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A Vestige of the Ultimate Force of Time and Space

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A Vestige of the Ultimate Force of Time and Space

BFA Thesis Statement at Washington University in St. Louis
Second major in Marketing

Jiyoung Megan Lee
2019

Abstract

This art statement is rooted in an idea that the existential quality is independent of absence and presence (synonymous to appearing and disappearing, and real and recognition) and distilled physicality of the human body creates a parallel relationship between the two. In search of proof and logic for articulating the central idea, –that the absence does not define evanescence of existence— the application of physical interactivity in my art, also known as relational aesthetic, enables the work to invite viewers in a way that the interactors leave their traces by physically interacting with the work. These individual traces are eventually archived into a collective mass and thus belong to the artist’s authority as each mark of trace becomes separated from its origin. In this essay, I combine the notion of beingness of an image to the nature of trace, the death of present moment and fragments of presences, and discuss how such ideas are applied in my interactive art practice.

The Ultimate Force on My Body

Unlike the freedom that my mind can have, a body is strictly bounded to the ultimate force of time and space. The spacetime force of this planet restricts the dimension of my presence but ironically, this boundary is what keeps me alive as a living body on the Earth. In search of liberation from this absurd reality, I attempt to challenge this boundary and question whether this mysterious boundary is truly a life net. Therefore, this inquiry treats death as a comprehensive term that discusses the relationship between appearing and disappearing, which likewise connotes the idea of real and recognition.

By the connection between spacetime boundary and my role as an artist, I assign the two-dimensionality to the trace (meaning, presenting as an image form of trace) in my practice. Eventually, through a constant construction and deconstruction of the *image* of traces, I revive the traces into a being by mimicking the law of nature. Therefore, in my art practice, I create interactive and situational installations where the viewers' participation activates the work. The interactivity serves as a medium that creates a distinction between absence and presence. An image of the trace—namely, a trace in a two-dimensional platform— which is created as a result of the presence and exists in the result of absence is archived under my own artistic gesture in exploring the spacetime boundary.

According to Hans Belting, “an image finds its true meaning in the fact that what it represents is absent and therefore can be present only as image” (85). He further elaborates that “the dead have always been absent in person, and their unbearable absence - that is, their death- was made good by the presence of images” (85). The image does not just compensate for a loss but represents a body, acquired ‘being’ in the name of that body. An image and a trace share a notion that it is an indexical representation of the original entity and the two gain beingness of their own by the

absence of the original. As Charles Sanders Peirce accounts in his *Theory of Sign*, the indexicality of the trace emphasizes its existential quality in relation to the original and in relation to time and space. The trace does not communicate straightforwardly or conventionally, but its strong link to the original alludes to the idea that the trace of a living body is an index of the presence of the original in the absence of (more precisely, in a disappeared or unrecognized state of) the body.

Therefore, an image and a trace both experience an ontological transformation of the original and thus both are given the power to act in place of the original body. In my art practice, thus, the notion of an *image of trace* acts as a testimony of the presence of the body in its absence. An image of trace serves as a manifestation of something that what it represents is absent but therefore exists as a being of a trace.

The Presences at TIME in SPACE

My interactive installations adopt a notion of the trace as an index of presence and absence. The installation functions as a vestige-archiving instrument for it is staged so that the viewers leave their marks, their traces. The activator's (that is, one who interacts with the work) physical participation is translated into an act of operating the instrument. That is, the viewers are invited to interact in a suggested way and their traces are created in the result of their actions. *The Presences at TIME in SPACE* is one of my earlier works that uses interactivity as a source to create and collect the traces of living bodies, the beings. In this work, the viewers playfully walk around the sculptural canvas pad laid on the ground. Inside the pad, it is filled with bubble wraps and each bubble is injected with various colors of inks. Before the viewers walk on this art object, people are suggested to wear a pair of bubble shoes that are placed beside the entering point of the pad. As soon as people walk on the pad, the ink leaks out from the burst bubbles and smears onto the surface of the canvas pad. Naturally, by their weight and gravity, the viewers create and imprint the marks of their traces on

my art object and so the traces reside in the artist's archive as an image. By archiving these individual traces into a single mess on my art object, I reincarnate the collected traces in means of art and empower them to be the original, independent from its precedent. After all, the entire process is a macroscopic act of archiving and reincarnating the energies of living bodies through art and image.



