesive sheet; dimensions variable. Installation view of *Integral Historia*, Space AfroAsia, Dongducheon, 2021. Photography by Onejoon Che.



발 빠른 자는
뒤쳐진 너를 두고 갈아났을까?
어느 쪽으로?

DID THE FLEET-FOOTED RUN AWAY
AND LEAVE YOU BEHIND?
WHERE TO?

Figure 2. Sylbee Kim, *Hand-to-Mouth Salon*, 2021, HD video, color, no sound, 5'16". Video still © Sylbee Kim.

Dysfunctional governance, extremist politics, neoliberal speculation and infinite competition will dismantle our belief in equality – which humankind has struggled to establish – and reinforce spiralling violence and destruction instead, finally annihilating our civilisation. Discontinuation of socially conscious art would be one of the first signals of such decline. Art as an industry and social sector can never be immune to such a development, despite its historical advocacy of artistic autonomy. There is an old misunderstanding regarding the production of art and the image of the artist: the illusion that anything is allowed under the name of innovative experimentation in artistic form. This leads to the hasty pursuit of self-satisfaction, excused as a challenge to society, but failing to propose a valid critique on conditions of life and death.

While the art market mirrors the logic of the speculative market, the funds flowing into public institutions are directly affected by constantly shifting politics and corresponding censorship; whereas production processes are determined by conditions set by technological tools, nationalistic governances and transnational conglomerates, which compete to lead advancement. The problem we now face, however, is to recognise the ecology beyond this actual enclosure of human civilisation. With our planetary ecosystem in mind, it is necessary to question conventions that dictate the needs of art practice to professionalise, which includes the belief that experimentation should have slick outcomes and which put in place criteria for what may not be regarded to be 'good enough'. Art requires a radical transformation, in line with the crisis reached by systems that do not take the wider demographic, existing both inside and outside the field of art, into account.

_Recognising that the mainstream art market and its institutions actively exclude a vast range of existing and possible practices, this essay presents strands of thought for reinventing modes of sustainable continuation with a focus on my production as a video artist. In conjunction with the *Song of the Wind* project, initiated by Sunyoung Oh, I will revisit my projects in the context of the ethics of working with others, artistic labour and approaches towards technology. Can we test community models in a different light and play with limitations? Who can be the subjects of such interest and how do we meet each other? In doing so, how do we deal with technology amidst its accelerating development? Here, imagination, idealism and dreaming arise as persistent necessities that we need to incubate together as a community, instead of sitting scattered in myriad sites of powerlessness.

SCENE #2: ANCHORING AND BRIDGING DIFFERENCES

_Sylbee Kim, *A Sexagesimal Love Letter*, 2016

- § 1. You were born, but... you will also die.
- § 2. Until that time,
- § 3. when the particles in your body begin to decompose,
- § 4. your life will not cease.
- § 5. My love,
- § 6. my heart-leaf,

§ 7. every time I look, my gaze finds you.
§ 8. Everywhere.
§ 9. The world foresees your end.
§ 10. All arrows point toward this end.
§ 11. My sorrow is vast.
§ 12. Tragedy is pre-programmed.
§ 13. No way out.
§ 14. Out of a blazing fire, the moon rises.
§ 15. We can only see one side of the moon.
§ 16. Balancing between what is perceived by children
§ 17. and what is presented by adults,
§ 18. children grow into adults themselves.
§ 19. Your children are not your afterlife.
§ 20. They belong to the future.
§ 21. Yield your seat.
§ 22. If you will not,
§ 23. you will be flamed.
§ 24. A languid love.
§ 25. A dazed life.
§ 26. Death, always premature.
§ 27. My homeland,
§ 28. it exists in the hearts of people
§ 29. who welcome me heedlessly
§ 30. without any shared obligation.
§ 31. That is the only place
§ 32. where I can return from time to time
§ 33. into the unlocked arms of my fellow warriors.
§ 34. *O God! Neither woman nor man!*
§ 35. *Thy power is stripped.*
§ 36. *Thou hath no knowledge*
§ 37. *of what we share!*
§ 38. The egalitarian inevitability of death
§ 39. is what binds us together.
§ 40. Together we sing,
§ 41. together we dance,
§ 42. together we march
§ 43. to our deaths.
§ 44. And so we can confront death fiercely,
§ 45. refusing to be lured
§ 46. by any treasure
§ 47. or status or position.
§ 48. They who possess such things
§ 49. cannot bear to let them slip from their hands:
§ 50. power,

- § 51. wealth
- § 52. and immortality.
- § 53. We will die.
- § 54. It is the rightful conclusion
- § 55. to an unsundered life.
- § 56. In the night, thick like syrup,
- § 57. we visit each other's funerals
- § 58. while the possibility of our death is still real.
- § 59. The end is the end, not a beginning.

