The unknown cost of sojourn

Kim Mi-Kyo (Independent Curator)

**Learned helplessness & Hidden works**

Kim Jin-A is an artist who explores the lethargy of an individual’s ordinary life. Kim releases her thoughts on lives to various visual art projects. In particular, she navigates the structure of the psychological root of learned helplessness and labor as an action to sustain life, and she directs them into special incidents. The artist doesn’t define such helplessness as an emotional state, but as a learned energy of frustration and a step in the course of activities. The audiences of Kim’s exhibition face some ordinary activities, yet activities that are not expected at an exhibition like eating and talking, listening to music, gathering hydroponic crops, trimming and wrapping them to take home.

The beginning of these approaches is the learning and experiences of the artist that have accumulated to a complex identity. Kim is a Korean, a woman, the eldest daughter, born in the 80s, an artist, a community gardener and married. <A meal, the other cooked>, a performance the artist showed in four series, is one of the examples of Kim showing the development of the approach to the learning and the experiences.

The first version of <A meal, the other cooked> was first performed at 《Friendly Helplessness》, which I curated in 2017. Kim was searching for the sense of duty and discomfort of the new identity; “a newlywed-a wife”. Despite the fact that the husband never asked for breakfast, I, the curator, woke up early in the morning, suffering to prepare the meal. That is from growing up watching a woman preparing the meal, who was a ‘wife’ and also a ‘mother’. Kim says the cooking during the performance is a confrontation with a learned and a ‘hereditary’ role and duty. The menu of the performance is ‘rice with butter and soy sauce’, which projects the suffering and lethargy by taking the role and duty. The menu is a simple meal, showing the conflict between mandatory labor and fatigue of an individual. As a child, the menu is a delicious meal from the memories back then. The artist provided the meal, not as a ‘wife’, but as an ‘artist’ or ‘stranger-other’ and the audiences were eating a warm meal and talked about the topics given by the artist.

After the second version of <A meal, the other cooked> at “Art Space Tetra” in Fukuoka, Kim revealed the third version in 《Seodaemooninn Artfair》, 2018. There, Kim wore a mask to emphasize the identity of ‘stranger-other’ and performed in an extraordinary speed. The artist goes around saying, “Did you eat?” or “There’s the food, help yourself”, she erased the individual ‘Kim Jin-A’ from the audiences. Kim removed the identities emphasized in two versions before; young, newlywed, daughter and wife and she led the audience to focus on the ordinary action, like eating, with added unusual elements to think deeper about these actions.

The fourth version was curated by Gam Yoon-Kyung of It’s A PIECE OF CAKE at a baking studio “Ca-key” in 2019. There, Kim was again a ‘stranger-other’ and also a ‘host preparing meals’ meeting the audiences from the bar herself. Former series were serving the prepared meal but the fourth, the artist shows the labor of preparing the meal and delivering the food, while the audiences are talking about their daily lives. Because the artist was a woman, at first, the project was read in the code of feminism. But as the series develops, it tries to expand the discourse to reveal the hidden labor that was meant to maintain the everyday lives of modern people in modern society. <A meal, the other cooked> is not the only example but <Oh this rustic display>, <Source of dainty food>, <Source of exchange> and <Farm of the wanderer> also reveals the hidden labor of crops and farming from daily lives. Her series of artistic incidents directed by herself have occurred in various places.

**Survival and actions revealed in unspecific sites**

One of the fates of the artists and their works under the system called an exhibition is that the shining “moments” and “places” are finite. It would be considered lucky to be sent to the lonely museum storage when there’s no exhibition. Some never even have the chance to see their works in an exhibition during their lifetime and some may have a chance to re-discover later on in the future under the title of ‘undisclosed’ works. Some site-specific works are made along with the context of the place, becoming the landmark of a region. However, the context varies over time, depending on the change of the interests and the identities of the visitors and those who run the places. Like the destroyed Statue of Liberty from the films and video games, there is much room for different interpretation from what the original work meant.

Let’s narrow it down a little. The artist presents the work in different exhibiting conditions and the process of the form and context of the work are slightly modified compared to the original intention. Thus, contemporary art can become an art in the places where it will be exhibited; from traditional white cubes to black boxes, a building about to be demolished, and exposed outdoor environments. Kim sometimes leaves the safe place -the gallery- and makes installations at somewhat harsh exhibition environments, such as unmanaged public baths, inn, the operating bus terminal and abandoned houses. During the process, she connects the gap between the exhibition and vacant time with her self-sufficient efforts to “survive” as an artist and accepting it promptly.

To become a certain “something” needs much effort. For an artwork to exist, the making and completing process is important. Moreover, the planning and direction of the work for deciding ‘when and where to exhibit’ is proceeded among many relations. The works that float around diverse new environment goes through the ‘adapting’ process - the installation process. Especially, Kim’s works are mainly about installation and performing. It means that the artist is ‘reproducing’ the artwork each time. It seems ‘nomadic’, which is discussed in contemporary art when it comes to 1) staying for a while, 2) unable to settle, and 3) relocate. Her adaptation process, however, is based on a passive attitude based on the “Cannot Settle” instead of repeating 1) to 3). It leads the artist to get ready for action at any time. In the artist’s note, she premises the lethargy of ‘impossible to settle from the beginning’ and calls the action forcibly moving around as “wander”.