Fig 1. Jiyoung Megan Lee, *The Presences at TIME in SPACE*, 2016. (the aftermath of the interaction)

Spectators and the Body: Relational Aesthetic

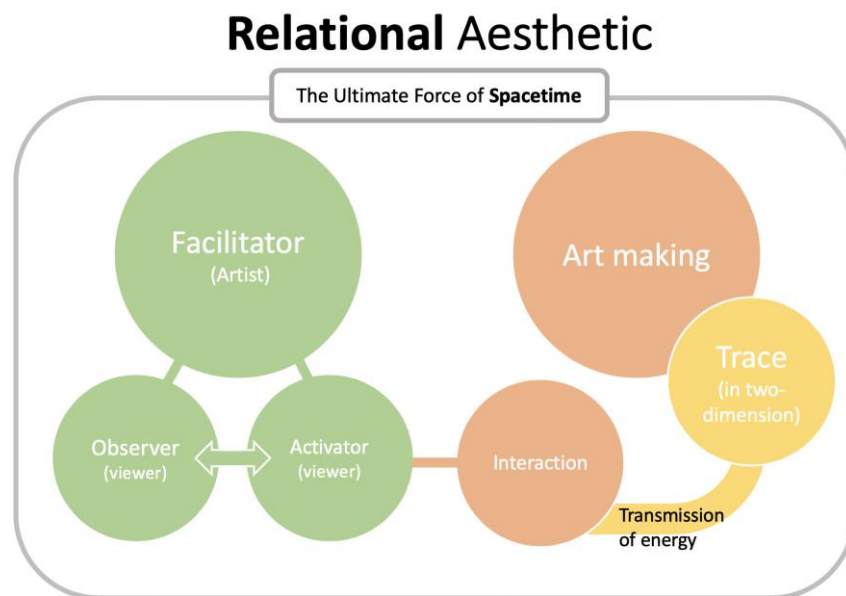


Fig 2. A diagram about my relationship to the viewer and the role of interactivity

Because of the nature of my installations that use people's traces as its major component, the relationship between the viewers and myself necessitates extra attention. The viewer, more specifically the activator, becomes the origins of the traces and also the substitution and representation of my own body in a genus level. Thus, the living body of a viewer, a unique carrier of energies, connotes the idea of the presence of the artist while I am absent and unrecognized from my own work. I ultimately gain an omniscient position and take a role of a facilitator who orchestrates the system of cause and effect in my art situation; the work causes certain actions from the viewers and thus a trace is created as an effect. Consequently, my practice capitalizes the multiple energies of the individuals and transforms into an artist's image.

The interactivity, therefore, is crucial to bring my work into a finished state. Though the art begins from the moment of creation by my own touch, I refer to this finished state as a visual presentation that the work is designed to achieve in front of the viewers. Once the viewers encounter with my work whether perceptually or physically, they take two interchangeable roles: observer and

activator. An observer is a group of viewers who perceptually interacts with the work and witnesses the creation of the vestige. The activator, on the other hand, physically interacts with the work which leads them to leave traces of theirs and thus take a role as the origin. Therefore, as soon as an observer interacts with the work, they become an activator, and the outside crowd who watches the live interaction become the observer, distanced from the interaction, who are possibly once or will be, an activator.

As Hans Belting writes in *An Anthropology of Images*, “interactivity is a new form of seduction, enticing us to a renewed faith in images” (61). The art of interaction alludes to the idea of emancipating the viewers from the role of the spectator in a traditional theatrical situation. The act of emancipation resonates with my limited position under time and space and the desire to achieve my own emancipation from this frame. Rancière and Elliott from *The Emancipated Spectator* illustrate that “the role of the viewer in art and film theory revolved around a theatrical concept of the spectacle. The masses subjected to the society of the spectacle (that places bodies in action before an assembled audience) have traditionally been seen as aesthetically and politically passive” (17). The essence of interactive art attempts “to transform the spectator into an active agent and the spectacle into a performance” (Rancière 11). In my interactive installations that are introduced in this essay, such transition is highlighted when an observer takes the place of an activator and those who transformed into active agent experiences the emancipation from being a static spectator. The observer is not purely the same as the spectator, as the observer's presence witnesses the creation of trace. Essentially, I eliminate the conventional spectatorship in the nature of the work and rather assign new roles to the audience so that they can be emancipated from being in a static and passive position in front of my art.