Working with video as a medium inherently requires collaboration. I often try to find solutions through DIY strategies from preproduction and shooting to postproduction, to continue my practice despite an often limited budget. Yet there are roles I cannot replace or compromise, which are those of the bodies in front of my camera. Until a person appears in the frame, their life so far, since the moment of their births and rebirths, the times and space where they grew up, the choices they have been making, are marked in their body and mind.

As a director, among my other roles in a self-organised project, I must provide an environment in which my performers can express themselves comfortably. Gradually, I have formulated the belief that anybody involved should never be exploited, especially when I engage actual lives to embody a role I assign to those bodies. No life may be turned into simple material to be mobilised for the sake of something significant, including art. The major engines of profit and power that drive the current world seem to be more and more eager to squeeze out humans, non-human beings and resources for the profit of a few. Art should neither be rendered into an easy disguise to cover such a destructive dynamic or adopt hierarchical strategies to glorify a few names and keep many others in the background.

The bodies in my work have always been those of minorities, as per each person's own definition and understanding. This decision is also anchored in my will to distribute chances and resources, as well as to enable a time and space that otherwise would not be given to us because of differences and distances. I want to believe that art can be a place where we can indulge such an imagination of the future, feeling safe and finding a home in each other, whoever we are.

In *Sisters in the Plutocratic Universe* (2016), two figures appear immersed in a mysterious ritual around life and death. They are located in Berlin's urban environment and their forms are overlaid with archive material. Through a casting call spread through my personal contacts, I cast Paran, an Iranian-German artist and Eli, an Israeli choreographer. Their roles in the video were those of two disparate sisters who encounter, observe and touch each other, switching between states of tension and tenderness. Their nationalities were not a focus of the project, but their difference and foreignness to the environment was. The figures represent all beings in life's struggles under the lethal conditions of oppressive capitalist wars. In the final video, their bodies become a negative space filled with historical footage of wars, climatic cycles and observations of the universe.

Their presence is conveyed through their acts, the speed and length of large and small gestures and the pauses in-between. Their history absorbs the roles I prepared for them; these roles are reborn anew through their embodiment. In this way, each role transforms a moment of togetherness into something irreplaceable

and singular. Whether trained or not, each cast member blows life into my characters, shaping them as voluminous presences. As such, each moment in which they are captured within my camera frame is unique.

During the shooting, my initial intention to enact abstract ritualistic movements was blessed by a surprising moment in their dialogue. Because they met each other for the first time for the shoot, Paran and Eli started chatting while I was setting up the camera in front of them. During the editing, I decided to expose their unscripted gentle exchange with one another with their approval. The political realities of their background completely dissolved into laughter, and the frame was filled with a sense of generous trust instead. This accidental moment turned into a picture of a hopeful sense of friendship, which was exactly what I was trying to grasp by means of the project, before I could clearly understand it as enacting a possibility of togetherness.

Video 1: Sylbee Kim, *A Sexagesimal Love Letter*, 2016, HD, 9:16, color, sound, 6'18"; *A Little Warm Death*, digital print, 700 x 260 cm; *Sisters in the Plutocratic Universe*, 2016, 4K transferred to HD, 16:9, color, sound, 11'04". Commissioned by SeMA Biennale: Mediacity Seoul 2016. Installation view of SeMA Biennale: Mediacity Seoul 2016, Seoul Museum of Art. Video documentation © Sylbee Kim.

In the exhibition installation, *Sisters* is paired with *A Sexagesimal Love Letter*, which is written as a monologue of resolution, a prayer and declaration of love. The writing of this began from observing different phenomena of death, from the suicidal flight crash by a Germanwings pilot to a South Korean teenage boy's disappearance after secretly joining ISIS. These types of death occurred unrelated in different regions of the world, yet I wished to understand what could possibly lie underneath such phenomena as a common problem. Indeed, what we commonly witness, despite any difference of locality, is the devastation of the self and others under capitalist exploitation and ill governance

I edited *A Sexagesimal Love Letter* in a vertical format, as a kind of digital codex around the formation of the body as a sociopolitical universe. The sexagesimal system was applied to enable the script's repurposed application of the symbol §, originally designated for legal clauses; yet in ancient times it served as a frame for understanding the universe, and this is still contained in our measurement of time. The video images were produced using only archive material, as well as copyright-free images from online platforms. The work confronts death as the inseparable other side of life, in order to reconfirm that our lives on this side are closely interwoven with deaths on the other side of the world. What can possibly bind us within the consciousness of a community is this recognition that we all die, which might be the only true condition that all of us can identify with.

Video 2: Sylbee Kim, *Song for M*, 2013, single channel HD, 9:16, color, sound, 14'13". Video excerpt © Sylbee Kim.