The first experiment can be seen in the performance and installation of <Learned Requirements> in 2015. Kim needed to open an exhibition to get a master’s degree and vacate her studio at the university. She thought this was an other’s intention. As one can see from the performance recording, she comes out of the frame-box that she had learned and experienced and displays the process of wrapping her works and tools in the exhibition hall throughout the exhibition. The works are ready-packed to be transferred from the studio to the exhibition hall or to some unspecified places. By putting it in the exhibition hall, the artist revealed the situation of ‘not settling’ and its helplessness.

The recent experiment is the main artwork from her third solo exhibition at the Tsushima Art Center in 2019, <Farm of the wanderer>. This was also shown in her second solo exhibition, 《Ground, up, ready》. It is a modular installation to grow plants during the exhibition period based on the minimum conditions required for hydroponic cultivation system. The main elements from this work are “minimum conditions” and “modularity”. The status ‘the artwork is placed in unspecified places (space that may be exhibited in the future)’ has been already concerned during the designing phase. The minimum conditions for germination of plants are supplied, such as water and red light through the water pump and LED lightings. And <The Wanderer’s Farm> consists of pipe units that can be adapted to physical space. In the exhibition, Kim unfolds her work in a permitted place for a short time. The helpless situation of the limited time of growing leads to the artist’s action - building a temporary ecosystem and to disassemble it turned into a question for the meaning of “survival”.

**The biotope staying on the boundaries.**

The temporary ecosystem built by Kim Jin-A through exhibitions is unstable and endangered. This is a biotope that temporarily links the disconnected worlds, such as exhibition spaces and everyday spaces. Biotope, meaning artificially created nature or installations, is an urban planning term, from ancient Greek ‘bios’ meaning, life and ‘topos’ meaning, land or territory. Biotope consists of various artificial and natural plant that helps short-term or long-term wildlife and habitats in modern urban cities, contributing to the ecosystem and inhabitants of the particular area. Biotopes serve as a small base to connect the disconnected ecosystem in the human-centered cities, parks and small flowerbeds. Kim’s work, constructed as a temporary and minimized ecosystem, becomes a small base and asks the audiences to focus on the territory - the gap and the present. We can compare the two artworks of Kim’s second solo exhibition 《Ground, up, ready》, <Wanderer’s Farm> and <Thang, Thang, Thang> in CYART SPACE. By comparing them, we can observe the methodologies used to induce the viewers to focus on the gap between the daily spaces and exhibition spaces.

The exhibition was held in two places: a showcase exhibition space CYART CUBE and white cube space CYART DOCUMENT. The exhibition was held only for five days in Spring 2019. The artist installed <Thang, Thang, Thang> and <Wanderer’s farm> in midair, with drawing series <Wandering Plants 243> on one wall.

The visitors met CYART CUBE on the 1st floor when they came in. <Thang, Thang, Thang> contains five kidney bean vines and the work, the audience, the exhibition space, and the daily space are separated by transparent glass windows. The work was installed in midair, hanging on seven wires and the audience could only watch from the outside of the window. The glass window between the audience and the work consists of one side. During the exhibition, natural light changes with time and the interior of the work is maintained by natural light during the day and artificial lighting after sunset. The situation directed by <Thang, Thang, Thang> reveals these different environments, ultimately revealing the fact that these two spaces are not connected. However, the transparent glass wall separates the exhibiting space from the actual space where the audiences are located and connects them with their gaze to the image of the work.

<Wanderer’s Farm>, exhibited at B1, CYART DOCUMENT, supplies the minimum conditions to grow herbs such as arugula and mint. The spectators can directly touch and gather, even eat the crops growing on the hydroponic cultivation system. The audiences’ actions are overlapped with the daily act of eating and smelling, the act of appreciating a work containing a specific context and meaning. It scatters the boundary between the exhibition hall where the audience stays, and the everyday spaces, to which they must return.

Likewise, by inducing the concentration on the gap between the everyday space and the exhibition space, the artist attempts to reveal the border area, in which the work and the artist temporarily resides for survival. This can be seen in the title of Kim’s solo exhibition, 《Eyes on the stars, feet on the ground》from Tsushima Art Center. The work that doesn’t completely stay in one place resembles ourselves, wandering between the ideal identity and reality. Kim’s concern points out the multi-layered spectrum from ideal to reality.

From Kim’s drawings, video-works and installations of objects throughout the art center, the dining place where they shared ‘rice with butter and soy sauce’, the artist directs the exhibition as a biotope - a place and an ecosystem where the plants, artworks coexist in the given exhibition period and place. The exhibition induces audiences to think in diverse viewpoints between the ideals and reality. The artist continues to create another artwork and adapt it to a different environment, excavating the territories between diverse ideals and reality. I look forward to seeing the ideals and reality from various angles of the microscopic perspective through her works. I also hope her works would help comfort us in midst of our wandering in-and-between the gap.