



la Biennale di Venezia

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la Biennale di Venezia

All The World's Futures

Biennale Arte 2015

Short Guide



## Ayoung Kim 075

The sound installation *Zepheth, whale oil from the Hanging Gardens to you, Shell 3* (2015) by Ayoung Kim is a vigorous experiment in syntactic structure and grammatical disorder made by several voices, including those of voice-performers, actors, and ordinary people. The word “zepheth” is the Hebrew word for the liquid form of pitch, a byproduct of petroleum, propane gas, and coal. Words in the title, such as “zepheth,” “oil,” and “shell,” show the work’s relationship to petroleum—the wealth of our time—and the history of the Middle East.

Most of this work, including its title, employs algorithmic arrangements and rearrangements. Working with composer Heera Kim, Ayoung Kim has created a fascinating chorus of abnormal, experimental, incoherent, and conflicting sounds by agitating assorted text resources and the sounds of the score according to the rules of simple computing algorithms. This process is visualized on a wall with diagrams of images, text, and scores and integrates research materials, the arrangement of voices, and their algorithm-based transformation. By applying the rules of the algorithm to ordinary melodies and grammatical or syntactical structures—which, we could say, represent an entirely rational, coherent, homogenous modern structural ideology—the artist presents an opposing, illogical, grammatical style in her intriguing work. Commonly understandable rules are either absent or disassembled, and the work achieves symbolic potentiality and interesting semantic gaps while avoiding clarity and meaning.

Using her research in the Middle East—a prolific oil producer and the focus of many recent wars—the artist demonstrates the intersections between Middle Eastern issues as they appear in the region’s macrohistory and the modern history of Korea, including the microhistories of Korean immigrants who worked in the Middle East’s petroleum industry. They include the artist’s father (a Korean governmental official in the 1970s), a man named Oh Won Chul, and Hajjiyah Dame Violet Penelope Dickson (1896–1991), an Englishwoman who lived in Kuwait from the 1920s to the ’70s.

The sounds that can be heard in the exhibition space come

from recordings of voices reading, acting, and singing from a script and a libretto that the artist wrote based on this research. The work involves the performers’ dialogue, scenes, and narration, but their speech and choruses are fragmented. The overall narrative, however, is more an experimental musical than a story that can be understood in its entirety; this effect is achieved through the combination, intersection, conflict, and tension between deconstructive, fragmentary stories and the musical flow of syllables repeated in a hybrid chorus that has a rather interesting, arcane sound with an experimentally enriched phonetic texture.

This experimental piece of musical theater illustrates a heterogeneous combination of conflicting, disharmonizing, and discordant sounds that invoke the imperialistic narrative surrounding the rich black oil that flows from the barren desert. This synthetic, evocative narrative connects two other threads: the nonfictional narratives of several protagonists who took part in this history and the developmentalist myth of South Korea, whose major corporations not only helped to develop infrastructure in the Middle East and its oil industry but, as a result, boosted Korea’s own economic growth. Together, these complex elements reveal the heterogeneous nature of the modern Middle East.

—HK



Ayoung Kim, *Zepheth, whale oil from the Hanging Gardens to you, Shell 3*, 2015