One project from 2012 that I participated in – and which is comparable to *Song of the Wind* – was called *Art Base Momoshima*. Momoshima is a tiny island with a rapidly shrinking population in the Seto Inland Sea, Japan. The project's founder, artist Yukinori Yanagi, owns an abandoned junior high school building on the island, which he offered as an art space. The chief curator of the edition I joined was a former student of Yanagi at Hiroshima City University. The main funders were local governments, the university and also included a small number of commercial, private businesses. International artists and staff – the latter mostly from Hiroshima – were offered shared accommodation in an empty house. Other premises on the island, such as a small, abandoned cinema, were also made available for artistic use. The condition of participation was to produce works specific to the location, and this involved preproduction before arrival on site to

enable the final exhibition at the culmination of an 8-day residency. Similarly to *Song of the Wind*, the curatorial team had an intense preparation phase requiring thorough communication with local people. Their shared interest was to revive the vitality of the little town, rather than contributing to a specific local industry. As I observed the workflow, it was clear that the project was understaffed and the overall procedure relied too much on the top-down administration of the project. There was a small artist's fee and a modest budget for the return shipping of the resulting small-scale works.

Song for M started from a reflection on the condition of art practice, where artists are often destined to visit a site for a shorter or longer period to question or respond to local life. It consists of roughly two visual elements: one is a long sequence where I tell a fictive story of days on Momoshima prior to the trip, about which only limited information and impressions were given; the second element was shot in situ, after arriving on the island.

From drawing a map of the island on a studio desk in Berlin, the story developed as a fake myth evolving around the landscape of the small island and ended with the resolution to 'leave the gathered material where it is, as perfect as it is'. Local sites such as the rundown cinema and a mountain are mentioned and surely misinterpreted in the made-up story. In the shots of Momoshima, these actual spots appear, through which the discrepancy between the imagined and the real is captured.

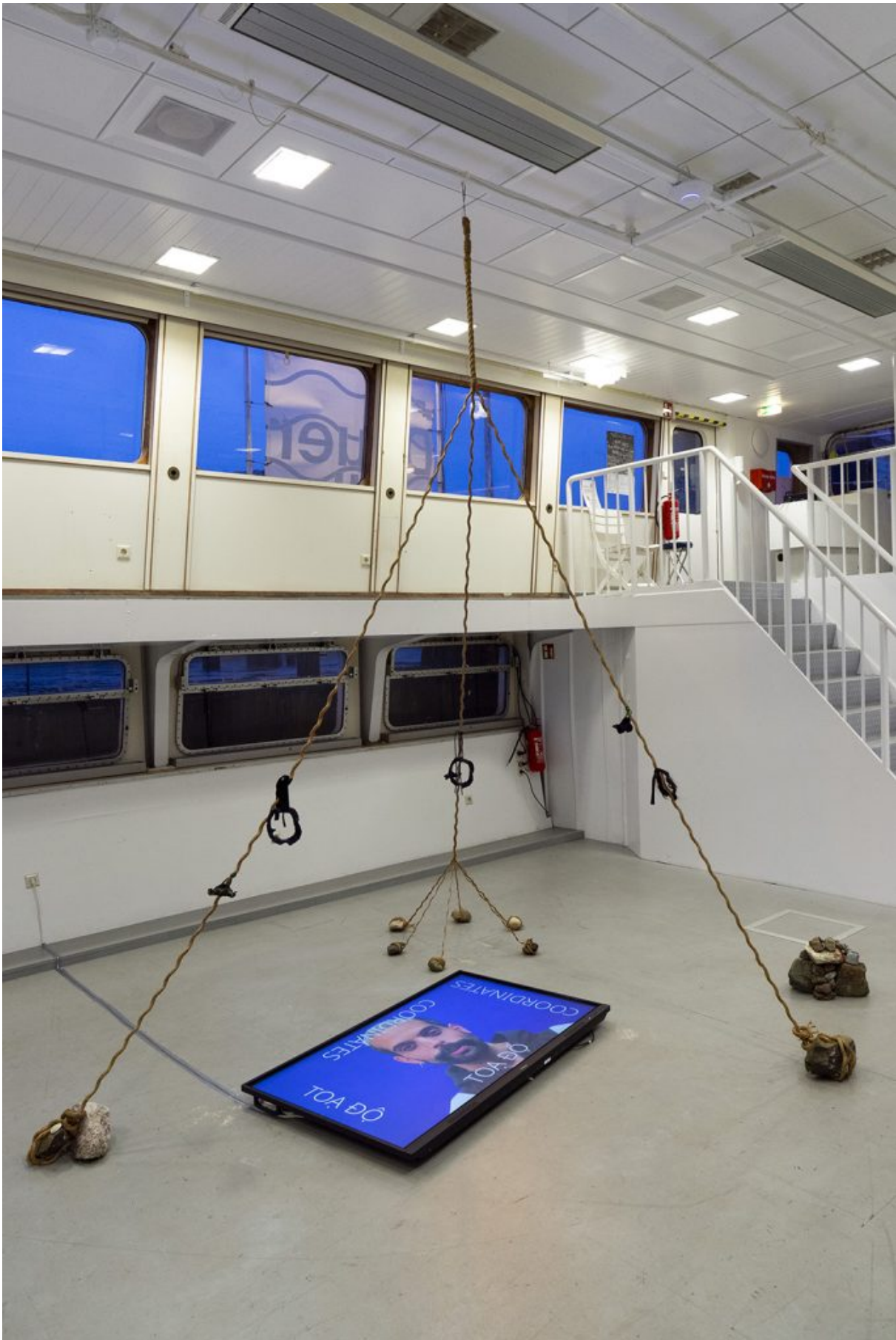
The piece is accompanied by an original score by Hyoungjin Kim, a composer based in the US who, after my request, responded in a similar way, rendering the idea of a never-visited place through his own artistic language. The soundscape depicts mingling ocean streams in two discordant scales. The flux of old and new is structured into an ironic harmony, where moments of contact occur among disparate tonal elements. Even though *Song for M* narrates the experience of approaching a specific place, the general notion of travelling to an unfamiliar place and questions about the meaning of temporary engagement with that place were challenged.