Rudolf Stingel's application of interactivity as a source of image-making also allows "painting, but not by [his] assistants who carry out [his] concept but by a public that inscribes its own individual response in a material way into the work" (Tate, "Untitled, Rudolf Stingel, 1993."). Stingel's works emancipate the restricted distance in the relationship between the viewers and an art object. First presented at 2003 Venice Biennale, Stingel's Celotex insulation covered the entire walls of the exhibition space, and the viewers were invited to make marks, inscribe and even deface the surfaces of the Celotex (Robert 9). In his inquiry on by whom and how artwork is created, Stingel acts as a mediator who pairs a value into those marks generously made by the hands of the viewers (Robert 9). Although my practice and Stingel's Celotex insulation differ as I focus on the energy carried in the living body while he puts more emphasis on the natural reaction and interaction of the spectators, I resonated with his system of treating the marks of others also as indexical traces and eventually archiving them into a collective mass. The repurposed marks and traces dissolve into the singular authorship of the facilitator and so exist under the artist's own authorial gesture (Chrissie 23).



Fig 3. Rudolf Stingel, *Untitled*, 2007

Stingel, Rudolf. "Untitled." *The New York Times*, static01.nyt.com/images/2007/10/13/arts/stingelspan.jpg.

Untitled(2019)

I consider the work *Untitled(2019)* as a gateway or a sketch of the later work *30minutes*. It serves as a research work that investigates the steps and strategies for creating an interaction-generating and trace-recording device. Its sculptural aspect operates like a machine which is designed to encourage the interaction from the viewer and also archive the traces caused in a result of the action.

Hanging from the ceiling, a wooden box-like sculpture has two stripes of twine elongated from the two opposing sides. This work requires two participants and they are guided to pull down the strip of twine from each side. The force of pulling presses and squeezes the water-filled sponges that are stacked inside the wooden box. Therefore, the coupled participants, the activators, make the water drip on the sheet of papyrus paper placed on the floor. After the water evaporates, the water stains on the papyrus paper are archived as a vestige. The observer who is not interacting with the work at the time, observes the entire situation in a third person perspective and being present at the same time and space, they witness the creation of trace. Eventually, the energies originated from the living body are transmitted through the water as a medium and appear in two-dimensional form, as an image, achieving its own beingness, reincarnated.



Fig 4. Jiyong Megan Lee, *Untitled(2019)*, 2019

30minutes

In orchestrating and capitalizing the multiple energies of the crowd, I was strongly resonated with Tino Sehgal's relationship to viewers in *These Associations*, performed in 2012 at the Tate Modern, London. *The Associations* is about experiencing random and simultaneous encounters between people under immense freedom. However, it is still a staged scene since there are choreographed actions involved in his work. This work incorporates the spatial structure of the Turbine hall – east, dead end and west, entrance—in Tate Modern and so enhances the idea of attention used as a material in his work (“Conversation Pieces”). As Tate identifies, “Sehgal’s work allows for transformation over a period of time and the conversation will also address this process of continuous change” (Tate, “Curator’s Talk: Tino Sehgal – Talk at Tate Modern”). The continuous change is something that I also aimed to express through the nature of interactive art in my practice and such attempt is highlighted in my latest work *30minutes*.

Like Sehgal's approach in *These Associations*, the freedom of participants is important in my work as it lets people behave within a chance of randomness though they are certainly in a staged environment. (which is, in fact, quite similar to how humanity has existed on the Earth after the creation of the universe). The work *30minutes* invites the viewers in its staged and opened space installation without giving them any instruction, but only with suggestive cues. The objects are installed in a way that people can freely enter space. The activators navigate the space, walking on the stepping stones and approach the water tank that has two sponges inside connected by a string. A pair of wet sponges inside the water tank suggest people to freely draw or make marks on the Zen cloth laid under the stepping stones, by carrying the water in the body of sponges. When the water hits Zen cloth, the water temporarily appears in black and as water evaporates fast due to the special effect of the cloth, the cloth turns back into blank white, erasing the images of traces. In this work, I shifted the direction from archiving the images of traces to constant construction and deconstruction, occurring a constant change, of such images of vestiges. Essentially, the work *30minutes* brings the emphasis back on the idea that existential quality is independent of absence and presence –and appearing and disappearing, and real and recognition— by repetitively erasing the image of the trace to allude that an image does not interfere with the existence of the erased trace.

In the end, in the act of creating, archiving and finally erasing the traces, the fragments of presences, I stand on my manifestation that I resist living in the information given to my body, acknowledging that my distilled physicality creates confusion between reality and illusion. Bounded by the ultimate force of time and space, therefore, I desire to be independent of the real and recognition and seek for the essence of existence.



Fig 5. Jiyoung Megan Lee, *30minutes*, 2019



Fig 6. Tino Sehgal, *These Associations*, 2012

Sehgal, Tino. "These Associations." *Image Object Text*, imageobjecttext.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/sehgal-these-associations-2012-from-platform.jpg.

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