SCENE #3: LEAPING OVER BOUNDARIES

The 'monoculture of the mind', which endangers both biodiversity and noodiversity, suggests that the key to resolving this problem is to return to the discourse of technodiversity. Therefore, the matrix of biodiversity, noodiversity and technodiversity form a more comprehensive framework than the dialectics between nature and technology for understanding the planetary condition. The question of bifurcation is central since, without differentiation and diversification, it is impossible to talk about difference and diversity. Diversity is not only to be maintained, but it also has to be constantly created (Hui 2024: 226).

Any artist works with technological tools and apparatuses, be they analog or digital. These change over time, for example, humans used to do laundry at the riverside but now machines and services have largely taken over this labour. Yet an artist is someone who feeds pigment into a washing machine rather than detergent and gives another usage to the material and apparatus, rather than adhering to its designed purpose. I believe artists use various media as emergent thinkers in this era and are less masters of technique in the traditional sense. What an artist chooses as her tool is a symptom in itself or reflects the zeitgeist. Likewise, technological development mirrors the biases in existing data and the developers'

background and intentions, as well as their socio-economic conditions and power relations. I try to work with a conscious understanding of how the medium I chose to use ended up in my hands and what it means to use or not to use it now in a certain way. All these choices are fundamentally political.





Figures 5 and 6: Sylbee Kim, *Bodies off Coordinates*, 2023, video installation, single channel 4K, color, sound, 14'14"; rope, found stones, incense, seaweed (Hanoi and Bremen Version), human hair, 3D PLA print, cotton, shoe lace (Bremen Version), ca. 400 x 400 x 500 cm. Installation view of MAP 2023: *The Alternative Mobility*, Dauerwelle, University of Arts Bremen, photography by Ingo Vetter; Heritage Art Space, Hanoi, photography by Ngô Trần Phương Uyên.



Figure 7: Sylbee Kim, *Bodies off Coordinates*, 2023. Video still © Sylbee Kim.

In 2023, I took part in the Month of Art (MAP) project initiated by Heritage Art Space (HAS) in Hanoi, Vietnam, in collaboration with the Art University (HfK) Bremen, Germany. The basic arc of this annual project is to provide active exchange between generations of artists, with a focus on the otherwise impossible access to international art education for young artists in Hanoi. I collaborated with HfK students and artists in regular offline meetings in Bremen and online gatherings with participants in Hanoi; there were also video shoots on campus and in the city of Bremen and a final exhibition in both Hanoi and Bremen. The budget was so small that each of us had to undertake a range of jobs, including exhibition-making, and many parts of the project were improvised. Yet again, the main harvest of the experience came not from securing top-quality production outcomes, nor in terms of career-driven accomplishments, but from an immensity of friendship and fun.

Bodies off Coordinates (2023) consists of a single-channel video and site-specific arrangements of natural and recycled materials. The making of the piece involved a lot of DIY work, employing basic materials and digital compositions due to restricted resources. I used an open-source game engine to create animated 3D inserts for the video, while experimenting with natural materials for props used in the video and the installation. The jute rope in the installation was borrowed from a local nautical association and returned after the exhibition. Its structure was anchored with stones collected from the urban landscape to where they too were returned. A sculpture was made out of my cut hair. This hair wreath was scanned and 3D-printed as a copy of an organic object, ornamenting the 'temple' that I built with ropes in both exhibition sites: in Hanoi I worked on the installation remotely, but in Bremen I was on site. In the overall process, fair compensation of human labour was crucial to avoid the invisible exploitation of time and engagement, often concealed in artistic experiments.

The casting call for this video, explaining the theme of the non-belonging of immigrants, was released internally within the university, and I received immediate responses: Jamie and Renen were also participants

of the MAP project, while Rui was a student from the film department of HfK. In the video, the migrating bodies encounter each other in a time-travelling vessel. They use imaginative leaps to visit the places that each had left behind in the past and where they dream to arrive back to in the future. Three figures cherish their brief moment of togetherness, telling of rituals and stories around their places of yearning. Through teaching and learning how to sing in the other's 'mother tongue', one becomes a temporary home for another. They depart, yet with the charged hope to revisit these 'homes' in their continuing life journeys.

Being present in both cities of Bremen and Hanoi, the final video installation turned into a curious portal connecting the two cities, 'leaping' the distance and time zones between them. It invites the viewer to imagine what might bind us together for a common continuation. For Hanoi, a different type of incense was employed, one whose ash rolls into a spiral after burning, which means that god granted your wishes. I wasn't previously aware of this and it was a joy to learn of it, despite the distance.

SCENE #4: GETTING LOST TO DIVERT

Ideological products produce [...] new stratifications of reality; they are the intersection where human power, knowledge and action meet. New modes of seeing and knowing demand new technologies, and new technologies demand new forms of seeing and knowing. These ideological products are completely internal to the processes of the formation of social communication; that is, they are at once the results and the prerequisites of these processes. The ensemble of ideological products constitutes the human ideological environment. Ideological products are transformed into commodities without ever losing their specificity; that is, they are always addressed to someone, they are 'ideally signifying', and thus they pose the problem of 'meaning'. (Lazzarato 2006:144)

In this explanation of immaterial labour, Lazzarato points out how technology is intertwined within the signifying process of the product of immaterial labour in society. Engaging with the advent of and devising a response to technology in any societal and political practice is indispensable and is where contemporary art clearly has a role. Contemporary art seeks novelty more than ever in proximity to industry, in comparison to pre-modern times. For all institutions, individual artists and viewers, commodification and spectacle have become indispensable as a precondition of production, presentation and reception. As a part of society, art cannot escape it, while art is expected to be in the vanguard of yet-to-be explored developments, like an oracle. Especially in technology, the urge to adapt to the virtual and the augmented poses a new realm for art. It dictates that the more isolated our bodies are, the more broadly art can expand in the virtual sphere. How do we find the linkage between socio-political consciousness and cutting-edge tech experiments in order to win against capital-fed spectacle? Can we embrace low resolution, glitches and amateurism and still appear more attractive than the industry standard of sleek images?

As a digital video artist, is there an imperative to create high-resolution images using cameras specialised for film production? Must I struggle to secure extra budget from prestigious funders each time to afford the professional solution? Would I be eliminated from establishing myself as an artist if I only use the mobile phone camera that I carry every day in my hand? The use of consumer-level equipment reduces the number of pixels and the size of data, making transfers faster, and editing and rendering on older computers possible. I dare say that we can and we should work in this way, because the difference between artists and

the general public or YouTubers does not lie in their choice of equipment and mastery of skills, if this distinction still matters.

The frontier of technological media development is to be found in warfare, and it is updated in line with the interests of transnational corporations and nation-state governments. What real reason is there for a media artist to take the lead in such experimentation ahead of anyone else? Artworks generated through the early adoption of new technology often become rapidly obsolete in conjunction with outdated technical language or the discontinuation of equipment and prematurely turn into relics of technological cultural history. Every year, the number of pixels in VR equipment increases and its field of vision becomes ever more meticulous. When will last year's purchase be discarded? It will not be long before we are all nostalgic for 8K resolution. Fascination with high resolution and advanced technology is not intriguing enough in itself. Unless the message of an artwork is simply about crystalline resolution or the novelty of the medium itself, its essence should not be diminished just because a high-resolution projector or an impressive multi-channel arrangement of LED panels cannot be provided for its exhibition.

Can I work as an artist if I cannot afford a smartphone or even an internet connection? If I work with materials that are easily available, instead of materials authentic to each traditional genre, will I be reduced to the status of hobby artist and my artwork become worthless? Surely not, and is not cheap experimentation a more environmentally friendly option? In other words, the artist's fundamental role is to find solutions as creative as possible to actualise such a choice. We have to talk about far more urgent issues than the technical specifications of products endlessly updated by conglomerates.

So as not to compete in the technological race, we must be free to experiment without having to nervously follow the latest conventions and language established by each industry and creative genre. This is because continuous experimentation, undaunted by dominant conditions, is the ultimate privilege of art and the task of an artist. Now, I am more driven by how I can still convince my audience without the need for spectacle that consumes excessive budget and resources. I wish to avoid the pristine images of the mainstream industry. The aim is to prove that we can experiment with new tech media and in regard to societal values and still be proud of our humble and faulty outcomes. Art, then, has to accept discomfort and compromise.

Vagrant Genes (2021) was produced as a radical experiment in institutional art exhibition, one that presupposes multiple limitations due to the need for environmentally friendly choices. It is a two-channel video composed of the *Itinerary* projected at the Museum of Contemporary Art Busan, South Korea, and *Choreography* released via my YouTube channel.

Eulsukdo Island, where the museum is based, is located at the Nakdong River estuary and is an important wintering site for migratory birds. Migratory birds follow a fairly straight flightpath because they are not bound by the national borders of humans. But some birds, due to a genetic problem that affects their orientation, fly in an incorrect or even opposite direction, becoming vagrants. Most of them die, being unable to adapt to unfamiliar habitats. However, when they survive and meet another similarly lost bird and mate, the new offspring are imprinted with their parents' erroneous flightpath.

The main video, *Vagrant Genes: Itinerary* presents a gymnastic exercise, informed by the movement of migratory birds and vagrants; while they navigate guided by the Earth's magnetic field and the stars, they transmit bird flu as well. Through the ecology of migratory birds, the work reflects on the global airway industry interrupted by COVID-19, in line with the destructive aspects of our capitalist civilisation. Together

with Jung Sun Kim, a Berlin-based Korean choreographer, I developed a kind of gymnastics for the isolated human body, and Nacca, a Japanese activist, vegan cook and my performer in Busan, practised it on Eulsukdo. As the 'carrier' of the choreography, I physically got in 'touch' with Jung Sun and Nacca, to transmit it from Berlin to Busan. The camera became an extension of my eye more than ever, exercising with them while they practised. Due to social distancing and quarantines differently imposed in each country, our intimacy was delicate and controlled.

Since *Vagrant Genes: Choreography* was conceived to serve as a physical exercise for isolated bodies in quarantine, it was released on my YouTube channel to be accessed from different locations. It imagines the flow of energy, the navigation of migratory birds and the airflow they ride on, reinterpreting exercises of physiotherapy and Korean traditional dance movements.





Figures 8 and 9: Sylbee Kim, *Vagrant Genes*, 2021, 2-channel video, 4K, color, sound, 16'30"; 7'14", courtesy of the artist. Commissioned by Museum of Contemporary Art Busan and supported by Neustart Kultur – Stiftung Kunstfonds, Germany. Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Busan. Installation view of *Sustainable Museum: Art and Environment*, 2021. Courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Busan. Photography by Studio Jeongbiso. © 2021 Museum of Contemporary Art Busan.

Budgetary constraints for production and exhibition caused multiple inconveniences and raised numerous questions. My six-year-old camera, which travelled with me from Berlin to avoid rental costs on location in Busan, moved around in my suitcase and became cracked, resulting in blotches over my framed images. Nacca finished the two shoots, as planned in advance, but also took additional time to guide me around many places and introduce me to her community. Is the fee I paid her still fair? Is it possible to put a price on her goodwill and care? Did I violate my own principles and exploit her? Am I self-exploiting because I covered my air ticket and the repair of the camera at my own expense and because I filmed, edited and animated as much as I could myself? Does the standard exhibition honorarium or artist fee include expenses for the additional work artists must do due to the lack of a budget for outsourcing services? As a result, do the wobbly animation, the blotches on screen and uneven sound, which hasn't been professionally mixed, hinder the audience experience?

In the exhibition, the sounds from other video installations displayed near mine mingled, as if creating one artwork. Temporary plywood walls, without the addition of white panelling, dominated the exhibition space with a greater presence than the subtle intricacies of the flat works hanging on those walls. Does the projection, lacking a black box to reduce post-exhibition waste and thus blurred by lighting from the other artworks, motivate the viewer to turn away from my video more quickly? Does the whole imperfect experience generate a rift between the viewer and the presence of my work?

Video 3: Sylbee Kim, *Vagrant Genes: Itinerary*, 2021, 4K, color, sound, 16'30". Commissioned by Museum of Contemporary Art Busan and supported by Neustart Kultur – Stiftung Kunstfonds, Germany. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art Busan. Video excerpt © Sylbee Kim.

Despite all the shabbiness of the scope of the production conditions and budget, each step in the production phase was, in fact, the greatest luxury I could indulge in. And after subtracting all the crew whose work I could substitute myself, my cast of bodies consisted of irreplaceable individuals invited by means of the public museum's budget. In addition to their expertise and exceptional presence, exceeding all of my requests, what the moments we spent working together gave me was an appreciation of a shared view of the world, as well as the affirmation and support that my attempts can convince others, despite constraints. The result of my cheap experimentation is a temporary yet unprecedented space, constructed from the things that manifested throughout our time spent together; it is in this space, where our communal ritual for all bodies born and dying on the Earth can take place.

Cheap experimentation is an attempt to imagine a world that runs counter to the currents of travelling the fastest to the farthest and to show off by consuming the most expensive. It represents an opportunity to relieve the pressure of taking the next step in terms of expertise, technological upgrades and endless novelty, which are believed to be required in productions and exhibitions. It allows us to recognise the absurdity and pollution to which we have shut our eyes. It presents a sufficiently new and refined solution by resolutely using those approaches that until now have been considered unsophisticated. It is to imagine that we can conduct valid experiments without the need to exploit anyone or anything, even if it means employing seemingly worthless things, lying close to us and at a slower pace.

SCENE #5: MANY SONGS OF DIFFERENT WINDS

In April 2025, I had the privilege to participate in the Field Research Program of *Song of the Wind* in Vietnam. In the first phase, I visited La Pán Tẩn village and Mù Cang Chải district in the North Vietnamese mountains and in the second phase, I met queer communities in Hanoi. My approach was grounded in the belief that ecological discourse also must be based on diversity and the equal coexistence of all. The problem of double and multiple marginalisation is common in any society. Hence, my entrance to the communities assumed that an existential sense of non-belonging is to be found even within a minority community. I wish to close this essay by sharing core experiences and questions from the visit to North Vietnam.

Among numerous H'Mông villages in the region, people in La Pán Tẩn had been strongly isolated geographically and historically. Traditionally, their harvest was not for sale but for their own consumption. There were not even markets in this town for trading crops and goods with other villages. In their H'Mông language there were words for hour, month and year, but none for week. When a weekly market started to be established, 'market' also began to mean 'week'.

Khang A Tủa is the founder of an organic farming cooperative in Mù Cang Chải. His generation of H'Mông children could go out to the cities and expand their world. Yet many of them did not choose to chase a successful life in the city but returned to their hometown with a resolution to improve the community's life. Khang founded the cooperative because H'Mông farmers should be better compensated through organic farming instead of adhering to cheap volume sales, which ultimately damages the fertility of their soil (Tủa

and Nguyễn 2024). There are many babies and children at the headquarters of Khang's cooperative. As he is providing new jobs to mothers of various ages, their children are naturally co-parented during business hours.

From the H'Mông perspective, humans consist of Hmoob (the H'Mông people) and Suav (the rest). Most H'Môngs live and die in the village where they are born, hence they cannot quite imagine other possibilities for their individual lives or community, he explained. He wishes to share with more of the H'Mông people the experience of recognising the other, which leads to a better understanding of the self.

In my encounters, each time I asked how one deals with the experience of being disconnected or isolated in their community, I noticed a certain impossibility in explaining such an experience. That is, in this community, the individual life is not atomised. They would recognise individual problems as a matter for the community and seek a solution together, or believe that they can share the pain if they fail to find solutions. The community cares for the members and the sense of belonging is vivid, which is a core dynamic for the

economy of the village as well. For example, when free hands help out in building a neighbour's house, the owner butchers a chicken to feed them.

Where humans dwell, there are chickens, dogs, cats, buffalos, pigs and other livestock and mountain birds whose names I do not know. None of them is confined or leashed; they know how to step aside when a motorbike passes by, sharing the narrow serpentine roads with humans. To survive winter, people let the livestock into their houses and share each other's warmth. And the presence of all animals is meticulously entangled with the vegetation. Life and death stay close and just as H'Môngs and the rest are not separate, neither are they.

The fact that the younger generation, who have experienced 'the other' when studying in cities, does not participate in the rampant competition of the outside world and, instead, makes the decision to commit to the future of their home community is significant. If every member of the community can realise an improved life while preserving past traditions, such a generous integration of various individuals emerges as a potent model for the ecological discourse and practices that so-called 'developed countries' are committed to evolve: where a human life does not desire a level of abundance and wealth that far exceeds its needs; where life can be organised around fair remuneration for labour and the principle of helping those in need; and where the foundation of social life is built upon a deep understanding of and coexistence with nature.

Could the life of this village, which is on the threshold of a market economy, arise as a sustainable model? The first thing worth learning is that we do not need many things. At the core of such a life, there is a strength that is sovereign and does not require any outside intervention or judgement. Such judgement often turns otherness into a mere landscape observed from distance or higher position in an assumed hierarchy, be it coming from inside or outside nation-state borders. The villagers are masters of balancing between the requests of change from the side of the central government or intruding interests who might 'help improve' their reality. It is a community with a strong sense of belonging that binds its members, and the isolation of an individual is not neglected or extended. They are well aware of their own internal issues and outside pressures across generations and businesses, and continue with their own judgement. Hence, their strength is expressed as both individual and communal flexibility to change and offers evidence of a 'higher level of civilisation' – in quite a different way to the delusions of superiority that marked the European so-called Enlightenment. I dread the accelerating barbarism of the so-called First World of the Global North, where human existence is hierarchical and destruction appears normative.

The tourism that the young villagers are developing to fight poverty centres the value of community and natural cycles long-lost elsewhere. The H'Mông greatly cherish this authenticity as their most important resource, and it will not be easily corrupted or commodified. Nguyễn Hoàng Hào, a forest industry specialist whom I met later in Hanoi, also confirmed this impression of mine about the development specific to this region. I dare to dream of a situation where 'underdeveloped' regions emerge from the current contemporary crises to overtake those thought to be more developed; where their conscious steps proceed to establish a better future for everyone, rejecting the failures of the sinking 'First World'. Even in their success, they will not seek domination but to willingly share their stories with the rest.

In order to blow like the 'wind' and disappear like a harmless 'song', did I exploit the friendship of those I met here? Have I exploited myself? Since I have accepted making art as my profession, I have tried not to reproduce the inertia of exploitation prevalent in art labour throughout the entire process of my work. As well as economic thinking, this is a decisive foundation for an ethical and sustainable art practice. However, confronting a generosity that far exceeds payment raises a great deal of unease within my 'artistic pursuit'.

An attitude open to learning is a basis for any encounter and exchange within or outside art, and the fact that I am an artist arriving from elsewhere for a while does not compensate for anything per se. I wish people to be rewarded in adequate terms. I cannot claim credit for the effect of our shared conversations from a 'benevolent' position – that would be unacceptable. Only their own judgement of the experience matters, which might occur after their individual time has passed after our separation. Their own voice recapitulating the process and results of our encounters should resonate in their next steps in life, and the space should not be taken over by temporary visitors from the outside interpreting what their engagement was about.

By the end of my journey, I learned how much work was required of local partners, colleagues and friends on site in the preparation, process and results of making work for *Song of the Wind*. Whereas I usually clearly set out the scope of roles and payments when initiating my own projects, this project relies upon and believes in the hope of re-reading realities and intervening to discover the specific necessities of each site. It was beautiful but also painful, and I am not sure whether it is sustainable. Reciprocal learning is fundamental, and yet for me, there certainly is a gap that opens up between the methods proposed by the *Song of the Wind* and the excessive engagement to be extracted from participants. Our encounters with others surely leave traces, and the euphoria of learning cannot cover an asymmetry between intruding demands and local generosity.

In any discourse, including the ecological one, the central value I wish to safeguard is diversity and the equal coexistence of all. Can we meet each other without objectifying, creating scenarios or otherwise aestheticising other lives and bodies? And without judging the priorities or preconditions of others? A society where such unjudgmental relationships operate within mainstream culture has yet to be established anywhere; but it can be dreamed about based on what we have learned and experienced, and such imaginings can trigger the next actions. Could art be the space where we can foretaste it? Could we learn from a variety of different civilisations from beyond dominant historical narratives? By doing so, could we finally reconnect to the ecology within which our different bodies are physically situated, finding each other again in different light?

References

Hui, Yuk (2024), *Machine and Sovereignty*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Lazzarato, Maurizio (2006), 'Immaterial Labor'. In Paolo Virno and Michael Hardy, eds. *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Oh, Sunyoung (2024), 'What May I Hope?', <https://songofthewind.info/sunyoung-oh>. Accessed 30 October 2025.

Tũa, Khang A and Alex Nguyễn (2024), 'Corn in Peril: Viet Nam's Hmong struggle to save indigenous seeds', *Mekong Eye*, January 29.

Van der Tuin, Iris and Rick Dolphijn (2012), 'Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers: Interview with Karen Barad', in I. Van der Tuin and R. Dolphijn (eds.), *New Materialism*, London: Open Humanities Press.

About the author

Sylbee Kim is a South Korean video artist based in Berlin since 2005. Kim's video installations experiment with digital and physical making processes and extend virtual materialities to the real. Her practice questions whether art could bridge differences and simulate a pluralistic socio-political ground. Kim has presented solo exhibitions at ARTSPACE BOAN, Seoul; Mélange, Cologne; and Insa Art Space, Seoul, among others, as well as in group exhibitions at Gwangju Biennale; MMCA, Korea; Mediacity, Seoul Biennale; Kunstverein Göttingen; and Neuer Berliner Kunstverein. She has been a resident artist at Gasworks, London and MeetFactory, Prague. Kim was elected as the first Asian board member of bbk berlin and is currently a guest professor at the School of Visual Art of the Korea National University of Arts, Seoul. <http://sylbeekim.net>